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Narrative Construction, Identity Formation, and Cultural Representation in Taylor Swift's Folklore: A Literary and Cultural Inquiry

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Abstract

This study examines Folklore as a literary and cultural text through the combined frameworks of Narratology, Cultural Studies, Memory Studies, and selected approaches to myth and symbolic interpretation. Rather than approaching the album merely as a musical production or autobiographical reflection, the study investigates how selected songs construct meaning through narrative design, memory, symbolic representation, and cultural imagination. Through close textual reading, the analysis is organized into three clusters: (1) multiperspectival storytelling in Cardigan, August, and Betty; (2) memory, identity formation, and emotional survival in Mirrorball, This Is Me Trying, Mad Woman, My Tears Ricochet, Seven, and August; and (3) myth, symbolism, and cultural imagination in The Last Great American Dynasty, Invisible String, Epiphany, and Peace. Findings suggest that Folklore extends beyond contemporary popular music and functions as a literary space where narrative construction, cultural meaning, and emotional experience intersect. The study argues that contemporary songwriting may serve as an evolving form of literary expression capable of sustaining critical interpretation.

Keywords: Folklore, Narratology, Cultural Studies, Memory Studies, Myth, Symbolism

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Introduction

From Biography to Discography: Taylor Swift and the Context of Folklore

Taylor Alison Swift is an American singer–songwriter recognized as one of the most commercially successful and culturally influential artists of the twenty-first century. Born on December 13, 1989, in West Reading, Pennsylvania, she developed an early interest in music and songwriting and later relocated to Nashville, Tennessee, to pursue a professional career in country music. After signing with Big Machine Records, Swift released her self-titled debut album in 2006, introducing her to a wider audience through songs such as Tim McGraw and Teardrops on My Guitar (Bennett, 2014; Morris, 2023). Since then, her career has expanded across multiple musical genres, including country, pop, indie folk, and alternative influences, resulting in a body of work that has continuously evolved in style and thematic direction.

Across more than two decades of artistic production, Swift's discography has attracted sustained public, critical, and scholarly attention not only because of its commercial success but also because of its cultural and narrative dimensions. Her albums frequently document shifts in musical identity and storytelling strategies that correspond with different phases of her artistic development. Albums such as *Red* (2012), *1989* (2014), *Reputation* (2017), *Lover* (2019), *Folklore* (2020), and *Evermore* (2020) are often identified as significant milestones in discussions of Swift's artistic growth and cultural influence (McNutt, 2020; Sheffield, 2021). *Red* signaled experimentation beyond country conventions; *1989* marked her transition into mainstream pop; *Reputation* explored reinvention and public image; while *Lover* introduced a more reflective and emotionally expansive direction.

Among these works, *Folklore* occupies a distinct position and emerges as a particularly compelling subject for literary inquiry. Released in 2020 during the COVID-19 pandemic, the album represented a notable departure from Swift's previous commercially oriented pop productions. Rather than foregrounding spectacle and autobiographical immediacy, *Folklore* adopted a quieter indie-folk aesthetic centered on atmosphere, fictional narration, introspection, and layered storytelling (Petrusich, 2020; Sheffield, 2020). Produced largely through remote collaboration with Aaron Dessner and Jack Antonoff, the album developed under conditions of isolation and uncertainty that shaped both its sonic texture and thematic atmosphere.

This creative transition contributed to the album's broad critical recognition and positioned *Folklore* as one of the defining musical works of the pandemic period. Critics frequently emphasized its narrative sophistication and literary sensibility, particularly its movement toward character-driven storytelling, multiple perspectives,

and interconnected emotional worlds (Empire, 2020; Rolling Stone, 2020). Rather than presenting songs as isolated confessional statements, the album constructs scenes, voices, and imagined experiences that invite sustained interpretation.

Folklore presents a collection of narratives that move across themes of memory, identity, longing, relationships, and human experience. Songs such as Cardigan, August, and Betty reflect on remembrance and emotional retrospection; The Last Great American Dynasty reconstructs history through narrative voice and public memory; while Epiphany employs contrasting perspectives to dramatize emotional distance. Elsewhere, songs such as Mirrorball, Seven, This Is Me Trying, and Invisible String explore questions of selfhood, nostalgia, emotional labor, and connection. The album concludes with tracks that shift toward contemplation and artistic withdrawal, creating a body of work that remains varied in tone while maintaining thematic coherence.

Because of these qualities, Folklore may be approached not only as a musical release but also as a contemporary narrative text. The album's interconnected storytelling, shifting perspectives, and recurring thematic patterns invite modes of interpretation commonly associated with literary analysis. Through close reading of selected songs and attention to narrative construction, this study examines how language, voice, and thematic continuity create meaning across the album. Such an approach enables Folklore to be understood as a unified artistic work rather than simply a collection of individual songs.

By situating Folklore within literary inquiry, this study also participates in broader discussions concerning the changing forms of narrative and artistic expression in contemporary culture. As literature increasingly intersects with popular media, works such as Folklore challenge conventional boundaries that separate literary texts from contemporary cultural production. Reading the album through literary frameworks therefore creates opportunities to reconsider how storytelling continues to evolve within modern artistic forms.

Methodology

Research Design

This study employs a qualitative literary research design using close reading and interpretive textual analysis to examine selected songs from Taylor Swift's Folklore. Qualitative literary inquiry is appropriate because the study seeks to interpret meaning, examine symbolic patterns, and analyze how narratives operate within literary and cultural contexts rather than measure variables quantitatively. The study approaches Folklore not merely as a musical production but as a contemporary

literary text whose meanings emerge through language, narrative structure, symbolism, and cultural representation.

Close reading serves as the primary analytical method because it allows detailed examination of lyrics, recurring motifs, narrative perspectives, symbolic images, and thematic relationships across songs. Rather than focusing on authorial biography or audience reception, the analysis attends to the internal organization of the text and investigates how meaning is constructed through narrative voice, temporal movement, imagery, and thematic continuity. Interpretive textual analysis further enables the study to connect textual observations with broader literary and cultural frameworks in order to understand how selected songs produce meanings related to identity, memory, emotional experience, and collective imagination.

Corpus of the Study

The corpus of this study consists of selected songs from *Folklore* (2020), chosen through purposive selection based on their literary complexity, thematic coherence, and relevance to the theoretical concerns of the study. Rather than examining the album in its entirety, the analysis focuses on songs that most strongly demonstrate narrative construction, identity formation, symbolic representation, and cultural meaning. To organize the analysis systematically, the selected songs were grouped into three analytical clusters:

Cluster 1: Multiperspectival Narratives and Interwoven Voices

The first analytical cluster consists of *Cardigan*, *August*, and *Betty*, which were selected because of their interconnected narrative structure and their strong demonstration of storytelling techniques across multiple perspectives. These songs collectively construct what Taylor Swift has described as a shared narrative world in which events are presented through different narrators occupying distinct emotional and temporal positions. The cluster was chosen primarily to support the narratological component of the study, particularly the examination of narrative voice, focalization, temporality, and perspective. Rather than presenting a single and unified account of experience, the songs distribute narrative knowledge across multiple speakers, allowing meaning to emerge through overlapping interpretations and partial viewpoints. Through this arrangement, the cluster provides a suitable corpus for analyzing how contemporary songwriting may employ literary narrative strategies commonly associated with fictional texts.

Cluster 2: Memory, Selfhood, and Emotional Survival

The second analytical cluster includes *Mirrorball*, *This Is Me Trying*, *Mad Woman*, *My Tears Ricochet*, *Seven*, and *August*. These songs were selected because they foreground themes of memory, identity formation, emotional vulnerability, and the process of enduring personal disruption. Unlike the first cluster, which emphasizes storytelling structure, this group shifts attention toward inward reflection and the reconstruction of self through emotional experience. The selected songs portray speakers who revisit past events, negotiate emotional wounds, confront personal limitations, and reinterpret experiences in order to understand their present identities. This cluster therefore supports the study's use of Narrative Identity Theory and Cultural Memory Theory by providing texts through which memory may be examined not as simple recollection but as an interpretive process that shapes identity and emotional meaning. The grouping allows the study to investigate how personal experiences become recognizable forms of shared human experience and cultural expression.

Cluster 3: Myth, Symbolism, and Cultural Imagination

The third analytical cluster is composed of *The Last Great American Dynasty*, *Invisible String*, *Epiphany*, and *Peace*. These songs were selected because they extend beyond personal storytelling and develop broader symbolic and cultural meanings through images, historical references, and imaginative structures. While the earlier clusters emphasize narrative construction and memory, this group focuses on how individual experiences become transformed into larger reflections on destiny, suffering, identity, relationships, and collective meaning. The selected songs employ symbolic motifs and culturally recognizable patterns that invite interpretation beyond literal events. This cluster supports the study's engagement with myth criticism and symbolic interpretation by examining how songs construct meaning through cultural narratives, recurring symbolic images, and forms of imagination that connect private experiences with broader human concerns. Through this grouping, the study investigates how contemporary songwriting may function as a site where literary symbolism and cultural meaning intersect.

These songs were chosen because they extend individual experiences into broader symbolic, historical, and cultural meanings through mythic imagination and literary symbolism. The clustering process was intended not to isolate songs but to highlight recurring literary tendencies across the album and demonstrate how individual tracks contribute to larger thematic formations.

Theoretical Framework

This study uses Narrative Theory, Narrative Identity Theory, Cultural Memory Theory, Theory of Myth and Symbolism, and Cultural Studies/Cultural Criticism to examine Taylor Swift's *Folklore* as a literary and cultural text. These theories allow the album to be analyzed not only as music, but as a collection of stories, voices, memories, symbols, and cultural meanings.

Narrative Theory, also called narratology, studies how stories are structured, organized, and communicated. It focuses on elements such as narrator, point of view, time, plot, characterization, focalization, and narrative voice. Gérard Genette explains that narrative meaning is shaped not only by events themselves but by the manner in which those events are told, especially through voice, mood, and time (Genette, 1980). Mieke Bal also emphasizes that narrative analysis considers how a story is presented, who perceives it, and how the reader or listener receives it (Bal, 2009). In relation to *Folklore*, Narrative Theory is useful because many songs are constructed like short stories. The songs in this album do not present one simple version of events. Instead, they offer different perspectives within the same emotional situation. Through these songs, Swift creates a multiperspectival narrative in which listeners must piece together the story from different voices. This reflects Genette's idea of focalization, or the perspective through which events are perceived (Genette, 1980).

Narratology also helps explain the album's use of retrospective narration. The speakers in the song look back on past emotional experiences, meaning that memory shapes the narration. The story is not told as a neutral report but as a subjective reconstruction of feeling. This makes the songs literary because their meaning depends on narrative technique, not merely on lyrical content. On the other hand, Narrative Identity Theory argues that people understand themselves through stories. Paul Ricoeur explains that identity is not fixed or complete; rather, the self is formed through narration, memory, and interpretation (Ricoeur, 1992). In this view, individuals make sense of their lives by arranging experiences into meaningful stories.

This Narrative Identity Theory is important in analyzing *Folklore* because many songs explore speakers who are trying to understand who they are after emotional pain, loss, or change. In "mirrorball," the speaker performs different versions of herself to remain loved and visible. In "this is me trying," the speaker defines identity through effort, failure, and emotional survival. In "seven" and "august," memory becomes a way of understanding the self. Through Narrative Identity Theory, *Folklore* can be read as an album about self-construction. The characters and speakers do not simply describe what happened to them; they interpret their experiences in order to understand who they have become. Ricoeur's theory is

especially useful here because it shows that identity is created through the act of telling and retelling one's story (Ricoeur, 1992).

Cultural Memory Theory studies how memory is shaped, preserved, and transmitted within culture. Jan Assmann argues that memory is not only personal but also collective, because societies preserve shared experiences through texts, rituals, images, and stories (Assmann, 2011). Aleida Assmann also explains that cultural memory allows societies to store and reinterpret the past through symbolic forms such as literature, monuments, archives, and art (Assmann, 2011). In *Folklore*, memory is one of the album's central concerns. The songs often return to past relationships, childhood, lost possibilities, and historical moments. However, memory in the album is not presented as a perfect recovery of the past. Instead, memory is emotional, selective, and reconstructed. For example, "seven" presents childhood as both innocent and distant, while "epiphany" connects wartime memory with pandemic suffering.

Cultural Memory Theory is useful because it explains how private memories can become shared cultural experiences. The emotions in *Folklore*—grief, nostalgia, longing, regret, endurance—are personal, but they are also recognizable to listeners. The album transforms individual feeling into collective emotional memory. In this sense, *Folklore* functions as a cultural memory text because it preserves emotional experiences through narrative and song.

Another relevant theory is the Theory of Myth and Symbolism which examines how literary works use recurring images, archetypes, myths, and symbolic patterns to create deeper meaning. Barthes explains that myth is not simply an ancient story; it is a cultural system that transforms ordinary events or objects into larger meanings (Barthes, 1972). Northrop Frye also argues that literature often relies on recurring archetypes and symbolic structures that connect individual texts to broader human patterns (Frye, 1957). This theory is highly relevant to *Folklore* because the album is filled with symbolic images: cardigans, invisible strings, houses, forests, ghosts, mirrors, fire, rain, and scars. These images do not function only as decorations. They carry emotional and cultural meaning. For example, the cardigan symbolizes memory, comfort, and being remembered after neglect. The invisible string symbolizes fate, connection, and hidden order. *Holiday House* in "the last great american dynasty" symbolizes legacy, reputation, and public imagination.

Myth theory is also important in songs that allude to history and celebrated individuals such that they become more than historical figures. Through repeated storytelling, they become mythic and allegorical figures associated with rebellion, excess, and female disruption. This reflects Barthes's claim that myth turns historical

reality into cultural meaning (Barthes, 1972). Similarly, these mythic persons or characters reflect Frye's idea that literature turns specific experiences into universal patterns (Frye, 1957).

Cultural Studies, or Cultural Criticism, examines how texts reflect, produce, and challenge cultural meanings. Stuart Hall argues that representation is central to culture because meaning is created through language, images, and signs (Hall, 1997). Raymond Williams also defines culture as a lived social process, meaning that art must be understood in relation to social experience, values, and historical conditions (Williams, 1983). This theory allows Folklore to be studied as more than a personal or musical work. The album can be examined as a cultural text that responds to contemporary experiences such as isolation, emotional uncertainty, gendered judgment, nostalgia, and the search for meaning. Released during the COVID-19 pandemic, Folklore resonated with listeners because it emphasized interior life, memory, loneliness, and imagined connection.

Cultural Criticism is especially useful in songs that critique women who are often labeled irrational or excessive. It also applies to emotional conditions which challenges cultural expectations on what truly provides complete stability and emotional security. Through this lens, Folklore becomes a site where personal emotion intersects with larger cultural conversations about gender, memory, identity, and vulnerability.

Synthesis

Together, these theories create a strong framework for analyzing Folklore. Narrative Theory explains how the album tells stories through voice, time, and perspective. Narrative Identity Theory explains how characters and speakers form identity through storytelling and reflection. Cultural Memory Theory shows how personal memories become collective and culturally meaningful. Theory of Myth and Symbolism reveals how images and stories become larger symbolic patterns. Finally, Cultural Studies/Cultural Criticism situates the album within broader social and cultural contexts. Therefore, Folklore may be understood as a contemporary literary-cultural text that uses narrative, memory, identity, myth, and symbolism to explore human experience.

Method of Analysis

The analysis proceeded through four interrelated stages. First, close reading was conducted through repeated examination of selected lyrics to identify narrative structures, symbolic patterns, recurring images, and thematic relationships. Second,

thematic clustering was employed to organize songs according to dominant literary concerns. Songs were grouped based on recurring patterns of narration, memory, symbolic representation, and cultural meaning. Third, textual analysis was conducted by examining narrative techniques, lyric construction, imagery, characterization, temporal movement, focalization, and symbolic language within each cluster. Finally, interpretive synthesis was performed by relating textual observations to the selected theoretical frameworks. Rather than treating songs as isolated units, the analysis examined how meanings developed across songs and contributed to broader discussions concerning narrative construction, identity formation, memory, mythology, symbolism, and cultural imagination.

Through this methodological approach, the study positions Folklore as a literary and cultural text capable of sustaining sustained critical interpretation beyond its status as contemporary popular music.

Analysis

Narrative Construction, Identity Formation, and Cultural Representation in Taylor Swift's Folklore: A Critical Evaluation

This analysis is arranged into three interconnected clusters. The first cluster—Cardigan, August, and Betty—highlights the album's narrative qualities through shifting perspectives and interwoven voices that create a shared story world. The second cluster—Mirrorball, Mad Woman, and My Tears Ricochet—moves toward questions of identity, emotional experience, and cultural meaning, revealing how personal expression can reflect wider social realities. Positioned between these two approaches is Epiphany, which serves as a connecting text through its treatment of memory, reflection, and collective experience. The third cluster includes these cuts from the album: The Last Greatest American Dynasty, Invisible String, Peace, and Epiphany. These songs interrogate myth, symbolism, and cultural imagination. Other songs remain valuable parts of Folklore, yet this selection of songs opens the album to interpretation through storytelling and cultural inquiry.

Cluster 1: Multiperspectival Narratives and Interwoven Voices in Cardigan

Among the songs selected for analysis, Cardigan, August, and Betty provide the clearest example of Folklore's narrative qualities because they construct a shared story world through interconnected perspectives and emotional experiences. Rather than presenting a single narrator or a fixed version of events, the songs allow listeners to piece together the story by moving across different voices and points of view. This

narrative structure makes the cluster especially suitable for analysis through Narratology (Genette, 1980).

Cardigan is presented through the voice of someone looking back on a youthful relationship that continues to hold emotional importance over time. The literal meaning of Cardigan is a fictional teenage love triangle where Betty falls deeply in love with James and gets hurt when he chased another girl, Augustine. Opening a drawer where she found a forgotten cardigan, Betty speaks from a position of maturity and distance, suggesting that the events have already passed and are now being reconstructed through memory. The title itself symbolizes familiarity, comfort, and something once neglected but eventually remembered again. Instead of presenting a chronological account of events, the song focuses on emotional recollection and personal interpretation.

In narratological terms, Cardigan demonstrates retrospective narration because the story is told after the events have already occurred. The song also uses internal focalization, meaning that listeners experience the relationship primarily through the narrator's memories, feelings, and perceptions rather than through an objective version of events. As Genette (1980) explains, focalization concerns who perceives the story and from whose perspective events are understood. In Cardigan, listeners do not receive an objective or omniscient account of the relationship nor access to multiple viewpoints. Instead, the narrative is presented entirely through the consciousness and perspective of the speaker. Images, emotions, and interpretations are filtered through a single narrative voice, limiting what the audience can know beyond the narrator's perception. This use of internal focalization narrows the field of perception and creates intimacy by positioning listeners within the narrator's subjective point of view rather than presenting events through detached observation. As a result, the audience does not encounter the relationship as an externally verified reality but only through the narrator's selective presentation of events and perceptions (Genette, 1980).

While Cardigan reflects on the past, August occupies a more immediate emotional space. The song tells the story of a brief and uncertain relationship remembered by Augustine through longing and impermanence. During summer, Augustine falls in love with James and begins a romantic relationship. Believing that the relationship might become real and lasting, she rearranges her life around him, hoping James will choose her. However, James eventually returns to Betty when summer ends. Unlike the more resolved narrative position in Cardigan, August constructs its storytelling through a limited and subjective narrative perspective that shapes how the relationship is presented to the audience. The song employs retrospective narration, in which events are recounted after they have already

occurred, allowing the narrative to unfold through reflection rather than immediate action. This temporal distance structures the sequence of revelation and controls how information is disclosed. At the same time, the song utilizes internal focalization, a narrative technique in which access to events is restricted entirely to the consciousness of a single narrator. Because the audience receives only the narrator's observations, perceptions, and interpretations, alternative viewpoints remain inaccessible and the relationship is presented as a partial and mediated account rather than an objective reality. Through this restricted perspective, the song creates intimacy while emphasizing the selective and constructed nature of storytelling, a feature central to narratological analysis of narrative voice and focalization (Genette, 1980; Bal, 2009).

Betty narrates the story of James and how he realizes his mistake after a romantic entanglement with Augustine. He owns up to his action and reconciles with Betty. This song shifts the narrative once more by introducing a more direct and immediate speaking voice that alters the storytelling dynamics established in the preceding songs. Unlike the reflective distance found in *Cardigan* and the temporal detachment of *August*, the song adopts a more immediate first-person narrative mode, positioning the speaker closer to the unfolding events and reducing narrative distance. This technique creates the impression that the audience encounters the account as an active attempt at communication rather than as retrospective contemplation. Through this narrative position, Betty foregrounds direct address, as the narrator speaks explicitly to another character, producing greater dramatic immediacy and strengthening the illusion of interpersonal exchange. At the same time, the song demonstrates internal focalization, restricting access to events entirely to the consciousness, perceptions, and interpretations of a single narrator and preventing access to alternative viewpoints. Because the narrative remains filtered through one speaking subject, the audience receives a selective and partial version of the relationship rather than an objective reconstruction of events. This restricted perspective also raises questions of narrative reliability, since the narrator's account may reflect self-justification, omission, or subjective interpretation rather than factual transparency. The interaction of first-person narration, direct address, internal focalization, narrative distance, and reliability positions Betty as the most dialogic and dramatically immediate narrative among the three songs while emphasizing how storytelling itself becomes shaped by the limits of perspective and narration (Genette, 1980; Booth, 1983; Bal, 2009).

Taken together, *Cardigan*, *August*, and *Betty* form what Taylor Swift has described as the album's "teenage love triangle" narrative (Swift, 2020). However, the literary value of the cluster lies not only in the storyline itself but in the way the songs

distribute narrative knowledge across multiple voices and perspectives. Each narrator occupies a different emotional and temporal position and therefore reveals only partial access to the events being described. This narrative technique reflects what Bakhtin (1981) refers to as polyphony, or the coexistence of multiple voices within a text without reducing them to a single controlling perspective. Meaning therefore emerges not from one authoritative narrator but from the interaction among several narrators whose memories, emotions, and interpretations overlap and occasionally contradict one another.

Through shifting perspectives, layered temporality, and interwoven voices, Cardigan, August, and Betty transform individual songs into a connected narrative experience that invites active interpretation. More than simply functioning as popular songs, the cluster demonstrates how Folklore may be approached as a literary text shaped by narrative design, emotional perspective, and multiperspectival storytelling.

Cluster 2: Memory, Selfhood, and Emotional Survival in the Songs Mirrorball, This is Me Trying, Mad Woman, My Tears Ricochet, Seven, and August

Stories of Becoming in Mirrorball and This is Me Trying

The second cluster in Taylor Swift's Folklore may be understood as a group of songs organized around the intertwined themes of memory, identity formation, emotional vulnerability, and the attempt to endure personal disruption. The song Mirrorball revolves around a speaker who constantly changes herself in order to remain visible, desired, and emotionally necessary to others. Swift expresses this emotional performance in the line, "I'm still trying everything to keep you looking at me" (Swift, 2020a). Like a mirrorball that reflects different lights depending on who is watching, the narrator adapts her identity and performs different versions of herself in the hope of maintaining connection and avoiding abandonment. Another lyric, "I can change everything about me to fit in" (Swift, 2020a), further emphasizes this willingness to reconstruct the self for acceptance. She recognizes that her value often comes not from being known authentically but from her ability to reflect what others want to see.

Similarly This Is Me Trying tells the story of a narrator who feels that they have disappointed others and perhaps themselves after failing to meet expectations or losing direction. The speaker appears aware of mistakes, missed opportunities, and emotional struggles but wants others to recognize that continuing to move forward already requires significant effort. Unlike narratives of success or recovery, the song focuses on effort itself as a meaningful achievement. Swift writes, "At least I'm trying"

(Swift, 2020b), a line that transforms emotional survival into an act of perseverance. The speaker demonstrates awareness of mistakes, regret, and emotional struggle, yet she continues to move forward. Another revealing lyric—“They told me all of my cages were mental” (Swift, 2020b)—suggests an awareness of internal limitation and psychological burden. Rather than presenting emotional difficulty as weakness, the song frames endurance as a difficult but valuable act. The speaker seeks recognition not for perfection but for continuing despite exhaustion.

Pain, Anger, and the Reconstruction of Self in Mad Woman and My Tears Ricochet

The theme of emotional injury appears more directly in *Mad Woman*. The song narrates the experience of a woman who has been wronged, manipulated, or publicly wounded and then criticized for expressing anger about that harm. Swift condenses this injustice in the line, “No one likes a mad woman” (Swift, 2020c). Rather than focusing on the original betrayal, attention shifts toward the emotional reaction itself, portraying her as irrational or unstable. The narrator recognizes this pattern and questions why anger expressed by women is so often interpreted as madness. The narrator questions why expressions of anger are often interpreted as irrationality, especially when voiced by women. Another lyric, “Every time you call me crazy, I get more crazy” (Swift, 2020c), demonstrates how public labeling becomes a force that reinforces emotional isolation. Through this perspective, the song critiques social expectations that permit suffering but discourage emotional resistance. Anger becomes both a response to injustice and evidence of how emotional experiences are socially regulated.

A related emotional atmosphere appears in *My Tears Ricochet*. The speaker addresses someone responsible for emotional betrayal while recognizing that attachment continues even after injury. Swift captures this contradiction in the line, “And I still talk to you when I’m screaming at the sky” (Swift, 2020d). The lyric suggests that grief does not end emotional connection but often deepens its complexity. Another significant line, “You wear the same jewels that I gave you” (Swift, 2020d), reinforces the painful awareness that emotional investment continues to exist even after relationships collapse. The song constructs a space where love and anger coexist. Rather than presenting closure, it portrays grief as a lingering process through which emotional wounds continue to shape identity and memory.

Memory, Longing, and Emotional Reconstruction in August and Seven

The songs *Seven* and *August* may be read together through their shared exploration of impermanence, longing, and the realization that emotionally

meaningful experiences cannot always be preserved. In *Seven*, the speaker revisits childhood and remembers believing that imagination and affection could overcome difficulty. Swift writes, “Please picture me in the trees” (Swift, 2020e), a line that evokes innocence and freedom. Yet another lyric—“Before I learned civility” (Swift, 2020e)—suggests that adulthood introduces restrictions that alter emotional perception. Memory therefore becomes both comforting and painful because it reveals what can no longer be recovered.

Likewise, *August* presents a narrator who enters a relationship with hope only to realize that closeness existed under uncertain conditions. Swift writes, “August slipped away into a moment in time” (Swift, 2020f), emphasizing how emotionally meaningful experiences may remain temporary. Another line, “You weren’t mine to lose” (Swift, 2020f), reveals the painful recognition that emotional attachment does not guarantee permanence. Through these songs, memory becomes less about recovering the past and more about understanding the emotional meaning that remains afterward.

Unlike other sections of the album that emphasize interpersonal events, this cluster turns inward and privileges reflection. Across these songs, speakers revisit memories, confront emotional wounds, negotiate fractured identities, and attempt to understand who they have become through love, disappointment, isolation, judgment, and loss. This orientation toward memory may be examined through Paul Ricoeur’s Narrative Identity Theory, which proposes that identity is not fixed but continuously formed through interpretation and storytelling (Ricoeur, 1992). According to Ricoeur, individuals become themselves through the narratives they construct around lived experience. Selfhood therefore emerges through ongoing interpretation rather than stable essence. Viewed through this framework, *Folklore* transforms memory into a literary mechanism through which speakers repeatedly return to earlier experiences in order to understand the present self. Songs such as *Seven* and *August* illustrate that memory is not passive recollection but active reconstruction.

Ricoeur later explains that remembering is not a direct recovery of reality but a process through which experience is reorganized into meaningful forms (Ricoeur, 2004). These songs resist nostalgia and instead show how identity develops through reinterpretation. This process may be further understood through Cultural Memory Theory, especially the work of Jan Assmann and Aleida Assmann. They argue that memory extends beyond individual consciousness and becomes shaped through social and cultural frameworks (Assmann, 2011; Assmann, 2011). Personal experiences gain meaning because they become connected to larger cultural narratives.

Applied to Folklore, this perspective suggests that the songs resonate not because they reveal private experiences alone but because they transform individual emotion into recognizable cultural language. Themes of exhaustion, grief, nostalgia, betrayal, and emotional perseverance become shared experiences that listeners recognize within their own lives.

Ultimately, this cluster contributes significantly to the literary dimension of Folklore because it presents memory not as a collection of facts but as an active space where identity is continually formed. Through Narrative Identity Theory, Cultural Memory Theory, and Memory Studies, the songs reveal how emotional survival depends upon the continuing reconstruction of the self.

Cluster 3: Myth, Symbolism, and Cultural Imagination in Folklore's *The Last Great American Dynasty*, *Invisible String*, *Epiphany*, and *Peace*

The songs *The Last Great American Dynasty*, *Invisible String*, *Epiphany*, and *Peace* may be viewed as a group in Folklore that explores larger ideas related to myth, symbolism, and cultural imagination. Although the album often tells personal and reflective stories, these songs extend individual experiences into broader symbolic meanings that explore destiny, memory, suffering, belonging, legacy, and human connection. Rather than remaining personal narratives, the songs transform ordinary experiences into stories that reflect wider cultural ideas and shared human experiences. Through symbolism and imagination, Folklore creates literary spaces where personal experiences gain deeper meaning and become ways of understanding life beyond everyday reality.

*Stories, Memory, and Cultural Meaning in *The Last Great American Dynasty**

Among the songs in Folklore, *The Last Great American Dynasty* most clearly demonstrates how ordinary life can become transformed into cultural myth. According to *Here Comes The Song* (2023), the narrative draws from the life of Rebekah Harkness, an American socialite and heiress associated with one of the most prominent industrial fortunes of the twentieth century through the Standard Oil family. Following her marriage to William Hale Harkness, heir to the Standard Oil fortune, Rebekah purchased a mansion in Watch Hill known as Holiday House. After her husband's death in 1954, Rebekah became a highly visible and controversial public figure whose unconventional lifestyle attracted both fascination and criticism. Accounts of her life often emphasized extravagant gatherings, artistic circles, and her association with notable cultural figures such as Salvador Dalí. Stories surrounding her social life—including anecdotes that circulated through newspapers and popular

culture—gradually transformed her public image into something larger than biography alone. As a result, Rebekah Harkness came to occupy a symbolic position in cultural memory, remembered not merely as a historical individual but as a figure shaped through reputation, retelling, and public imagination.

The song depicts a woman who gradually becomes remembered not simply for who she was but for the stories people created around her. Her identity becomes shaped by public imagination, reputation, and repeated retelling. In this sense, the song reflects what Roland Barthes calls myth—a process through which real events and historical figures become larger symbolic narratives that represent cultural beliefs and values (Barthes, 1972). The song suggests that society rarely remembers people exactly as they are. Instead, people become symbols shaped by public interpretation. This appears in the lyrics “the last great American dynasty” (Swift & Antonoff, 2020), in such a way that Rebekah Harkness is transformed into a figure associated with rebellion, excess, freedom, and disruption. Whether those stories are fully true becomes less important than the fact that they continue to circulate and define her legacy. Through this process, the character becomes almost legendary.

Through symbolism, the house itself becomes one of the most important literary elements in the song. Holiday House is not merely a location but a symbol of inheritance, reputation, social performance, and continuity across generations. This symbolic role appears in the short line “Holiday House sat quietly on that beach” (Swift & Antonoff, 2020), where the house becomes a silent witness to changing identities and public narratives. Likewise, the phrase “there goes the maddest woman this town has ever seen” (Swift & Antonoff, 2020) functions symbolically by showing how social labels become attached to women whose behavior exceeds accepted expectations. In this sense, the song presents identity as something shaped not only through action but through cultural interpretation.

The song also illustrates cultural imagination, which refers to the way communities create stories that transform individuals into enduring social figures. Rebekah’s life becomes meaningful not simply because of historical events but because society repeatedly narrates, exaggerates, and remembers those events. This process appears in the phrase “who knows, if she never showed up” (Swift & Antonoff, 2020), which imagines history itself as dependent upon the arrival of extraordinary individuals. Through this perspective, the song becomes more than a biographical narrative; it becomes a reflection on how cultures remember, mythologize, and preserve figures who challenge social norms. Ultimately, *The Last Great American Dynasty* demonstrates how storytelling transforms private lives into symbolic

narratives that continue to shape cultural memory long after historical events have passed.

Imagined Connections and the Search for Meaning in Invisible String

The interpretation of *Invisible String* may be strengthened through the Japanese legend of the Red String of Fate, which describes an invisible thread that connects individuals who are destined to encounter one another regardless of distance, circumstance, or time. According to the legend, the thread originates from the heart and extends outward to unite people whose lives are already connected through fate. Although the thread may stretch, delay, or become tangled, the connection itself cannot be broken (Bright Side, n.d.). This cultural narrative provides a compelling framework for understanding the symbolic world created in *Invisible String*.

From the perspective of myth, the song reflects a long-standing human desire to explain relationships and life events through narratives of destiny and invisible order. This idea appears most clearly in the lyric, “all along there was some invisible string / tying you to me” (Swift & Dessner, 2020). The line transforms an ordinary relationship into something larger than coincidence and imagines human encounters as connected by unseen forces. Similar to the Red String legend, the song suggests that experiences which once appeared random later become understandable through reflection. In this sense, the song illustrates what Roland Barthes describes as myth: not false stories, but cultural systems that organize human experience into meaningful patterns (Barthes, 1972). The invisible string therefore becomes a mythic image that turns individual experience into a larger narrative of destiny and connection.

Through symbolism, the invisible string becomes more than an object; it represents continuity, emotional connection, and the belief that life contains hidden forms of order. Another lyric reinforces this symbolic function: “One single thread of gold tied me to you” (Swift & Dessner, 2020). The image of the golden thread expands the meaning of connection beyond romance and suggests permanence, value, and emotional continuity across time. Like the Japanese legend, the symbolic thread implies that periods of uncertainty or separation do not erase connection but may become part of a larger process that only becomes visible in retrospect.

The song also illustrates cultural imagination, which refers to the human tendency to create stories that give meaning to experiences that otherwise seem accidental or fragmented. This appears in the reflective line, “Time, curious time / gave me no compasses, gave me no signs” (Swift & Dessner, 2020), where the speaker recognizes that meaning is rarely visible while events are unfolding. Instead, significance emerges later through interpretation. The Red String of Fate survives

across generations because it expresses a shared cultural hope that life contains unseen forms of connection and purpose. Likewise, *Invisible String* transforms personal experience into a broader imaginative narrative that listeners can recognize as part of their own lives. Through myth, symbolism, and cultural imagination, the song becomes more than a narrative of love—it becomes a literary reflection on how people construct meaning and coherence from the unpredictability of human experience.

From Suffering to Significance: Reimagining Human Experience in Epiphany

The interpretation of *Epiphany* may be understood through the ideas of myth, symbolism, and cultural imagination, as the song transforms individual suffering into a broader reflection on endurance, sacrifice, and shared human vulnerability. Unlike songs that focus on personal relationships, *Epiphany* moves beyond personal experience and connects two moments of historical crisis: soldiers in war and healthcare workers during the COVID-19 pandemic. Inspired by the wartime experience of Taylor Swift's grandfather during the Battle of Guadalcanal and linked to the emotional realities of frontline healthcare workers, the song suggests that suffering may appear in different historical situations while carrying similar emotional weight. Rather than treating these experiences as identical, the song places them side by side to highlight common experiences of exhaustion, service, emotional restraint, and human vulnerability. Through this structure, *Epiphany* presents suffering as historically different yet emotionally familiar across moments of crisis (Earth & Altar, 2020; Swift, 2020).

From the perspective of myth, *Epiphany* raises ordinary experiences of suffering into something larger and more universal. The soldier and the healthcare worker become figures that represent sacrifice, endurance, and care rather than remaining only individual people. This mythic quality appears in the short line "only twenty minutes to sleep" (Swift & Dessner, 2020), which turns exhaustion into a universal image of human limits and responsibility. Likewise, the opening image "crawling up the beaches" (Swift & Dessner, 2020) recalls historical memory while also turning the soldier into a symbolic figure whose experience reflects the suffering of many others. In this sense, the song reflects Northrop Frye's idea that literature transforms specific experiences into recurring human patterns and archetypes (Frye, 1957). The song therefore creates a modern story of endurance in which those who quietly carry emotional burdens become contemporary heroic figures.

Through symbolism, *Epiphany* expresses suffering not through dramatic language but through quiet and restrained images. The line "holds your hand through plastic now" (Swift & Dessner, 2020) becomes one of the strongest symbols in the song

because it combines isolation, care, fear, and human connection in a single image. The plastic barrier symbolizes both protection and separation—it helps preserve life while also preventing ordinary human closeness. Similarly, the repeated longing for “some epiphany” (Swift & Dessner, 2020) turns the title itself into a symbol. Traditionally, an epiphany means sudden understanding or revelation, yet in the song it becomes a longing for peace, comfort, or meaning during moments when complete understanding is impossible. Through these symbols, suffering becomes emotionally recognizable without needing direct explanation.

The song also shows cultural imagination, which refers to the way societies create stories to understand collective experiences. During the COVID-19 pandemic, public language often used images of war to describe healthcare workers and the crisis itself. However, Epiphany does not reduce one experience into another. Instead, by placing wartime suffering beside pandemic suffering, the song creates emotional connections while respecting the differences between them. This structure allows listeners to recognize shared human experiences across different periods of history. In this way, the song transforms private exhaustion into collective memory and invites listeners to imagine suffering as both personal and universal. Ultimately, Epiphany becomes more than a song about war or illness—it becomes a literary reflection on how people endure suffering and continue searching for meaning during uncertain times.

Beyond Tranquility: Meaning and Human Connection in Peace

The interpretation of Peace may be understood through the lenses of myth, symbolism, and cultural imagination, as the song transforms an intimate relationship into a broader reflection on love, uncertainty, and the limits of emotional security. Unlike romantic narratives that portray love as a complete solution to personal struggles, Peace presents a speaker who offers deep commitment while recognizing that certain forms of stability may remain impossible to provide. Although the song emerges from Taylor Swift’s reflections on public life and the pressures of visibility, the emotional experience represented in the song extends beyond celebrity and speaks to a broader human fear: whether love can remain meaningful even when life cannot become completely peaceful (Swift, 2020; Willman, 2020).

From the perspective of myth, Peace challenges one of the most enduring cultural myths surrounding romance—the belief that love should bring completeness, certainty, and emotional calm. Many literary and cultural traditions imagine love as a force that resolves conflict and restores order. However, Peace questions this expectation by presenting love not as perfection but as continued commitment despite

instability. This challenge appears in the repeated question “would it be enough?” (Swift & Dessner, 2020), which becomes the emotional center of the song. The speaker does not ask whether love exists but whether love alone can compensate for uncertainty and limitation. In this sense, the song reflects what Roland Barthes describes as the cultural construction of emotional meaning, where personal relationships become shaped by larger social expectations and narratives (Barthes, 1972). Rather than reinforcing the myth of ideal love, Peace presents a more complex vision in which love survives not because difficulties disappear but because people remain despite them.

Through symbolism, the song transforms ordinary images into expressions of emotional experience. One of its strongest symbols appears in the line “But I’m a fire” (Swift & Dessner, 2020). Fire traditionally symbolizes warmth, protection, passion, and life, but it also suggests unpredictability and danger. In the song, the speaker recognizes that she can provide care and devotion while simultaneously bringing instability into the relationship. Likewise, the image “the rain is always gonna come” (Swift & Dessner, 2020) becomes a symbol of unavoidable hardship and public pressure. Rain does not represent the absence of love; rather, it symbolizes the realities that continue to exist even within loving relationships. Another significant image appears in “I would die for you in secret” (Swift & Dessner, 2020), which transforms private loyalty into a symbol of quiet and sacrificial love. Through these symbols, the song suggests that intimacy may be strongest not in public declarations but in unseen acts of care and commitment.

The song also demonstrates cultural imagination, which refers to the ways societies create shared ideas about what relationships should look like. Contemporary culture often imagines successful relationships as peaceful, private, and emotionally secure. However, Peace questions these expectations by presenting love as coexistence with uncertainty. The speaker acknowledges that external pressures, public attention, and personal limitations cannot always be removed. Yet the song imagines that meaningful relationships remain possible even without ideal conditions. This perspective becomes especially significant because it moves away from romantic narratives centered on perfection and instead values endurance, acceptance, and emotional honesty. Through cultural imagination, Peace becomes more than a personal confession—it becomes a reflection on how people negotiate the tension between love and the impossibility of complete control over life.

Ultimately, Peace transforms a private emotional concern into a broader literary reflection on intimacy and human vulnerability. Through myth, symbolism, and cultural imagination, the song suggests that love does not always promise calmness or

certainty. Instead, it proposes that genuine intimacy may emerge when individuals continue choosing one another despite the inevitability of disruption and change.

Conclusions

This study examined Folklore as a literary and cultural text by applying Narratology, Cultural Studies, Memory Studies, and selected approaches to myth and symbolic interpretation. Rather than treating the album merely as a collection of contemporary songs or autobiographical reflections, the analysis demonstrated that Folklore constructs a coherent artistic world through interconnected narratives, shifting perspectives, symbolic patterns, and broader cultural meanings. Through close reading of selected songs, the album reveals that contemporary popular music can function as a meaningful site of literary inquiry where narrative structure, emotional experience, and cultural imagination intersect.

The first analytical cluster, composed of Cardigan, August, and Betty, showed how Folklore employs multiperspectival storytelling to construct a shared narrative world. Through narrative voice, focalization, temporal movement, and interwoven perspectives, the songs demonstrate that meaning emerges not from a single authoritative account but from the interaction of partial and emotionally situated narrators. Viewed through Narratology, the cluster revealed that storytelling in Folklore depends upon perspective, selective memory, and the limits of narration itself, transforming the listening experience into an act of interpretation rather than passive reception.

The second cluster shifted attention from narrative construction toward the inward processes of remembering, identity formation, and emotional survival. Through Mirrorball, This Is Me Trying, Mad Woman, My Tears Ricochet, Seven, and August, the study illustrated that memory in Folklore is not presented as the simple recovery of past experience but as an active process through which individuals reinterpret emotional wounds, reshape self-understanding, and negotiate continuity through change. Drawing on Narrative Identity Theory and Cultural Memory Theory, the analysis demonstrated that identity emerges through interpretation and that personal emotions acquire broader significance when they become recognizable within shared cultural experience.

The third cluster expanded the discussion toward myth, symbolism, and cultural imagination through The Last Great American Dynasty, Invisible String, Epiphany, and Peace. These songs illustrated how Folklore transforms private experience into larger systems of meaning. Historical figures become cultural narratives, invisible connections become symbols of human longing, suffering becomes collective reflection, and intimate relationships become meditations on uncertainty and emotional endurance. Across these songs, symbolic images and imaginative structures allow individual experiences to exceed autobiography and

enter broader conversations about destiny, memory, vulnerability, love, and human connection.

Taken together, the findings suggest that Folklore occupies an important position within contemporary literary and cultural inquiry because it challenges traditional boundaries between literature and popular music. The album demonstrates that storytelling continues to evolve through contemporary artistic forms and that song lyrics may function as complex narrative texts capable of sustaining sustained literary interpretation. Ultimately, Folklore shows that contemporary music is not only heard but also read, interpreted, remembered, and imaginatively reconstructed—allowing personal narratives to become shared cultural experiences and revealing how literature continues to find new forms in modern culture.

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