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### The Toxic Nature of Love As Presented By Taylor Swift In "Blank Space"

Music is a form of self-expression. Music and music videos can be a forum for very powerful messages like political or social issues through the specific use of lyrics and images. Taylor Swift is an artist most notable for her songs about her life experiences. Her songs about relationships, both the triumphs and failures, have brought tremendous success to her career establishing a large following of dedicated fans. In Taylor Swift's music video, "Blank Space," Swift addresses her fan base about love and relationship culture. In this video, Swift draws upon historical and cultural contexts of courtship and love from classic works of literature like *Romeo and Juliet*, *Snow White*, *The Great Gatsby*, and gothic literature with the use of images throughout the video as well as writes many paradoxes in the lyrics of the song to ultimately demonstrate that love at face value can appear to be wonderful and beautiful, but is ultimately ugly, destructive, and toxic.

There are many fantasy-like images that shape Swift's romance as almost dreamlike at the beginning of the video. Swift says, "I could show you incredible things." The word incredible accurately reflects the very grand and elaborate setting and scenes that take place. There are two large, white horses in her bedroom (0:12) that also reappear later in the video with Swift and her significant other riding them (0:58). White horses sometimes are a mythological symbol in storytelling of heroic

knights riding in to save the day on a white horse. The symbol of the white horses adds to the fairytale feeling of the relationship in that her significant other is her Prince Charming and they will live happily ever after. There are also crystal chandeliers in almost every room (0:34), marble floors (0:12), champagne (0:28), and sculpted gardens (1:46) to create this feeling of a superficial fool's paradise. Swift and her significant other are living a luxurious and relaxing lifestyle it seems without any other care in the world. They carve their names into trees (1:25) to solidify their love, ride horses, ride bikes inside the house (0:36) to show that there is more than just passion but also friendship, and lounge by the pool all day. These elements all set the stage as a story of an intense love and passionate romance.

While the stage is set for Swift to have a storybook love, there are a few prevailing scenes throughout the music video that draw from historical and cultural contexts of literature to depict the actual toxicity of love and relationships. Swift mentions "new money, suit and tie," which connects to an idea developed in *The Great Gatsby* by F. Scott Fitzgerald of old money versus new money. In the novel, Fitzgerald portrays the newly rich or "new money" as being ostentatious and lacking in social graces and taste. The main character of the novel, Jay Gatsby is from new money and uses such wealth to drive a nice car and dress well to impress the love of his life, Daisy Buchanan. Swift's significant other drives up to her mansion in a very nice car and is dressed in a suit. He looks wealthy and is comparable to Jay Gatsby. Swift could be suggesting that this man doesn't have the values associated with the old fashioned gentleman and thus the relationship would not work out. As many

know, love is destructive in *The Great Gatsby* and Swift could be foreshadowing the destruction that's to come because of her relationship.

One of the most famous love stories is Shakespeare's, *Romeo and Juliet* and Swift briefly recreates the balcony scene to further demonstrate the destructive and toxic nature of love. Swift can be seen on a balcony overlooking her love (1:45) like Juliet who is perched at her balcony as Romeo waits below. In *Romeo and Juliet*, the two discuss their forbidden love in this scene and how their families are enemies of one another, which is keeping them apart. The story of Romeo and Juliet while a love story depicts one of the most toxic relationships in all of literary history that ends in the tragic suicides of the star-crossed lovers. This is extremely powerful for Swift to portray as it compares her own relationship to one with the potential to cause destruction and heartbreak. Another cultural context from literature that Swift connects to in order to show that love is toxic is the image of her holding and giving a red apple to her significant other. This symbol of a red apple is derived from The Brothers Grimm story of "Snow White." In this tale, the Queen, hoping to kill Snow White so that she can be "the fairest of them all," concocts a poisonous apple to tempt Snow White with and kill her. By holding the apple with a mischievous and evil look on her face (2:53), Swift alludes that love is tempting and will lure you, much like the Queen is able to tell Snow White that one bite and all of her dreams will come true. However magical and beautiful that apple appears to be, like all the incredible, grand things Taylor is surrounded by in her video, it is ultimately poisonous and will cause damage. In the case of Snow White it causes her death but

for Swift it causes heartbreak as evident in the “screaming” (1:54) and “crying” (2:14).

Swift’s music video draws many parallels to a gothic romance. Gothic romances often concern young women who live in large isolated mansions with mysterious men tinged with horror. Jane Eyre is a popular example of a Gothic romance novel. One of the elements of a Gothic romance is the setting of a castle. Translated into modern filmmaking the setting for Swift’s music video is a mansion. Within 3 seconds, a large mansion comes into scene. Weather and lighting is another important function in Gothic literature. Certain elements of the weather are used to establish moods and magnify the feelings of the protagonist. The sky is gray and cloudy (0:03) as whom we later learn to be Swift’s significant other drives in. There is also an apparent fog (0:07) surrounding the man. The use of fog creates a foreboding, brooding feeling so viewers get the sense that this man is not good. The gray sky continues throughout the music video and never seems to lighten. The relationship parallels this and doesn’t grow stronger or happier which is often associated with bright light, blue skies, and the sun. Its important to note that the lighting in the mansion casts shadows and is similarly dark. The curtains are always drawn (0:34) which contributes to the lack of light but also reflects the isolation of the Swift and her significant other. As the video progresses Swift becomes more emotional and distressed because of the relationship. Overwrought emotion and women in distress are other elements of Gothic literature. As an appeal of pathos and sympathy to the viewers, Swift is a heroine overcome with screaming and crying (2:14). The distress appears to be because of technology, which brings the

video into a modern time. Swift's significant other is on his phone while she is trying to enjoy a picnic (1:36). The two are not communicating. This makes a statement about how society is so engulfed in technology that interpersonal communication is failing. Swift's distress over this is apparent when she rips her glasses off her face (1:49) and has a look of disgust and says, "oh no." She then proceeds to drop the phone in the pool (2:17) in an act of defiance and disgust. This is where the video takes a turn and the ugly side of love and relationships come out.

Swift presents many paradoxes in her lyrics to emphasize that being in love is not a perfect fairytale but instead a "nightmare dressed like a daydream." The lyrics "perfect storms" and "rose garden filled with thorns" effectively connects both the beauty and torment of love. How can a storm be perfect and yet the concept of a storm, like a hurricane or a tornado, is something terrible and destructive and ruins lives? How can roses be so beautiful and lovely to look at with a pleasant fragrance and yet draw blood with their thorns? Furthermore, Swift highlights the contradiction of love as a wonderful thing with words like "magic, madness, heaven, and sin" juxtaposed to argue her point. A deep romance can be magical and "leave you breathless" when one becomes enamored with someone. But intense love can also cause a sort of madness or insanity if someone becomes "drunk on jealousy" and doesn't allow their significant other to hang out with anyone but himself or herself as shown in this music video. Swift and her significant other only do things with each other in their isolated mansion with no contact to others. Love can also leave you with a "nasty scar." This madness distorts your sense of what's healthy and unhealthy and causes people to "come back each time [they] leave" even if the

relationship is physically or mentally abusive. A vision of a perfect storybook ending is enough to cloud the ability to leave a toxic relationship. Heaven and sin that Swift refers to hammers home her main argument that love can be good or bad, beautiful or ugly. Heaven is generally thought of as a place where good souls reside eternally whereas sin, referring to hell, is a place of eternal fire, evil, and ugly. A relationship could be heavenly with no conflict, resentment, or unfaithfulness or it could be tormented and destructive like hell. Swift mentions that a relationship could “be forever” or “go down in flames.” This is a paradox to describe how sinless souls go to heaven to rest in peace eternally whereas a soul that has sinned goes to the depths of fiery hell.

Ultimately, Swift sends the message that though a relationship appears to be a daydream on the surface, it can transform into a nightmare as it does for Swift in this video. Swift’s message is summed up when she says, “don’t say I didn’t warn you.” The entire music video serves the purpose of showing through the use of contradictions and references to cultural contexts of love in literature that it can be easy to be fooled by the fantasy appearance of love but Swift’s fans need to be warned that love can be dangerous and destructive.