

Disnarration and the performance of storytelling in Taylor Swift's *folklore* and *evermore*

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Abstract: In a similar way to dramatic performances and plays, song lyrics establish a complex discourse structure whereby listeners are placed in a position to overhear 'the pretence of a conversation constructed to convey the performer's meaning' (Nahajec 2019: 25; see also Short 1996: 169). In Taylor Swift's songwriting, listeners are positioned not only to eavesdrop on the narratives presented but are also invited to conceptualise and enact particular roles and scenarios in the discourse. This paper offers a stylistic analysis of songwriting and narrative structure across Swift's oeuvre to identify how disnarration strategies are used to build stories in her two sister albums written and produced during the Covid-19 pandemic, *folklore* (2020) and *evermore* (2020). Specifically, this study examines how disnarration characterises the albums' narrators, establishes narrator-narratee relationships and invites listeners to adopt a participatory role in the meaning-making process. Through close analysis of four songs across the two albums, this paper builds on developing studies of the stylistics of songwriting (see West 2019) and argues that disnarration strategies foreground particular themes within the discourse, such as nostalgia, wistfulness and regret, and contribute to the fictionalisation and self-aware storytelling characteristic of these albums' storyworlds.

1. The discourse architecture of Swift's songwriting

Taylor Swift is a popular and influential contemporary music artist whose writing and genre choices are stylistically diverse. Since her first album, self-titled *Taylor Swift*, came out in 2006, she has released a further eight albums, moving from country and folk music to alternative rock and synth-pop. Through the writing and production of these nine albums, Swift's genre, writing and production choices have undergone significant changes. More recently, Swift's reach and cultural significance within the music industry has been further spotlighted in a public battle over ownership rights when the master recordings of her first six studio albums were sold to a third party, without her consent (see Bruner 2021). As a response, Swift has planned to re-record and re-release these albums, some of which are already available under the proprietary label 'Taylor's version' (at the time of writing, this includes *Fearless* 2021 [2008] and *Red* 2021 [2012]). The release of Swift's two most recent albums, *evermore* and *folklore*, which were both written, produced and released during the Covid-19 pandemic and which focus on and celebrate storytelling, can be seen as an

appropriate yet calculated response to the previous controversy; one which publicly establishes Swift's agency as a musical artist and functions as a performative reclamation of narrative ownership.

Previous stylistic research on songwriting has demonstrated that this genre can be explored through the perspectives of literary linguistic frameworks (see, for example, the analyses in the 2019 special issue on 'The Challenges of the Song Lyric' in *Language and Literature*), and while drawing direct analogies between songwriting and poetry is problematic (see West 2019: 4), the performative nature of the genre means that it also shares some compositional similarities with dramatic discourse. In his stylistic study of drama, Short (1996) argues that watching a play sets up a unique discourse relationship between the performance and the audience. When we watch something on stage, we are listening in on a conversation that we are not actively participating in. In this way, Short argues that watching a play is like eavesdropping in on a conversation (Short 1996: 169). Nahajec (2019: 25) proposes that, in a similar way to dramatic performances and plays, song lyrics establish a complex discourse structure whereby listeners are placed in a position to 'overhear' 'the pretence of a conversation constructed to convey the performer's meaning'. The author of the song speaks to the listener, and at the same time the musical persona (the speaking 'I' or the third person narrator of the song) speaks to the addressee (the 'you' or the designated addressee of the song). In the context of Swift's songwriting, this structure can be outlined as in Figure 1 below.

Arguably, this eavesdropping process is a more salient and complex experience when listening to Swift's earlier albums, which are more confessional and also frequently directed to specific addressees. In such autofictional discourse contexts, the roles of the musical persona and the author become more closely aligned through the conflation of 'the authorial signature of the self (*auto-*) with a character (*-fiction*)' (Gibbons 2018: 76), while simultaneously the positions of the addressee and the wider audience remain more distanced. Reviews of the album *Lover* (Swift 2019), for example, suggest that there are many examples of tracks which have attracted media speculation surrounding, for instance, the identity of the specific addressee (e.g. 'Lover', 'London Boy', 'Cruel Summer'), the significance of personal relationship plans (e.g. 'Paper Rings') or metaphorical meanings behind referenced locations (e.g. 'Cornelia Street') (see Martin 2019 for a discussion of the fan theories on this album).

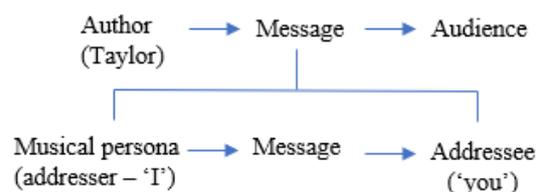


Fig. 1: Discourse Architecture of Swift's Songwriting (after Nahajec 2019: 25; and Short 1996: 169)

In a recent interview with Zane Lowe for Apple Music (2020), Swift commented on the craft of her songwriting. She discussed in particular the ‘diaristic’ writing style of her earlier songs (and often the unwanted media speculation that this style warranted), but how she moved away from this more recently with *folklore* (2020). For this album, she described a kind of distancing from her former more confessional narrative style:

I think that when I put out *folklore*, I felt like if I can do this thing where I get to create characters in this mythological American town or wherever I imagine them, and I can reflect my own emotions onto what I think they might be feeling and I can create stories and characters and arcs.

The combination and creation of characters in her writing – personal, mythological, or otherwise – and the connections and references that are built up between and across her songs, mean that, famously, her lyrics are full of ‘Easter eggs’: significant references that fans and listeners paying close attention are able to identify and draw on to create new threads of meaning across her oeuvre. The shift from diaristic to creative storytelling, however, establishes different relationships with listeners in both *folklore* and its sister album *evermore*, which was similarly written during the pandemic and released five months later in December 2020. Similar invitations for audience participation and emotional projection can be observed in other songs written and produced during the same period, such as Adele (*30*), Dua Lipa (*Future Nostalgia*) and Ellie Goulding (*Brightest Blue*), which have likewise captured and tapped into the general feeling of disorientation of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Swift’s style change during her pandemic releases creates a distancing effect where Swift’s autofictional voice is backgrounded and listeners move away from the role of confidante, listening to the lyrics as though they are unmediated anecdotes or missives directly from the writer (see Ellis 2021, who identifies a letter writing theme in *evermore*). Instead, the author-addressee relationship is established by the setting up of richly detailed or more schematic stories through world-building details (Werth 1999; Gavins 2007). Some of these world-building choices refer back to Swift’s previous songs (intratextuality) or refer to descriptors of existing fictional narratives (intertextuality). As with previous albums, these schematic stories continue to enable Swift to ‘reflect [her] own emotions onto’ the characters, including allowing continued references to specific or significant locations in her own life (extratextuality), but nevertheless ones which are less directly connected. These strategies work to position audiences in complex ways: listeners overhear the conversations presented in the lyrics, but simultaneously are invited to enact specific roles in the discourse. This paper argues that the complexity of the world-building process can be traced, in part, to the disnarration strategies in *folklore* and *evermore* and which build up a number of schematic and fleeting narrative scenarios.¹

¹ Lyrics from *folklore* and *evermore* (Swift 2020, Republic Records) are reproduced in the article in the service of non-commercial research, scholarly criticism and review.

2. Disnarration

Disnarration is an ‘unconventional storytelling strategy’ (Lambrou 2019: 2) which presents events that did not take place (see Prince 1988). Disnarration is ‘created by the evocation of entities, states, acts or events the ontological status of which, as “actual” within the storyworld, is made temporarily or permanently ambiguous, or ultimately denied’ (Macrae 2020: 159; after McHale 1987: 99-111). It therefore generates ‘ontological flickering’, and also invites a process of comparison; one through which the narrator confirms to the reader that they are aware of ‘what is ‘real’ within the storyworld and what is not’ (Macrae 2020: 161). A famous example of disnarration in contemporary fiction is Ian McEwan’s *Atonement*, in which the narrator Briony reveals at the end of the novel that her account of events has been a work of her own re-imagining, often bearing little resemblance to reality. The story has been told through disnarration and the reader is led to question what they have previously read (see Lambrou 2019: 35-36). More generally, a narrator’s role as guide in this process of disnarration means that they become foregrounded in readers’ conceptualisation of the narrative worlds, and consequently are positioned on-stage as an object of interest. In other words, because disnarration ‘frequently consists of hopes, desires, imaginings and ponderings, unreasonable expectations and incorrect beliefs [...] it can function as a characterization device’ (Prince 1988: 4). Through disnarration, readers are given insights into the speculations of the narrator, which functions to flesh out and further develop their character, such that a richer mind-model (Stockwell 2020; Stockwell and Mahlberg 2015) of the narrator-character is invited. Processes of disnarration also help to designate the role of the reader – or listener, in this context – because ‘[t]he disnarrated can also help to define a narrator, his or her narratee, and their relationship’ (Prince 1988: 4).

In his original account, Prince (1988: 2) outlines the following as invitations for disnarration:

alethic expressions of impossibility or unrealized possibility, deontic expressions of observed prohibition, epistemic expressions of ignorance, ontologic expressions of nonexistence, purely imagined worlds, desired worlds, or intended worlds, unfulfilled expectations, unwarranted beliefs, failed attempts, crushed hopes, suppositions and false calculations, errors and lies, and so forth.

These invitations can be linguistically and stylistically marked through a number of different mechanisms. Modal verbs and adverbs, verbs of perception and *verba sentiendi* signpost statements or scenarios that are subjectively construed through the perspective of the speaker, and which suggest a departure from the current ‘storyworld’ (a term used by Lambrou 2019 to refer to the world or state of affairs as represented by the main story in a text and differentiated from any disnarrated or counterfactual scenarios). Discussions of modality in contemporary cognitive stylistics are centred around modal text-worlds: the idea that these expressions are conceptually distanced from the speaker (cf.

Possible Worlds Theory, Pavel 1975). Disnarration can also occur through the setting up of conditionals, hypothetical structures and counterfactual statements.

With a few notable exceptions (Macrae 2020; Lambrou 2019; Herman 1994, 2002), the mechanisms of disnarration have historically been considered through narratological rather than linguistic perspectives. This paper builds on these recent studies by extending the *stylistic* exploration of disnarration, through an analysis of, firstly, how disnarration is linguistically marked, and secondly, the interpretative significance of these disnarration strategies within the context of Swift's songwriting more specifically. In particular, the analysis argues that disnarration functions in *folklore* and *evermore* to more fully characterise the speaker-narrator of each song through the representation of unrealised possibilities and the speaker's attitude towards them; and simultaneously to build up rich narratives for the discourse event, such that the speaker-narrator and the 'overhearer' cooperate in a process of intersubjective meaning-making. Key to this discussion is the representation of the speaker-narrator's emotional response to the presented scenarios. These ideas will be explored in more detail in Sections 4-7.

3. Methodology

This is an exploratory, qualitative study aiming to identify patterns in Swift's work, focusing on the stylistic mechanisms of disnarration. *folklore* and *evermore* have been selected for analysis as these albums demonstrate a move towards a less diaristic storytelling for Swift (even if they are still often erroneously interpreted as fully autobiographical), and are very similar in terms of both musical genre and lyrical content. Additionally, these albums are arguably the most literary of Swift's work, with some obvious and some more oblique intertextual references to classic literary narratives. Ellis (2020) summarises these influences at the discourse level of the albums, suggesting that '[i]f *folklore* is inspired by William Wordsworth, *evermore* seems inspired by Emily Dickinson'. These intertextual scenarios have led some critics to discuss the escapist elements of the albums (see, for example, Ebury and Welsch 2020; Mylrea 2020; McCready 2020), which are particularly salient when contextualised in the period in which they were written, produced and released (see Wulf et al. 2021).

The following sections provide a sustained analysis of the *folklore* lyrics of 'the 1' and 'the last great american dynasty', and the *evermore* tracks 'willow' and 'champagne problems' in order to capture a stylistic overview of the two albums. For the purposes of this study, the analysis focuses on the text and does not consider the interaction with other compositional choices such as music (cf. Neary 2019, 2021; Nahajec 2019; Voice and Whiteley 2019) or phonetic features (Flanagan 2019). 'the 1' and 'willow' are the first tracks in the respective albums and frame the narrative style across the two records. As the opening songs, these can be considered to carry heightened stylistic significance (see Rabinowitz 2002). The other track lyrics display marked disnarration strategies, presenting counterfactual scenarios exploring what

could have happened if a proposal had been successful ('champagne problems') or if the main protagonist had not married her husband and moved to a particular location ('the last great american dynasty').

4. 'the 1'

folklore opens with the self-reflexively named 'the 1', which establishes disnarration as a prominent part of the narrative construction within the two albums. Throughout the one-sided exchange presented in this song, the speaker addresses a former partner and speculates on the life they will not spend together and thereby presents a series of fleeting narrative scenarios, which are hypothetical, modalised or negated. As a result, the song moves between the tangible and the indeterminate; presenting events that are both unrealised and yet explicitly and specifically outlined. The addressed 'you' is a fictionalised addressee (Herman 1994) who is off-stage in that their voice is never heard directly, though implied through the speaking persona's responses: 'I'm doing good, I'm on some new shit' (line 1).

The third line of the song, 'I thought I saw you at the bus stop' is framed through the perceptual reporting clause 'I thought', but can be construed as a possible storyworld scenario until it is revoked, definitively, in the next clause: 'I didn't though'. It could be argued that the subsequent narration in the rest of the song is hinged on this disnarrated encounter. While it is true to say that all narrative scenarios within fiction are unrealised or imagined (see Riddle Harding 2007: 272), this frame creates an additional layer of fictionalisation and narrative embedding within the song, such that the following structure can be identified:

Storyworld	Speaker had a romantic relationship that ended and for which they feel regret.
Counterfactual 1	Seeing the former partner at the bus stop and having a conversation where their relationship is discussed.
Counterfactual 2	The shared life together where they did not break up.

Table 1: Storyworld Structure of 'the 1'

In other words, the revoked encounter means that listeners are invited to conceptualise the disnarrated events of the shared life together presented in the subsequent lyrics, and yet simultaneously to acknowledge that the 'defense' (line 15) may not have been spoken to or heard by the recipient. Consequently, the questions posed remain unanswered and therefore rhetorical. Significantly, though, the response of the addressee is suggested in the narrator's account, as though the speaker-narrator is expecting a rebuttal: they mention not having a defence explicitly ('In my defense / I have none', line 15) – as if expecting to need one – and also put forward a series of counter statements signposted through the adversative conjunction 'But', which fronts a number of lines:

'And it's alright now / But we were something, don't you think so?' (lines 10-11)

'In my defense, I have none / For never leaving well enough alone / But it would've been fun' (lines 15-17)

'We never painted by the numbers baby / But we were making it count'
(lines 22-23)

It is clear, despite these counter statements, that listeners are not eavesdropping on a conversation between two ex-partners in a romantic relationship, but rather the monologue of regrets as presented by the narrator, albeit ones which are verbalised. The speaker describes how they 'persist and resist the temptation to ask' the addressee questions about what might have been, and these descriptions are all semantically loaded: both 'persist' and 'resist' (line 36) signify an action that suggests an antagonistic force, whereas 'temptation' (line 36) designates the speaker's act of refraining from doing something strongly desired.

The predominant type of disnarration in 'the 1', and which builds the alternative scenarios mentioned above, occurs through hypothetical constructions. The speaker imagines a life where they and the addressee end up together and describes how 'it would've been fun / If you would've been the one' (lines 17-18). This imagined life is framed through epistemic modal verb phrases which outline potential possibilities ('It *would've* been sweet / If it *could've* been me', lines 41-42, emphasis added) and which work to suggest a potential reality (Langacker 2008) at a conceptual distance from the speaker. The scenario of ending up together is also explicitly framed through positive evaluation which is linguistically separate from the modality that marks the counterfactual statement (Riddle Harding 2007). The narrator describes how it would have been 'sweet' (line 41) and 'fun' (lines 17, 33, 45) if things had worked out differently, and also how this scenario is something they wish for ('And if my wishes came true / It would've been you', lines 29-30). The hypothetical framings of the scenarios are further elaborated through other markers of modality and subjectivity, including verbs of perception ('I guess', 'you never know', 'don't you think so?', chorus) and schematic language ('some new shit', line 1; 'something', chorus; 'some woman', line 21) which draw greater attention to the speculative nature of the character's reveries. At the same time, the counterpoint to the narrator's positive conceptualisation of the counterfactual scenarios is the remorse and regret expressed for their storyworld reality.

These stylistic choices work together to build up a listener's mental model of the character-narrator. Alongside the evaluative stances put forward by the speaker in the disnarrated scenarios, other style choices such as intertextual references, extended and elaborated motifs, as well as more explicit and dysphemistic language, evoke a complex and layered implied narrator, and one who moves away from the 'nice girl' persona established in earlier diaristic albums (see Ringrow 2020). Here, it could be argued that 'the 1' characterises a speaker who feels nostalgic and retrospective (Ellis 2020), but more specifically wistful,

about this potential relationship ('But it would've been fun / If you would've been the one', repeated as part of the refrain in lines 17-18 and 33-34, and in the final two lines, 45-46). Equally, the regretful tone is compounded through the way that the storyworld is framed and the narrative alternatives are introduced. In another context, mistaking someone at the bus stop would be considered subnarratable (Warhol 2013) – in other words, not worthy of mention because it is too mundane – but here this everyday and unremarkable non-encounter is enough to instigate this stream of thought and speculation, which appears to be meaningful to the speaker.

At the same time, listeners are also invited to 'impose their own judgments and analysis on the details of the text' (Riddle Harding 2007: 278). While the speaker addresses a particular fictionalised addressee, there are also instances of generalised 'you' (Herman 1994) throughout the song. These appear, for example, in the 'You know' of line 6 and the repeated first line of the chorus ('you never know'). Similarly, the rhetorical questions have the same function of opening up the address to invite listener reflection: 'If one thing had been different / Would everything be different today?' (lines 37-38). Parker argues that the placement of 'you' in narrative fiction has become conventionalised in that it is rarely sustained, often appearing in the beginning or end of stories to achieve particular effects. When 'you' appears at the beginning of a text, it can fulfil a narrative function:

An indefinite [generalized] you can also suggest experiences or sensations shared by narrators and readers, or readers and characters, establishing connections between them on this basis, before character traits or behaviours readers may potentially share, idealise, or reify are elaborated. (Parker 2018: 102)

Parker goes on to suggest that it draws 'readers into unfamiliar situations, marking shifting focalisation, or destabilising previously-established narrative situations' (2018: 111). Placing the generalised 'you never know, never know' in the chorus has the effect of reminding the audience to speculate on their own position and potential roads not taken. This is disruptive in that it continuously destabilises the established narrative scenario and instead brings the story back to the listener. Another function of this *you* address, though, is that it designates a potential shared situation between the narrator and listener, such that further intersubjective connections may be established between the speaking persona and the audience.

In addition to details about the narrator-character, world-building information is established through references to specific locations in the unfolding narrative scenarios, which are grounded in the everyday and domestic. Particular places are referenced (such as 'the bus stop', line 3, 'home', line 21, and being 'by the pool', lines 12 and 28), while a CINEMA domain is also referenced in descriptions of 'the Sunday matinee' (line 5) and mention of 'the greatest films of all time' (line 6). Such references form intratextual connections between and across songs in these two albums (and in Swift's oeuvre more generally), which comprises other cinema descriptions throughout. Even within this song, this

domain is reinstated later when the speaker makes a ‘specific marked’ interrelation (Mason 2019) to the film *Titanic*, by quoting the phrase ‘making it count’ (line 23). Such an interrelation is validated and verified through the broader CINEMA domain and also via the co-text of the next line: ‘You know the greatest loves of all time are over now’ (line 24). This reference also foregrounds connections with the subsequent narrative interrelations made later in the two albums – in particular, the mentions of love stories or relationships which experience trials and hardship (e.g. ‘Peter losing Wendy’ in ‘cardigan’ (*Peter Pan*); the ‘invisible string’ between partners (*Jane Eyre*); the description of the unequal relationship between partners in ‘tolerate it’ (*Rebecca*)). Equally, setting up the CINEMA domain at the outset of this song, and the albums as a whole, places an emphasis on performativity; a reminder that the disnarrated scenarios we are about to listen to may in fact have ‘never’ occurred, but they are nevertheless playing out via a series of rich narrative montages.

It can be argued that ‘the 1’ establishes a clear direction for the storytelling structures presented in *folklore*. The song sets up a tone of wistfulness and regret, and at the same time the lyrics are grounded in narrative scenarios that prevent the audience from remaining as an eavesdropper only. Instead, listeners are invited to engage with the world-building of the song more directly, as signposted in the presentation of fleeting disnarrated structures, audience address and other self-conscious narrative forms such as intertextual references and reminders of performativity and acting a part. That the speaker’s wistfulness is extended and somewhat exaggerated also creates a sense of ironic distance, as though they are aware that their monologue is self-indulgent or hyperbolic. These linguistic strategies combine to create a wall-breaking effect: the speaker draws attention to the constructedness of the narrative, and reminds listeners of their position in the discourse event. The reminder invites listeners to become ‘hyper-aware of the pragmatics of the text’s communicative meaning and of the directed act of interpretation, and [...] kept overtly conscious of her own constructed reading subjectivity’, which is characteristic of metafictional texts (Macrae 2019: 8-9). This arguably is also referenced in the album title itself: listeners are given advance notice that the songs in this album are about stories and storytelling.²

5. ‘the last great american dynasty’

‘the last great american dynasty’ centres around somewhat unconventional female characters who do not fit neatly into societal expectations: American socialite Rebekah Harkness and, later in the song’s storyworld, Taylor Swift herself. Disnarration strategies are employed to focus on what could have happened if Harkness had not married Bill and moved to Rhode Island, and, subsequently, if Swift had not purchased Harkness’ home and moved into the neighbourhood (Swift is the songwriter, the speaker-narrator, and the ‘I’ in the song). In ‘the last great american dynasty,’ the author-speaker does have some

² This self-awareness of form is similarly apparent across other media channels. On the music streaming platform Spotify, for example, Swift has thematically grouped some of the songs according to ‘chapters’.

access to the responses to both Harkness and of course herself, drawing on the socio-historical context from beyond the song's storyworld, which includes the negative evaluative judgement of the local residents who resent the presence of both Harkness and then later, Swift. Counterfactuals are used throughout the song to indicate unfulfilled expectations and regret around Harkness moving into Holiday House ('Who knows if she never showed up what could have been', chorus), a home that Swift herself later purchased for 17 million dollars ('Who knows if / showed up what could have been', chorus, emphasis added). The counterfactuals that are established in the song are as follows:

Storyworld	Rebekah Harkness purchases a house (Holiday House, Rhode Island) and local residents are upset by her behaviour. The same happens when Swift purchases this house several years later. In both cases, local residents are unhappy with their new neighbours.
Counterfactual 1	Rebekah Harkness did not marry Bill and did not move to Holiday House. The local community led a more peaceful life.
Counterfactual 2	Taylor Swift did not purchase Holiday House, Rhode Island. The local community led a more peaceful life.

Table 2: Storyworld Structure of 'the last great american dynasty'

In the first part of the narrative, Harkness is chastised for her loud parties (line 8), how she spends her money (lines 5-6, 16-19), and even her husband Bill's death ('it must have been her fault his heart gave out', line 10). As such, modal structures suggest an alternative version of events where she did not marry Bill and did not move to Rhode Island: 'who knows, if she never showed up what could've been' (chorus). The evaluative stance here suggests that the modal construction of 'what could've been' is preferable to the reality which is negatively encoded elsewhere in the song chorus: 'There goes the maddest woman this town has ever seen / She had a marvelous time ruining everything'; 'There goes the most shameless woman this town has ever seen / She had a marvelous time ruining everything'. The indicator of evaluative stance here (Riddle Harding 2007) relies on these other intratextual clues to evaluate the alternative scenario as preferable, as it suggests a quieter life for both Bill and for the Rhode Island community; a life in which everything was *not* 'ruined' (lines 13-14, 22-23). In an interview with Melody Chiu for *People* magazine, Swift herself has said that she is 'really proud' of the lyric 'she had a marvelous time ruining everything' because of this element of disruption:

It can be a real pearl-clutching moment for society when a woman owns her desires and wildness, [...] and I love the idea that the woman in question would be too joyful in her freedom to even care that she's ruffling feathers, raising eyebrows or becoming the talk of the town. The idea that she decided there were marvelous times to be had, and that was more important (n.p.).

The disruption caused by Harkness is repeated, although to a seemingly lesser extent, with Swift's arrival in Rhode Island later in the song. The lyric 'who knows, if she [Rebekah Harkness] never showed up what could've been' is repeated with a pronoun change later in another iteration of the chorus: 'who knows, if / never showed up what could've been' (emphasis added). Here Swift alludes to the town complaining about her purchase of Holiday House, and this wistful alternative narrative again depicts a quieter, calmer scenario for the local Rhode Island community. Both of these counterfactual scenarios are employed to present a preferred version of events to the ones that actually happened (Lambrou 2019: 81), and by extension may suggest an emotional attitude of disappointment towards the actual events that occurred (Riddle Harding 2007: 280).

In addition to the counterfactual elements outlined, 'the last great american dynasty' is arguably one of the most extratextual narratives on *folklore* and *evermore* and makes specific use of locations to both build and locate the storyworld of the song. The song outlines a specific time period in the life of American socialite Rebekah Harkness, following her marriage to and the subsequent death of her second husband, Bill Harkness (Standard Oil heir, married 1947). Perhaps unsurprisingly, then, the locations (and indeed participants) referenced in the song have real-life counterparts; thus, these noun phrases have an obvious 'locative meaning' (Lahey 2006: 148). The main location where much of the narrative is centred is Holiday House in Rhode Island, New England, owned by Rebekah Harkness and then later, both within and without the storyworld of the song, Swift herself. This residence hosts many decadent, Gatsby-esque activities: 'filled the pool with champagne and swam with the big names' (line 17); 'And losing on card game bets with Dali' (line 19). These activities led to the imagined criticism and disapproval of the local residents earlier in the song, and *The Great Gatsby* literary narrative interrelation provides more evidence of both *folklore* and *evermore* as some of the most literature-influenced of Swift's songwriting, being employed here to signify Harkness' extravagance. Indeed, Holiday House is presented as an escape for Rebekah from St Louis: not just referencing an American city but also her hometown, a complicated relationship with her family, and her husband Bill's death, although this extratextuality will not necessarily be immediately apparent to every listener without this contextual knowledge. Listeners may have their own 'mental archive' (Mason 2019) for these real-world locations, with some schemas more fully developed than others. Holiday House, for example, is likely to have a sparser schema in the mental archive for non-US listeners, whereas Rhode Island residents may have a much richer representation of this locale and its associated connotations. Arguably, the recognition of the high level of extratextuality is not a prerequisite to song appreciation or even to engaging with the song's storyworld but may enable a deeper level of narrative engagement for the listeners who have a more developed extratextual knowledge (or who develop this extratextual knowledge through research and then re-listen accordingly). Alongside other pieces of contextual information and textual choices, references to real-world locations in texts can decrease the perceived distance between the speaking persona and the real-world author for the audience (Semino 1995: 145; see also Gavins 2020: 33-37).

Disnarration strategies in 'the last great american dynasty' function to indicate not relief, as in other examples discussed in this paper, but rather resentment towards the dual protagonists of Rebekah Harkness and Taylor Swift, as the local residents imagine the possibility of a more tranquil life had they not shown up. Disnarration is strengthened by sustained use of extratextuality to build up a rich picture of the storyworld of Holiday House, Rhode Island, which situates the characters' thoughts and actions within this particular milieu.

6. 'willow'

The second album *evermore* establishes a departure in tone from *folklore*, and if 'the 1' is about regret, 'willow' is about desire. This is noted by Swift in an exchange with a fan on Twitter, where she classifies the themes of the song as encompassing: 'intrigue, desire, and the complexity that goes into wanting someone. I think it sounds like casting a spell to make somebody fall in love with you (an oddly specific visual)' (Swift 2020). Even more specifically, this song is about emotional dependence and manipulation, and the speaker's awareness of being stuck in a cycle they cannot break.

While 'the 1' opened with a scenario that was so mundane as to be (almost) subnarratable, 'willow' sets the stage for references to fairy tales and the folkloric. The speaker in 'willow' offers world-building descriptions that are romanticised and more allegorical, as established in the opening line, 'I'm like the water when your ship rolled in that night' (line 1), which evokes the Greek myth of Penelope waiting for the return of Odysseus. This myth is re-framed in the song as the speaker describes physically or metaphorically following the addressee ('Wherever you stray, I follow', lines 8-9), though, as with 'the 1', it appears that this relationship is also unattainable or partly unrealised. Unlike 'the 1', though, the extent to which the relationship described exists in the storyworld is comparatively more ambiguous and the lines between the storyworld and alternative narrative scenarios are less clear. In part, this can be traced to the thematic parallels that the mythical and folkloric references invite, but this is also a result of other linguistic and grammatical structures within the lyrics.

Firstly, the speaker describes an inverse relationship between the addressee's speech and her own convictions: 'The more that you say / the less I know' (lines 6-7). The 'less I know' statement here describes an epistemic expression of ignorance that belies the level of knowledge of the speaker: it suggests that the addressee is duplicitous, and that their off-stage speech invites more questions than it answers. This lack of resolution or satisfactory explanation is established in the first counterfactual statement in the first verse: 'And if it was an open/shut case / I never would've known from that look on your face' (lines 3-4). This statement suggests that 'it' (likely referring to their relationship) is not an open/shut case, and therefore is unable to read the expression of the addressee. The addressee therefore is pictured as someone who is unreadable and also distanced, both emotionally and physically 'as if [they] were a mythical thing' (line 15).

Storyworld	The speaker desires the addressee. The relationship is complicated as it is considered not to be 'an open/shut case'.
Counterfactual 1	The relationship is an 'open/shut case'; the speaker is able to interpret the addressee's thoughts and they are able to return 'home'. In this scenario, other wished-for romantic possibilities are actualised: e.g. holding hands.

Table 3: Storyworld Structure of 'willow'

The unrequited nature of their relationship implied in the storyworld scenario is reinforced through descriptions in the chorus that suggest non-reciprocity ('I'm begging for you to take my hand') – which, significantly, is one of the most repeated lines in the song, appearing eight times in total – and the attribution of agency to the lover ('Wherever you stray / I follow'). This inference is further supported through the lexical choices that suggest an illicit affair ('sneaking', line 14; 'cheat', line 17; 'stray', line 8, 20, 41, 53; 'bait and switch', line 38, 66) or physical violence ('Rough', line 2; 'cut through like a knife', line 2; 'scars', line 35; 'Wreck', chorus). In some cases, the lexical choices establish multiple and concurrent semantic interpretations. When contextualised alongside the title 'willow' and its position in the chorus line ('Life was a willow and it bent right to your wind'), the 'switch' in the phrase 'bait and switch' on its own could evoke a wooden switch used for punishment. Equally, the speaker imagines themselves as a vehicle for transport to bring the addressee home in the lines 'you know that my train could take you home' (chorus). In another context, 'train' could be interpreted as an item of clothing associated with bridal wear. This latter interpretation is supported through the foregrounded clothing in 'cardigan' in *folklore*, and extra-textually reinforced by the choice of a bridal-style dress in the accompanying music video.³ Such layering of associations contributes to the ambivalence at the centre of this story: the listeners are not given the full information of the nature of their relationship, and in that way are aligned with the speaker, who similarly professes uncertainty. This ambiguity persists until later in the song and even when the counterfactual becomes upgraded to storyworld status ('Now *this is* an open/shut case', line 36, emphasis added). The fact of their relationship becomes progressively more tangible, as further suggested through the shift in spatiotemporal deixis to 'Now', though that the chorus is repeated along with the line 'I'm begging for you to take my hand' at the end of the song implies that the relationship may remain unreachable. While the music video for 'willow' is said to show 'togetherness' in contrast to the isolation of 'cardigan' (Ebury and Welsch 2020), this togetherness is therefore arguably more complicated in the song lyrics, which do not present a harmonious union.

As the opening track of *evermore*, 'willow' continues and extends the theme of narrative alternativity which characterises the storytelling of *folklore*. Listeners

³ Other strategies of disnarration are reinforced through the multimodal style choices of the music videos for these songs, though an analysis of these is beyond the scope of this paper.

overhear the speaker's plea to their unrequited lover, and the more romantic and idealised relationship they seek, but, as in the previous examples from *folklore*, these scenarios are problematised and revoked. The storytelling is both darker, as the analysis here has shown, and also further complicates the discourse architecture (see Figure 1). Halfway through the song, for example, the folkloric schema is disrupted in the lines: 'They count me out time and time again / [...] But I come back stronger than a '90s trend' (lines 31-33). These lines appear notably anachronistic within this context, through the anomalous reference to a '90s trend' and the ambiguity of the unnamed and unspecified third party. Significantly, the ensuing schema disruption give rise to an interpretation of 'me' as a metaleptic reference (Genette 1988 [1983]: 88) to Swift as real-world author⁴ rather than to the speaking persona of the song, and by extension to 'they' as a real-world referent, and possibly a person or group who is critical of Swift. In *evermore*, the songs' stories are said to more generally 'forego the self to move toward the nonspecific, the nondistinct, and impersonal as points of relation, intimacy and identification' (Kim Lee 2020). In light of this context, the suggested personal reference in these lines is therefore markedly foregrounded and conceptually disruptive, not entirely backgrounding Swift's authorial role in the storytelling process.

7. 'champagne problems'

'champagne problems' begins with the speaker addressing 'you': a fictional addressee who has 'booked a night train for a reason' (line 1). The reason, we find out later in the song, is because the speaker (and now former partner) has turned down his marriage proposal. The song, then, is a narrative recalling of both this specific event and their relationship more broadly and makes use of sustained and varied disnarration strategies to capture the ambiguity and complexity of this relationship. The speaker addresses her ex-partner throughout the song, moving across time between (1) the evening of the unsuccessful proposal, (2) her partner's actions directly prior to the proposal, (3) previous events in their relationship, and (4) an imagined future scenario after their breakup. Number (4) is arguably the most likely candidate to unpack in terms of disnarration strategies, as this relates to what *might* have been, but in fact all of these sub-narratives make use of disnarration as a way of portraying hypothetical scenarios in this relationship. Different perspectives on the same narrative event also help to create a storyworld in which rich characterisations can take place. The following structure can be identified in terms of counterfactual scenarios:

⁴ An inference further supported by the appearance of this lyric in Swift's Instagram bio at the time of the album's release [December 2020].

Storyworld	Speaker had a romantic relationship and ended up turning down partner's proposal.
Counterfactual 1	[negated parts; the hopes of the addressee as imagined by speaker] Proposal happened and it was successful: the couple danced together; people were celebrating; crowds of friends were applauding; guests were drinking the champagne; the fiancé delivered his prepared speech; the mom's ring ended up on the fiancée's finger to symbolise their engagement, etc.
Counterfactual 2	Family responses to storyworld events [represented as storyworld fact, but presumably the speaker does not have access to this response].
Counterfactual 3	The addressee meets a future partner and their relationship fulfils the desires and expectations that the one between the speaker and the addressee does not.

Table 4: Storyworld Structure of 'champagne problems'

In 'champagne problems', the narrator has seemingly come to the party with the intention of breaking up with her partner; her partner has come with the intention of proposing. The proposal was not successful, as told through the disnarrated lyrics which make use of negation strategies: 'Dom Pérignon you brought it / no crowd of friends applauded' (chorus) and earlier 'Your sister splashed out on the bottle / Now no one's celebrating' (lines 15-16). These lyrics also relate to the title of 'champagne problems' which is a play on words. It refers to having brought Dom Pérignon to celebrate a proposal that has now gone wrong (and no one is drinking it), and the argument that an unsuccessful marriage proposal is not hugely significant in comparison to other global issues. The expensive champagne reference also helps to locate this storyworld within a somewhat affluent or privileged setting, which is explored in more depth later.

The negation here ('now no one's celebrating', line 16, 'No crowd of friends applauded', chorus) has a discourse-pragmatic function as it is used to indicate that the listener may have a different set of expectations (Macrae 2019: 199). In Prince's (1988) terms, the rejection of the proposal may present to the listener elements of failed attempts, crushed hopes and unfulfilled expectations. Some of the expectations here may be around conventional (especially heteronormative) relationships in a North American context: the man proposes; the woman says yes; it is a joyful occasion that may be shared with family and friends and a glass of champagne. The negation demonstrates those expectations have not been realised within the storyworld, but may have been expected by both the listener and the male addressee (the ex-partner). Macrae (2019: 199) argues that '[a]ffirmative narration and negative/negating disnarration can be seen as occupying two poles of a scale of modalised narration'. As such, this negative disnarration related to what did *not* happen occupies a stronger position on Macrae's (2019: 199) cline of disnarration,

compared to, for example, affirmative narration which sits on the weaker side of the scale, or hypothetical focalisation which occupies the middle ground.

Despite conventional expectations regarding proposals and the suggestion that the song's addressee expected things to go well in terms of his (pre)suppositions, there are other indications in the song that he might have suspected that her answer would not be a resounding yes (and should not have assumed otherwise). The narrative of 'unfulfilled expectations' is therefore challenged. The speaker casts doubt on her ex-partner's apparent supposition that the proposal would be a success and, by extension, his intentions in proposing. However, this is filtered through the speaker-narrator's position; the listener does not necessarily have access to the partner's unfiltered point of view or other more 'neutral' contextual knowledge of their specific hypothetical relationship. For example, 'You booked the night train for a reason / So you could sit here in this hurt' (lines 1-2) suggests that he was planning for the aftermath of a failed proposal. Perhaps slightly more ambiguous is 'you told your family for a reason' (line 13), which might refer to the possible pressure of a (somewhat public proposal), but also so that his family and friends would fully support him if the proposal was then turned down. As developed elsewhere in the song, the speaker's sanity is questioned in her turning down this proposal through the modalised statement: 'She would've made such a lovely bride / What a shame she's fucked in the head, they said' (lines 37-38). In Riddle Harding's (2007) taxonomy, this can be categorised as 'negative toward counterfactual with counterfactual in focus'. Here, the speakers (assumed to be hypothetical reported speech by friends or family of the jilted partner) express a preference for the reality over the counterfactual alternative: the reality is that she was *not* a bride (at least, not to this marriage partner), and this is the preferred option due to the speaker's evaluative stance ('fucked in the head') as the cultural frame associated with this assessment is negative (Riddle Harding 2007: 267-268). However, this interpretation is filtered through the narrator as she has represented what she has imagined the family members and friends said about her in this context.

This reference to mental illness ('fucked in the head') echoes previous college experiences with the couple and their group of friends ("This dorm was once a madhouse" / I made a joke "well, it's made for me", lines 27-28). Turning down the marriage proposal is seen as something that is difficult for the partner's friends and family to understand. Although the reasons for the break-up are not fully realised in the song, the unsuccessful proposal could symbolise more broadly a rejection of societal norms and expectations for women. This theme of autonomous women doing unexpected things is developed elsewhere in *evermore* and *folklore*: recall, for example, the apparently disruptive behaviour of both Harkness and Swift in 'the last great american dynasty', and Wise's (2020) argument that 'One of *evermore*'s overarching themes, then, is women's desire for an existence where their happiness and success are not entirely dependent on men [...]'.

The imagined future scenario in 'champagne problems' makes use of disnarrated narratives which enable the speaker to present a possible future life

for her former partner in which he both forgets about her and finds a new and improved partner to build a life with ('You won't remember all my champagne problems', chorus; 'But you'll find the real thing instead', line 39). The deictic 'you' here functions as a focaliser who is explicitly identified to speak to a future scenario, highlighting '[...] the dynamic nature of the construction of this world' (Macrae 2019: 208; see also 205-206). These evaluations invite the listener to judge this scenario of the jilted fiancé finding another future partner as a preferred outcome (rather than if the marriage proposal had been successful). The listener has access to different embedded levels of evaluative stance throughout the song, and therefore 'is in a position to contrast counterfactual alternatives, and to understand the explicit and implicit evaluations of these alternatives [...]' (Riddle Harding 2007: 277), although arguably we do not get the unfiltered (i.e. direct) version of events from the addressee and his friends and family. The wistfulness of the speaker's 'But you'll find the real thing instead' (line 39) presents the hypothetical new partner as preferable to the ex-fiancée, which supports Thurschwell's (2020) reading of the speaker-narrator as somewhat callous in her ending of the relationship.

The disnarration in the song therefore arguably provides a point of tension between two readings: on the one hand, the addressee is someone who (according to the speaker) goes ahead with the pressure of public proposal when he is not sure of the outcome, as he may or should have seen signs that their relationship is not necessarily on solid ground. On the other, the speaker shatters the addressee's heart ('your heart was glass, I dropped it', chorus) and the listeners are given *her* view that there were signs she might say no; not necessarily his. This latter point – that he had misread or not noticed signs of disquiet in their relationship – becomes increasingly ambiguous later in the song as the speaker-narrator admits:

One for the money, two for the show
I never was ready, so I watch you go
Sometimes you just don't know the answer
'Til someone's on their knees and asks you (lines 33-36)

This play on words around a common phrase or idiom is a feature commonly used in Swift's songwriting and in this case relates to the countdown to an event ('One for the money, two for the show, three to make ready and four to go'). It is used here to suggest that the speaker and addressee were on different paths, but also to suggest that the speaker did not quite realise she would say no until the proposal was happening. This calls into question earlier assertions that the addressee must have suspected her answer might be negative. As such, lines 33-36 work to question narrator reliability and to highlight the complexity of relationships (the latter being a common thread throughout this song).

While the speaker does turn the addressee down ('Because I dropped your hand while dancing / Left you out there standing / Crestfallen on the landing, chorus), parallel structures present his hypothetical new partner as doing the opposite, using high modality ('And hold your hand while dancing / Never leave you standing / Crestfallen on the landing', chorus). Similar parallel structures

reinforce this message of a new hypothetical partner by a change in pronouns elsewhere in the chorus: for example, ‘my picture in your wallet’ later becomes ‘her picture in your wallet’. In this case, the listener is aware that this new relationship is not necessarily ‘real’ within the storyworld, but rather presented as a preferred alternative hypothetical future scenario for all parties. The scenario indicates a different possible life for the addressee, with positive evaluation (and even relief) that adds to the development of this narrative that focuses on a complicated relationship across different time periods (Riddle Harding 2007: 273).

In addition to the stylistic disnarration strategies, ‘champagne problems’ also makes use of world-building elements, such as references to objects and locations. Unlike many other songs on both *folklore* and *evermore*, however, there are no specific location references and the storyworld is slightly less localised. Nevertheless, the details work to create a rich storyworld that seems to be located within an upper-middle class or wealthy North American milieu (Thurschwell 2020 conceptualises these characters as the college-age children of ‘the last great american dynasty’ Rhode Island community). The champagne is a pricey ‘Dom Pérignon’ (chorus), although we do note that the sister ‘splashed out’ (line 15) on this (pun surely intended), which might suggest a sense of extravagance. The (non-)engagement party location appears to be a relatively large venue or home with (presumably) a dancefloor (‘while dancing’ and a ‘landing’, chorus). The couple are college-educated, although the references to their college days are more somewhat prosaic: there is a ‘dorm’ (line 27), ‘flannel’ (line 26), and a ‘Chevy’ (line 25). The latter, Insko (2020) argues, is part of Swift’s recent ‘return to trucks’: a nod to her country beginnings, but also ‘[...] an explicit rejection of chest-thumping masculine pickup truck aesthetico-politics’ (trucks also feature in *evermore*’s ‘tis the damn season’ and ‘no body, no crime’). The world-building elements in ‘champagne problems’ therefore work to further contextualise the relatively affluent storyworld of the failed proposal. Disnarration strategies function to represent themes of unfulfilled expectations, disappointment and relief – sometimes all at the same time. The speaker-narrator filters others’ viewpoints on the same narrative events, but there are issues of reliability, reinforcing the complexity of this relationship and its associated emotions.

8. ‘I don’t need your “closure”’

This paper set out to consider, firstly, how disnarration is linguistically created in Swift’s songwriting, and secondly, the interpretative effects of these strategies. While critics have commented on the tales and the utopian escapism (Ebury and Welsch 2020) present in *folklore* and *evermore*, the analyses in Sections 4-7 have demonstrated that the storytelling structures in these songs do not build storyworlds which are unproblematically romanticised (cf. Ellis 2020). It has been noted how much of the utopian or idealistic narrative or romantic scenarios are embedded in, and conceptually undermined by, the disnarrated structures of the lyrics. These utopian scenarios are present but they are removed through linguistic choices of negation, modalisation, schematisation and other stylistic

strategies that make up the processes of disnarration, and which work to distribute processes of evaluation across multiple perspectives.

The analyses have demonstrated that disnarration plays a significant role in world-building within these albums. It enables the ‘development of themes’ within the discourse (Riddle Harding 2007: 277), which draws on and subverts traditional preoccupations of Romantic literature (see Ellis 2020) and also becomes instrumental in building audience’s characterisation of the speakers; problematising listeners’ tendency to identify Swift herself with her speaker-narrators (see Martin 2019). Finally, the disnarrated structures also create a self-awareness of form that permeates both albums and which marks the writing as distinctly metafictional. As Macrae argues, ‘metafictionality can serve sometimes to bolster, and sometimes to break, the “fourth wall” – and sometimes, paradoxically, can do both simultaneously’ (2019: 4). This complex process of bolstering and breaking invites toggling or flickering between the narrative scenarios and storyworlds. This reflexivity occurs at all levels of the discourse architecture: extra-textually, in Swift’s reflections on writing, in the attenuated and yet still present autofictional elements (such as the references to real-world locations significant to Swift); at the macro-, compositional level of the text (for example, within the album titles); and also, as the analyses in Sections 4-7 have shown, within the style choices of the lyrics themselves. The self-awareness of the storyworld construction means that, at certain points, the discourse architecture of the song is laid bare, such that listening becomes a more direct collusion with Swift in the creation of these folkloric, escapist tales.

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