

Final Paper: Exploring Taylor Swift's "Fortnight" Using Narrative Criticism

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Message Criticism

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The artifact that I have chosen to discuss is the song “Fortnight” by Taylor Swift, featuring Post Malone on her latest album, *The Tortured Poets Department*. This is the first track of a thirty-one song album. Taylor Swift tends to place her songs in order that aligns with her past albums to symbolize how she feels about each song, the first track usually being a catchy song about a relationship. Taylor Swift’s “Fortnight” will answer the question of what story is expressed through the song and are the lyrics supposed to be taken as she expresses them or do the words have a different meaning? The reason that I am using these questions is because of the reputation that Taylor Swift has for herself. Swift’s lyrics usually tell a story about her life. The first question that I want to answer is due to the fact that Swift is infamous for making a song so much more than a song. She creates a story with the lyrics she uses and how the listener can imagine a full story in their heads. The second question that I posed and want to answer is that at times, Swift’s lyrics are so profound that listeners don’t know exactly what she is saying (Ahlgrim). I want to break down the lyrics and translate them to the listener to show the deeper meaning of the song. The critique I will be using for this is narrative criticism. Narrative criticism mainly focuses on how to interpret a story and how it hangs together (Sellnow & Endres, 2024). Taylor Swift uses her lyrics to create a story, giving her songs a beginning, middle, and end.

It is known that Taylor Swift is one of the biggest artists of our time. Taylor Swift came out with her eleventh studio album, *The Tortured Poets Department* in April of last year. The album consisted of thirty one songs, her biggest album yet. The first song on the album is titled, “Fortnight”. “Fortnight” was written with the collaboration of Taylor Swift, Post Malone, and Jack Antonoff and was in the top 100 for two weeks straight (Dailey). The song is performed by Taylor Swift and Post Malone and even has a music video starring the two of them, in a

melodramatic, black-and-white video that is a homage to the *Dead Poets Society* (Roe). The music video was just awarded “Video of the Year and Best Direction” (Dailey). “Fortnight” is a three minute and forty second song that tells a story, which the reader can presume, that has to do with the splitting of a couple. Swift opens the song by saying how she's been struggling mentally and there is a certain person that is causing her the trouble. The chorus then comes and she sings how her and this person were only together for a little while but now somehow their lives are intertwined again. The next verse talks again about how she is struggling and can't move on from this person. It goes into the chorus again and after that Post Malone has his verse about how Swift wants to connect with this person again but unfortunately she knows that it is not going to happen.

April of 2024, when this album was released, Swift was going through two very public breakups and there is speculation which old boyfriend of hers this song is about. “Swifties” tend to keep up with Swift's relationships due to the effect they have on her songs. There was quite a buzz around the album and about which breakup Swift was writing about. Listeners have suspected that this song is about Matty Healy, a famous singer for the band The 1975. Others suspect that it could just be a story that she created in her head and made a song out of. Swift has always said that her music is intended for everyone and that she creates music that reflects her and what is going on in her life and hopes that others resonate with that too. Although, *The Tortured Poets Department* was trademarked as the “Female Rage: The Musical”(Swift). Swift intended the audience to be women who need an outlet to let out their anger. The listeners of Swift's music, specifically “Fortnight” are the people who truly relate to the lyrics she sings. The intended audience is anyone who is going through a loss and can't fathom their life without them. Swift wants to tell a story through her songs so that others can relate and enjoy the stories

she paints through her story-telling skills. One of the most important skills in selling music and other art is that the audience feels connected to the work and that is what Swift does with this song and her other music. When this album was first released, listeners were shocked and quite happy that they got thirty one new Taylor Swift songs. People said that this album had “unbridled emotion” and “moments of genuine humor” and how this was her most intimate piece of work (Karp). Although some critics say this album was too long and that it lacks shifts that Swift has taken in the past (Karp).

The methodology that “Fortnight” by Taylor Swift will be analyzed by is narrative criticism. Narrative criticism can be defined as a rhetorical method of understanding the underlying moral of the story argued in the text (Sellnow & Endres, 2024). Narrative criticism is most found when the artifact that is being dissected is a story, something that follows a clear beginning, middle, and end (Sellnow & Endres, 2024). Narrative criticism can be compared to a fairy tale, but showing the important characters, events, and the moral of what the reader is supposed to understand from it. A big part of narrative criticism is storytelling, which is one of the primary means in which we share information and provide instruction (Sellnow & Endres, 2024). Storytelling can go back to the beginning of time and how people told stories that meant something to them and for entertainment (Sellnow & Endres, 2024). Narrative criticism is shown through characters, plots, actions, and morals. Narration does not only exist in books and television programs but in music, musicals, operas, and everyday activities (Sellnow & Endres, 2024). Narrative criticism is important in life and especially in popular culture because the audience wants to find out the moral or intentions of why something is happening and understand the meaning of a story (Sellnow & Endres, 2024). There are different paradigms in which narrative criticism can exist, those being rational world paradigm and narrative paradigm

and these differ by rational world is that all human beings act in a logical manner and narrative is that telling stories is the core of all human communication (Sellnow & Endres, 2024). Another important part of narrative criticism is coherence in which the story hangs together and makes sense and fidelity and that is the values offered in the story that we regard as humane and truthful (Sellnow & Endres, 2024). A story must have coherence and fidelity for the reader to understand the plot and what the story is trying to tell.

Examining the text using narrative criticism follows a series of steps. These steps being setting, characters, narrator, events, temporal relations, causal relations, audience, and moral (Sellnow & Endres, 2024). After completing those steps, the moral of the story can be found. The setting of the story is simply where the story takes place (Sellnow & Endres, 2024). The setting can be important to the plot and how the characters in the story react to their setting and if they have positive or negative feelings toward that place. Characters are the physical and mental traits and if they change over the course of the story (Sellnow & Endres, 2024.). Characters move the plot and the audience can analyze what actions the characters are doing and if they are likable or not. Narrator is whether the story is being conveyed straight to the audience or in other cases is there a narrator who moves the story along (Sellnow & Endres, 2024). Narrator can go hand and hand with the different perspectives like first, second, third and how the audience is getting conveyed with the story. Events are the major and minor parts of the plot that highlight the importance of the story and the events that add depth to the story (Sellnow & Endres, 2024). The events are important using narrative criticism because this is the meat of the story and using what the audience gets the moral from. Temporal relations is where one event occurs after another and uses time to create a different way of telling the story (Sellnow & Endres, 2024). Audience is in which the story is intended for (Sellnow & Endres, 2024). The audience is

important to any story because the audience is the one who decides whether they resonate with the story or not and what morals will be taken away. Many times, the audience can be any person who consumed the story but usually the artifact has a specific audience in mind. The moral component is how the audience interprets the story and whether we believe it rings true or not (Sellnow & Endres, 2024.). The main part of narrative criticism is whether the audience resonates with the story and how they will interpret and explain the story to others. The moral can be reflected by the audience's behavior and how they feel after they have consumed the story (Sellnow & Endres, 2024).

Moving forward, readers or listeners must be able to see what the possible implications are from the text. It needs to be decided whether it is a moral they want to live their life by and whether it is good or bad (Sellnow & Endres, 2024.). It also must be speculated if the artifact is reaching the goal of what they intended the reader to get from it. The implications of a story can also sway the audience into believing a certain side of the story (Sellnow & Endres, 2024). Politicians do this by releasing their statements about what they will change in office and the audience needs to consider the implications and how that will affect them. The implications are the “so what” asked by the audience after consuming the media (Sellnow & Endres, 2024.).

The first step of narrative criticism is to examine the setting, characters, narrator, events, temporal relations, causal relations, audience, and moral (Sellnow & Endres, 2024). The setting of this song is not exactly known, although, there is a line in the song that says, “Thought of callin' ya, but you won't pick up, 'Nother fortnight lost in America”(Genius). The listener can assume that the story is taking place in America. Another line that shows the setting is, “Move to Florida, buy the car you want. But it won't start up 'til you touch, touch, touch me”(Genius). This line shows that Swift had a very short affair with someone, somewhere in America, and Florida

is the idealized place that he can move to but it won't feel the same as where they had once been together. The setting of this song does not hold as much significance compared to the other elements.

The narrator of this song is Taylor Swift and Post Malone. Swift talks from the "I" and "me" perspective and the song is told from how she feels that the person she was in love with is no longer in her life. It is important that it is told from her narration because it shows the raw emotion that she feels for this man. They are describing the characters and how they feel toward these characters. Swift and Malone are singing about the character, the man, that they express the dire need to be with but they lost. The character of the man she had lost is not expressed directly but implied. This man is the main character in the story because Swift talks to him as she is narrating, he is the one that broke her heart and the meaning for this song. The narration that is being provided is that Swift and Malone are expressing this great love but it only lasted a fortnight, a short time, and now they have to go through life with a heavy heart. Another character that is talked about in the song is the wife of the man Swift was in love with, "Now you're in my backyard, turned into good neighbors. Your wife waters flowers, I wanna kill her"(Genius). This line of the song shows that Swift is jealous of the woman that her ex lover is married to. By saying "she waters flowers" I see this as the wife is a very womanly and put together woman who has a garden, a classic housewife, and Swift feels far from that traditional image because of her career

The events of this song are key to the storytelling aspect of narrative criticism. The events of the song are being displayed in each verse. The first verse of the song introduces how Swift is feeling about the person who left her, "I was a functioning alcoholic, 'Til nobody noticed my new aesthetic, All of this to say I hope you're okay, But you're the reason, And no one here's to

blame, But what about your quiet treason?" (Genius). These lines are saying that post-breakup from this person she had turned to the bottle, almost to get people's attention to tell them how hurt she was, but nobody seemed to notice that she was feeling this bad because of how functional she was due to her being drunk all the time. She then feels bad for expressing how hurt she has been and misses the person. She says that she wishes that he is fine even though he caused her all of this emotion. She wants to be the bigger person and say that the breakup wasn't anyone's fault but sneaks in that if he had told her that he wanted it to end before it had actually ended, maybe she wouldn't feel this much pain. The next verse is the chorus which says they were together for only a short amount of time but it meant something to her. The next lines in the chorus are crucial, "Run into you sometimes, ask about the weather, Now you're in my backyard, turned into good neighbors, Your wife waters flowers, I wanna kill her" (Genius). From the first read, a listener may think that her ex lover and his new wife moved into the house next to her and they make small talk. I believe that Swift is making a metaphor. Swift is known for writing metaphors in her lyrics and her fans uncovering them. Swift is saying that the person who she used to be in love with is in the same circle or job as her. "In my backyard" is a classic metaphor for the area of interest or job a person is involved in.. She may mean that she sees him at parties or award ceremonies. "Your wife waters flowers, I wanna kill her" is not his actual wife but she is describing how his new lover is much more put together and feminine than her and it makes her angry. I believe Swift is painting the perfect American family with a wife and husband and the wife takes care of the household and the garden. In reality the meaning of these lyrics is that she sees the "wife" as very traditionally beautiful and has traditional values compared to the life that Swift leads. The following verse talks again about how distraught she is that this person is no longer in his life. She says "All my mornings are Mondays stuck in an endless February" this

line meaning that every time she wakes up it feels like a Monday morning in the cold and that gut wrenching feeling of wanting to stay in your warm bed but forcing yourself to get out of it (Genius). She then says, “I took the miracle move-on drug, the effects were temporary”, this line can be up for many interpretations (Genius). I believe Swift is saying that she tried the “how-to” ways to get over someone, one example being talking to someone new. She says talking to someone new made her feel healed from the situation but only for a little while and she went back to feeling deeply upset about it. It could also be about how she was drinking a lot and it made her feel better in the moment but when she is sober she misses him again. She then says, “I love you, it's ruining my life, I touched you for only a fortnight, I touched you, but I touched you”, these lines are saying that loving this person and not being together, is making her life miserable (Genius). And although they only were together for a little bit, she loved him. The bridge of the song is next after the chorus repeats. The chorus is a little different this time, she now says, “And for a fortnight there, we were together. Run into you sometimes, comment on my sweater, Now you're at the mailbox, turned into good neighbors, My husband is cheating, I wanna kill him”(Genius). This time Swift is saying that they see each other at these events and she has to make awkward small talk with him. She then tells the listeners that she is with someone else and he is not loyal to her and it makes her miss him even more. The bridge is Post Malone's verse where he talks about moving to Florida as explained earlier. And the chorus repeats and the song ends.

Temporal relations are very important to narrative criticism. The temporal relations are the way in which the events take place and if the events had fidelity and coherence. The events do take place in order of how a breakup occurs. It starts with Swift saying that she is upset but she hopes that he is okay, the way one feels when a one-sided healthy breakup happens. She then

reminisces on how they were together and how she is comparing herself to his new girlfriend. This makes sense with temporal relationships because when a person is going through a breakup they often reminisce on the relationship and that follows the next verse of how reminiscing is only making her feelings worse because his legacy is still floating over her. The bridge then comes to the acceptance part of a breakup saying that she wants to call him but she knows nothing will happen between them even though she wishes it did. Causal relations are the cause and effect relationship between two elements of the story that drive the story forward . For “Fortnight”, the cause is the breakup between Swift and this man and the effect is Swift’s depression from the breakup. Casual relations are important to narrative criticism and “Fortnight” because it shows that the breakup was not just a stand-alone event but it set off a spiral of emotional reaction that Swift, and others feel. The cause and effect relationship holds weight for the story by the audience truly grasping the hardship and the ongoing effect. The audience that Swift intends is people who have been going through a breakup or people who have lost someone that they couldn’t let go of. “Fortnight” is on the album called *The Tortured Poets Department* and she trademarked it as “Female Rage: The Musical”, this meaning that Swift intended the audience to be women who felt like they needed to be validated (Roe).

Discovering the moral is one of the most important aspects of narrative criticism. The moral is what the story is trying to convince us about how we ought to or ought not to believe or behave (Sellnow & Endres, 2024). The moral of this song is that loving someone can come with the consequences of not being together and still feeling the overwhelming desire to be with them. The moral is also healing is not linear and sometimes not being with someone can be the time where your feelings are the most intense, an example of this are the lyrics, “I love you, it’s ruining my life” (Genius). Swift put out this song for her audience to relate and feel safe if they

are experiencing this kind of heartbreak too. Swift says in the song, “I took the miracle move-on drugs, the effects were temporary” (Genius), demonstrating the theme of nonlinear healing and that if her listeners have also done this, it is normal. The most important element to show this moral comes from the coherence and fidelity of the song. The song follows these two elements by singing in a way that a story, and a heartbreak, takes place. She starts with introducing her pain, then telling the audience of how they were together and how they are intertwined with each other's lives now, and then says how much she wants to reach out but knows no good will come from it, following the classic feelings of a breakup. Also, many experience healing differently, this is usually the way someone who was broken up with grieves, like the five stages of grief. The song travels through denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. This follows fidelity and coherence. The example of this, starting with denial, is shown when she says she is a functioning alcoholic but makes it sound like that is a normal thing (Genius). It then shows anger when she says, “Your wife waters flowers, I want to kill her”, showing the anger of her ex lover being with another woman (Genius). She states bargaining when she says “I took the miracle move-on drugs, the effects were temporary” because she tried to make a deal with herself by finding ways to get over him but resulting in her feelings not changing (Genius). Depression is clearly stated in the lines, “All my mornings are Monday stuck in an endless February”, showing the universal feeling of waking up on a cold Monday morning wishing to stay in bed forever (Genius). Acceptance is finally accepted in the lines, “Thought of callin' ya, but you won't pick up, 'Nother fortnight lost in America” showing that even though she wants to call them she knows nothing will come of it and their love story is just a story now, nothing more (Genius).

Taylor Swift has a reputation of producing songs and having an army of people depicting the songs and how her songs resonate with them. “Fortnight” by Taylor Swift is not different

from the rest where the audience is affected by the music she is putting out and how their behavior is reflected after listening to this song. The implications of this song are listeners feeling understood by listening to her music and how Swift's relationships can be an inspiration to her fans. The implications of this song are endless but one takeaway from listening to "Fortnight" can be how the audience behaves after listening to the song. The audience, as talked about earlier, is women who are filled with emotion that use her music as an outlet. If women listen to this song and accept the moral of Swift expressing that healing is not linear and any way that they heal is acceptable. The implications of this is the behavior shown after an emotional event, a relationship lost in this case. This song for many could be a place to feel understood because they are going through the same type of breakup or life event in general. Swift tells the story of being heartbroken and stuck in a place of hurt for so long and the love for this person is ruining her life. Many people have experienced grief like Swift expresses whether it was a relationship, friendship, opportunity, or any kind of loss. This song's moral is about how love can be such a beautiful thing when you have it but it can almost kill you when you lose it. The listeners of this song can connect that moral to real life events or connect it to a piece of media that has been consumed and it can make the listener feel connected to those experiences. Swift's music has most always had a lasting impact on people. Her listeners have expressed that her songs made them feel like they have a place in this world (Prestige).

Another implication of "Fortnight" that could be interpreted is the behavior that Swift has been known for her entire career and how others might copy that behavior. "Fortnight" is a song about how heartbroken Swift is and how she feels as though she will never get over this loss. Right before this album was released, Swift and Travis Kelce started dating and she actually has a few songs on the same album about the love she has for him (The Tortured Poets Department).

So for Swift to say in “Fortnight”, “I love you, it’s ruining my life”(Genius), to having a song called “So High School” (The Tortured Poets Department) which tells the story about teenage love she has for Kelce, this shows that the pain she describes can be healed and even replaced with love from another lover. Swift has been known for having many boyfriends and although she is criticized for this, it is just a pattern many people follow. The implications is the audience might hear such a gut-wrenching song but know there is a light at the end of the tunnel, healing and love for someone else.

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