



## Power And Identity In Taylor Swift's Song, 'Look What You Made Me Do': A Deconstructive Analysis



**Rida Khurshid**

MS Scholar, Department of English, Govt College Women University, Sialkot, Punjab, Pakistan.

**Aisha Farid**

Assistant professor, Department of English, Govt College Women University, Sialkot, Punjab, Pakistan.

**Abstract:** *In this paper, we analyze Taylor Swift's song 'look what you made me do' using Derrida's deconstructive approach to identify hidden meanings and assumptions and explore the role of language in shaping them. We examine the lyrics to detect specificities that reveal tensions or contradictions within the text, using language and symbolism to deconstruct societal power dynamics and hierarchies. The lyrics suggest that the speaker is a victim forced to take certain actions, and the video features multiple versions of Taylor Swift, implying that her identity is fluid and constantly evolving. By employing deconstructive techniques such as repetition and intertextuality, Swift creates a sense of instability and ambiguity that encourages listeners to question their assumptions and think critically about how power operates in our society. This complex and multilayered song challenges traditional understandings of power, agency, and identity.*

**Key Words:** Deconstructive analysis, Power dynamics, Pop music, Unstable identity, Intertextuality, Logocentrism.

**Corresponding Author:** Rida Khurshid (MS Scholar, Department of English, Govt College Women University, Sialkot, Punjab, Pakistan. Email: [rida.22558@gmail.com](mailto:rida.22558@gmail.com))

### Introduction

Throughout history, songs have served as a compelling method of communication, allowing individuals to express emotions, recount stories, and convey messages. To better understand a song's underlying meanings and messages, it is important to conduct a deconstructive analysis. This involves carefully examining the various elements that comprise a song, including lyrics, melody, harmony, rhythm, and instrumentation. Through this process, deeper insights can be uncovered to reveal

the true essence of the music.

Analyzing a text using deconstruction criticism was developed by Jacques Derrida, a French philosopher and literary critic, and involves uncovering underlying assumptions, biases, and contradictions within the text. This method can also be applied to songs, revealing hidden meanings and messages that may be conveyed in the lyrics, melody, harmony, rhythm, and other elements of the song. Through this analysis, we can gain a deeper understanding of the ideas and values being communicated.

Taylor Swift has gained worldwide recognition as a highly acclaimed musician in recent years. Her music has been analyzed by numerous scholars and critics, who have revealed hidden messages, underlying themes, and social commentaries. Swift effectively employs metaphors and symbolism in her music, imbuing her lyrics with layers of meaning. Her songs are infused with powerful imagery and allusions, which convey intricate emotions and concepts in a concise manner. As a result, her music is impactful and resonates strongly with her audience.

### **Significance of the study**

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In the realm of music studies, deconstructive analysis can provide fresh perspectives on a song's composition, lyrics, and production. By dissecting the various layers of meaning and how they intertwine, experts can gain a deeper comprehension of the cultural and social environments that influenced the song's inception and reception. This approach can also illuminate the impact of popular music on shaping and reflecting societal and political matters.

### **Scope of the study**

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Exploring the song "Look What You Made Me Do" by Taylor Swift through a deconstructive analysis could offer a fascinating and intricate research topic in the fields of musicology, language, cultural studies, and critical theory. In musicology, such an analysis could delve into the musical structure, instrumentation, and production techniques utilized to communicate the song's message. There this could involve an examination of diverse musical genres, the significance of sampling and remixing, and the use of sonic elements like tempo, pitch, and timbre.

### **Statement of problem**

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Taylor Swift's song 'Look What You Made Me

Do' has been lauded for its catchy melody and empowering lyrics. However, some scholars have argued that it perpetuates problematic themes of revenge and victimization. Also, the song's reception has been deeply divided, with some fans hailing it as a feminist anthem and others criticizing it for promoting harmful messages. By using deconstructive analysis, this research aims to untangle the complex meanings, themes and interpretations of the song, as well as its potential impact on popular culture.

### **Aims and objectives of the study**

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This study aims at identifying hidden meanings and assumptions: A deconstructive analysis can help identify hidden meanings and assumptions in the song that are not immediately apparent.

This work will help us understand the message that the song is trying to convey and how it is being conveyed.

Exploring the role of language in shaping meaning: Deconstruction (Derrida, 1967) is a method of analyzing language and exploring the ways in which it shapes meaning. By analyzing the lyrics of the song, researchers can examine the language used and how it contributes to the meaning of the song.

### **Research question**

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- How does a deconstructive reading of the song reveal tensions or contradictions within the text, and what does this suggest about the complex nature of identity and representation in popular culture?
- How does the song use language and symbolism to deconstruct societal power dynamics and hierarchies?

### **Literature review**

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Deconstruction, a literary theory and philosophical approach introduced by Derrida in 1967, seeks to reveal the hidden

assumptions and inconsistencies in language and thought. Although initially intended to analyze written texts, deconstruction has been utilized to examine other types of cultural works, including music and songs.

When it comes to popular music, deconstruction (as explained by Derrida in 1967) is the process of examining a song's lyrics, music, and performance to uncover how it relies on opposing concepts like male/female, self/other, or nature/culture. Deconstruction (as explained by Derrida in 1967) can also showcase how a song challenges or undermines these opposing concepts or how it perpetuates and reinforces them.

A deconstructive analysis of a song might focus on the way that the lyrics use language to construct meaning and how this construction is both limited and enabled by the use of binary oppositions. Alternatively, a deconstructive analysis might explore the way that the music and performance of a song disrupt or challenge traditional notions of genre, identity, or culture.

Greenberg (2011) applied Derrida's (1967) deconstructionist theory to examine the lyrics of Bob Dylan's "Tangled Up in Blue." He contends that the song's use of metaphor and narrative structure challenges conventional linear storytelling and aligns with the deconstructionist concept that meaning is fluid and ever-changing.

R. Elliott in his paper which is presented at the 2016 EMP Pop Conference (Elliott, 2016), argues that Swift since her teenage has been composing lyrics about 'significance themes' such as time, art, experience and self-awareness. Her songs effectively capture the essence of youthful experiences, whether through reference to a particular age or broader representation of elements like adolescence, school, summer, love and family.

In the context of Taylor's song 'Blank Space', the term 'blank space' carries multiple

metaphorical connotations. Initially, it alludes to the media's portrayal of Swift as a serial date.

As the 'space' is 'blank' and any name can be written in it; similarly, it can symbolize value and worthlessness, flexibility, compromise and a new start. Also, Janis Ian once wrote in her song 'Stars', which starts 'come and go.....like the last light of the sun all in a daze' (Ian, 2016). Swift creates the imagination where 'it's gonna be forever, or it's gonna go down in flames' (Swift, 2014). These two lyrics depict the concept of 'Logocentrism' by Derrida (Derrida, 1967).

A study conducted by Baird, Harris, & Thompson (2020) titled "They're playing our song": Couple-defining Songs in intimate relationships" suggests that melody can enhance well-being in various ways by connecting with identity, social relationships, emotions, and memory. The researchers examined the concept of "Couple-Defining Songs (CDSs)", a song that symbolizes love. The study consisted of 200 participants in a relationship with diverse age gaps, varied relationship duration, and different statuses. The participants were asked if they had a CDS. People who shared a "couple's song" (CDS) were asked about the origins and meaning of the song, as well as any memories and emotions that came to mind when thinking about it. Additionally, they accomplish a music appreciation questionnaire and a measure of relationship intimacy. The study discovered that CDSs were prevalent and were linked to increased levels of melodious connection and romantic engagements. The songs were usually acquired early in the relationship and elicited optimistic sentiments. These findings indicate that CDSs are widely experienced but underexplored phenomena that may be related to the complex nature of music and its impact on intimate relationships.

Many studies have used the Deconstructive approach for text analysis; however, the most relevant to the present

study are those that used the approach to analyze songs. In this regard, Stephanie Alexander's study of Lady Gaga's song is significant. Stephanie Alexander (2012) applied Derrida's deconstructionist theory (1967) to analyze Lady Gaga's popular song 'Born This Way' and how it challenged traditional gender norms and identities. Alexander scrutinized the song's lyrics, imagery, and performance to demonstrate how it embodied the deconstructive approach.

Another important study that applied the Deconstructive approach to songs is Sara Mills' analysis of Taylor Swift's song "Blank Space". In her article, Sara Mills (Mills, 2018) uses the deconstructive analysis of Derrida's (Derrida, 1967) to examine how Taylor Swift's "Blank Space" song constructs and deconstructs the notion of love. By referring to Derrida and feminist scholars like Luce Irigaray, Mills contends that the song highlights the paradoxes and intricacies of love as a cultural construct. She reveals how the song defies traditional gender roles and questions prevailing discourses of romance. Overall, Mills' article is a compelling illustration of how deconstruction can be utilized to unravel the various layers of meaning in popular music.

The reviewed literature indicates that a lot of work has been done on the songs using Derrida's theory of Deconstruction (Derrida, 1967); however, no research has been conducted on Taylor Swift's song 'look what you made me do', so it appeared as a gap for a researcher to conduct this study.

## Methodology

This study utilized a qualitative approach to conduct a deconstructive analysis of Taylor Swift's song 'Look what you made me do'. An objective was to pinpoint the distinctive elements within the lyrics that may relate to tensions or contradictions within the text. The analysis focused on the utilization of

language and symbolism to deconstruct societal power dynamics and hierarchies. Specifically, the study examined the elements of the deconstructive theory, including logocentrism, binary opposition, and inherent instability.

## Analysis

Deconstruction is a literary analysis method that seeks to uncover the hidden assumptions, binary oppositions, and contradictions within a text. Using this method, we can analyze Taylor Swift's song "Look What You Made Me Do" and uncover some of its underlying meanings and assumptions.

### Analysis of song title

The phrase "Look what you made me do" is an example of blaming language. It implies that the person being addressed is responsible for the speaker's behaviour instead of the speaker taking responsibility for their actions. This phrase shifts the blame onto someone else instead of owning up to one's actions.

The phrase "Look what you made me do" can be analyzed using deconstructive theory, specifically the concept of the "undecidable." This refers to the point where meaning becomes unclear or unstable. In this phrase, the undecidable element is who is ultimately responsible for the speaker's actions. While the phrase suggests that the person being addressed played a role in causing the speaker's actions, it is unclear how much control the speaker had in the situation.

The word "made" used in the song's title implies an element of coercion or manipulation, which undermines the notion that Swift is in control of her actions. It suggests that she might be compelled to do things against her will, creating a sense of conflict and tension. This hints at a potential power struggle between Swift and the individual she addresses.

The title "Look What You Made Me Do" suggests that the speaker feels powerless. The use of the word "made" implies that they were compelled to act a certain way rather than making their own choices. This could be seen as an attempt to avoid responsibility and shift blame for their actions.

Moreover, the word "look" used in the title carries significant meaning. It suggests that the addressee has a certain level of responsibility for the speaker's conduct and should pay attention to it. This approach can be interpreted as an effort to dominate and manipulate the addressee by making them feel culpable or liable for the speaker's deeds.

The title "Look What You Made Me Do" implies a power dynamic and uses language that blames others, suggesting that the speaker does not take personal responsibility for what she has turned into. By deconstructing the language, we can gain a deeper understanding of its assumptions and contradictions. This helps us question how language shapes meaning and reinforces power dynamics. The analysis of the poem in the light of various deconstruction techniques is as follows:

### Logocentrism

The idea of logocentrism is relevant to the lyrics of the song, as it emphasizes the importance of words and their meanings over other elements like emotions or experiences.

Taylor Swift portrays herself as a victim in the song, with a focus on the pronouns "you" and "me." The focus on the first-person and second-person pronouns creates a clear distinction between the person responsible for the actions and the victim, highlighting the impact of the other person's actions on Taylor Swift.

The title clearly suggests that the speaker's response is influenced by the actions of another person. The usage of "you made me" indicates that the speaker is not fully responsible for their behaviour and that

external factors play a role in their actions.

The lyrics of the song are highly focused on speech and its power to shape reality. A very important example is the line repeated by the chorus, "I'm sorry, the old Taylor can't come to the phone right now. Why? Oh, 'cause she's dead!" The repetition of the line suggests that language is a powerful tool. It may destroy or even eliminate one's identity. This line can be seen as a metaphor for the power of language to transform or erase one's identity.

The visual presentation of the song's music video reinforces the theme conveyed by the lyrics. The song's music video features Taylor Swift playing multiple different versions of her, each with a distinct identity and persona. This can be seen as an extension of the logocentric worldview, which places great emphasis on the power of language and identity construction.

### Binary Oppositions

The deconstructive theory challenges the binary opposition by questioning the fundamental assumptions and power structures that created the hierarchy. It seeks to destabilize and expose contradictions and inconsistencies within the binary opposition. A deconstructive analysis of the song "Look what you made me do" reveals several instances of binary opposition. One such example is the contrast between the old and new Taylor Swift depicted in the song. Swift declares, "I'm sorry, the old Taylor can't come to the phone right now. Why? Oh, 'cause she's dead. She's dead! Ooh!" "The old Taylor" is depicted as innocent, sweet, and vulnerable, while the new Taylor is characterized as dark, vindictive, and powerful. This binary opposition raises questions about the power dynamics that created the contrast between the two personas.

The song transitions another binary opposition between the victim and the



perpetrator. In the opening verse, Swift croons a melody, "I don't like your little games, don't like your tilted stage, the role you made me play of the fool, no, I don't like you." In the first verse, she expresses her dislike towards the other person's actions; including their games and the way they made her look foolish. It implies that she has been victimized by this person. However, later in the song, she takes on the role of the perpetrator as she belts out a tune, "I'm sorry, the old Taylor can't come to the phone right now. Why? Oh, 'cause she's dead." In this instance, Taylor suggests that the old self does not exist anymore and has taken on a new persona that is no longer a victim but a perpetrator.

The binary opposition between the past and the present is also deconstructed in the lyrics. Taylor sings, "I don't trust nobody, and nobody trusts me. I'll be the actress starring in your bad dreams." Here, Swift suggests that her past experiences have made her suspicious of others. However, later in the song, she takes control of her present and future by saying, "I got smarter, I got harder in the nick of time." Through this action, she indicates that her past has taught her valuable lessons, and she now feels empowered to take charge of her present and future.

The binary opposition between the individual and the collective is also deconstructed in the song. Swift sings, "But I got smarter, I got harder in the nick of time. Honey, I rose up from the dead; I do it all the time." Here, she suggests that she is not just an individual but a collective force that can rise from the dead and do it all the time.

Finally, the theme of gender can also be decentered in the song. Swift challenges traditional gender roles by presenting herself as both vulnerable and powerful and by incorporating elements of masculinity into her performance. However, the binary opposition of male and female can also be decentered by recognizing that gender is not

a fixed binary construct but is fluid and constantly evolving.

When examining Taylor Swift's song "Look What You Made Me Do" through the lens of deconstructive theory, we can gain a better understanding of traditional dichotomies.

Specifically, by recognizing the fluidity and complexity of concepts like victimhood, power, and gender, we can develop a more nuanced perspective of the world.

### Inherent Instability

One of the primary tenets of deconstruction is that language is inherently unstable and cannot be trusted to convey a fixed meaning. The song "Look What You Made Me Do" is rife with inherent instability, particularly in its lyrics. There are many instances of ambiguity and potential for multiple interpretations that make it ripe for deconstruction.

First, the phrase "Look what you made me do" can be subject to multiple interpretations. At first glance, it may seem like an instance of blaming the victim, as the speaker implies that their harmful behaviour was a result of someone else's actions. However, it's also possible to view this phrase as a declaration of the speaker's autonomy and strength, as they assert their power to shape their own future and challenge societal norms.

Next, the song's chorus, which contains the lines "I don't trust nobody and nobody trusts me / I'll be the actress starring in your bad dreams," is similarly open to multiple interpretations. On the one hand, it can be seen as a declaration of independence and self-sufficiency, with the speaker refusing to rely on anyone else for support. On the other hand, it can be read as a lament for the speaker's isolation and loneliness as they struggle to find meaningful connections with others.

Moreover, throughout the song, Swift

employs a variety of rhetorical devices that further complicate its meaning. For example, she frequently shifts between first and third person, blurring the lines between her experiences and those of other characters. She also uses a range of literary allusions, from Shakespeare to F. Scott Fitzgerald, which can be read as either sincere references or ironic commentary on the song's themes.

In a nutshell, "Look What You Made Me Do" by Taylor Swift is a complex and multilayered song that rewards close analysis from a deconstructive perspective.

## Findings

When analyzing the song "Look What You Made Me Do" through a deconstructive lens, various conflicting ideas and tensions can be uncovered. This highlights the intricate nature of identity and representation in popular culture. Deconstruction as a literary theory aims to expose the implicit assumptions and inconsistencies that are often concealed within a text.

The song's title, "Look What You Made Me Do," implies that the narrator is a victim who has been forced to take certain actions because of someone else's behaviour. Nonetheless, as the lyrics unfold, it appears evident that the narrator is not entirely innocent but has played a role in the situation. For example, the verse "I don't trust nobody and nobody trusts me" suggests that the speaker may have trust issues and is not willing to take responsibility for her actions.

The music video for this song showcases various portrayals of Taylor Swift, each reflecting a different stage or personality. This implies that her identity is malleable and continuously transforming, which opposes the concept of a consistent and unchanging identity. Moreover, the video appears to comment on Swift's public image and how she is viewed by her admirers and the media. By featuring multiple versions of herself, Swift questions the notion that there

is only one true, genuine version of her.

The song "Look What You Made Me Do" can be seen as a commentary on power dynamics and hierarchies in celebrity culture and the music industry. The lyrics and symbols used in the song aim to break down these power dynamics by revealing the manipulative and controlling behaviour of those in power. The repeated line "look what you made me do" implies victimhood and placing blame on others, which critiques the tendency of powerful individuals and institutions to justify their actions by blaming others.

The opening lines of the song also use language and symbolism to establish the theme: of victimhood and blaming, "I don't like your little games / don't like your tilted stage / the role you made me play / of the fool, no, I don't like you". Here, the "little games" and "tilted stage" can be seen as metaphors for the ways in which those in power manipulate and control those beneath them. At the same time, the "role you made me play" refers to how individuals are often forced into certain roles or positions due to power imbalances.

The chorus in the song plays an important part in this regard. The chorus, which highlights the line "I'm sorry, the old Taylor can't come to the phone right now / why? Oh, 'cause she's dead!", can be interpreted as a commentary on the ways in which powerful individuals and institutions often silence and control those who dare to challenge them or speak out against them. The death of the "old Taylor" can be seen as a metaphor for the death of individuality and authenticity in the face of powerful institutions and societal norms.

Overall, the song "Look What You Made Me Do" utilizes language and symbolism to break down societal power structures by exposing the manipulative and controlling behaviour of those in power. It also brings attention to the ways individuals are forced

into certain roles or positions due to power imbalances. Through a deconstructive analysis, the song shows the complexities of identity and representation in popular culture. The music video challenges the idea of a fixed identity and emphasizes the influence of media and public perception on celebrities' personas.

## **Conclusion**

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To sum up, the song "Look What You Made Me Do" provides a nuanced view of power dynamics, identity, and representation in popular culture. Through an analysis of the

lyrics and music video, it becomes evident that the song exposes the controlling and manipulative behaviour of those in positions of power while also challenging the notion of a fixed and unchanging identity. Overall, the song is complex and multi-layered, utilizing various deconstructive techniques to challenge traditional interpretations of power, agency, and identity. Swift employs repetition, intersexuality, and other deconstructive techniques to create a sense of instability and ambiguity, prompting listeners to question their assumptions and to think critically about the operation of power in our society.



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