

***“Give Me Back My Girlhood It Was Mine First”*: Reputation to Reclamation,
What Can We Learn About Our Contemporary View of Girlhood and the
Effects of Internalized Sexism from the Lyricism of Taylor Swift?**

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Word Count:

List of Illustrations

Figure 1: Arms with friendship bracelets [image]

Available at: <<https://fredandpearl.com/password>> [accessed 11/12/23]

Figure 2: Graph depicting the age of Leonardo DiCaprio's girlfriends in correlation to his [image]

Available at: <<https://www.insider.com/leonardo-dicaprio-girlfriends-reddit-chart-2019-3>> [accessed 13/12/23]

Abstract

In 2023 there have been discussions among young women about the concept of girlhood, and more importantly the reclamation of it. After the release of Greta Gerwig's *Barbie*, and musician Taylor Swift kicking off her Eras tour in the summer of 2023, there seemed to be a celebration of womanhood across social media. Trends of young women creating videos and photo montages of themselves and their closest friends experiencing life together, and the love and connection shared between them all.

This essay attempts to analyse why this movement has taken place, using examples from Taylor Swift's diaristic lyricism as a reflection of young women's experiences. Asking why women feel the need to reclaim their girlhoods, and interrogating the root causes of internalised sexism and its effects on an individual's perception of self, and of other women.

Introduction:

In the year 2023, there has been a phenomena within contemporary culture about girlhood, and specifically around the reclamation of it. The current conversation around it often references Greta Gerwig's blockbuster hit *Barbie*, which released in the summer of 2023, alongside musician Taylor Swift kicking off her Eras tour- the three-hour performance running through the highlights of her career from 2006 to the present. The latter of these two examples creates an interesting lens to view girlhood through within its own right, "girlhood is less a prescribed period of time and more suggestive of a way of seeing." (Healy, 2023)



Figure 1

These two cultural moments, particularly the discography of Taylor Swift, has helped to inform social media trends of women celebrating the joy in being a

woman. The bridge of Swift's song "*You're On Your own Kid*" and the now iconic line of "make the friendship bracelets" (a staple at Swift concerts where fans make and exchange friendship bracelets with each other) accompanied montages and slideshows of female friendships in every form. The same treatment extended to Billie Eilish's "*What Was I Made For?*" which featured in Gerwig's *Barbie* movie, the trend invoking emotional videos of women sharing childhood photos of themselves and attempting to reconnecting with their younger selves and what they used to enjoy.

More curiously, the conversation incorporates the question of "why?". Why have generations of women had to reject core interests and hobbies from their girlhoods which brought them joy and became a key part of their new young adult identities? Many directly reference feeling shame over enjoying and relating to Swift's work.

"Years of trying to be a "cool girl" had distorted my music tastes. Too many boys I knew showed disdain at worst and boredom at best whenever I tried to share my love for popular, radio-dominating artists like Swift or Spears. And so I entered a self-hating phase where I scoffed at and rejected the talents of women who reminded me of myself, wrapping the most girlish parts of me in shame and tucking them away." (Larocca, 2020)

Known for her diaristic songwriting, and openness with sharing her life experiences within her lyrics, Taylor Swift becomes an interesting meeting point within the conversation around girlhood. Her career, which began at 15,

wrote earnestly about relatable experiences many young girls might encounter: feelings of not fitting in, friendship, crushes, and heartbreak. Since her career only continued, now with 10 albums under her belt in 2023, it's not an unjust argument to say that she's chronicled an authentic experience for many women's coming of age.

Most relative to this essay is how, through that representation, we as an audience can see how Swift's experiences can have a direct patriarchal influence. Moreover, the realism and symbolism of her re-recording these early albums implicitly imply reclaiming her own narrative and thus girlhood. Given her position of how many young women relate to her music, the re-recordings provide an opportunity for thousands of women to revisit and reexamine their own girlhoods through the lens of Swift's music and without the patriarchal gaze imposed on them.

This essay aims to investigate the concept of "reclaiming girlhood" and why it is considered necessary, as well as analysing the effects of coming of age within a patriarchal society, and specifically the sub theory of internalised sexism.

Key theories from Judith Butler and Paulo Freire will be discussed and used as a base, expanded on through the examples of relevant Taylor Swift lyrics. This essay will specifically be focussing on lyrics from her 2010 album *Speak Now*, and then contrasting them to her more recent work, including the 2023 re-recording of this album. This is to help illustrate key ideas that link to the effects of internalised sexism and patriarchy, and how Swift re-recording this album in 2023 helps to aid the conversation around the reclamation of girlhood

and individual autonomy.

“Patriarchy is a system of relationships, beliefs, and values embedded in political, social, and economic systems that structure gender inequality between men and women. Attributes seen as “feminine” or pertaining to women are undervalued, while attributes regarded as “masculine” or pertaining to men are privileged.” (Asian Pacific Institute on Gender Based Violence, 2023)

Power imbalances are intrinsically linked into patriarchy, conveying a structure of the oppressor and those that are oppressed.

In his 1968 book *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, philosopher Paulo Freire explains:

“Sooner or later being less human leads the oppressed to struggle against those who made them so. In order for this struggle to have meaning, the oppressor must not, in seeking to regain their humanity... become in turn oppressors of the oppressors” (Freire, 1968)

Using Freire’s theory of oppressor and oppressed, we can view this as a frame to conceptualise internalised sexism. Patriarchal views and structures take place as the oppressors oppressing women, and when women spend a substantial amount of time internalising these views, they are at risk of turning sexist views on themselves and other women. Thus, becoming the oppressors of the oppressors.

Building on the theory of internalized sexism and patriarchy imbuing female identity, Judith Butler's gender theories aid this thought. Butler argues that our understanding of gender is "a constructed identity, a performative accomplishment", and that to become one's gender- in the case of this essay a woman- this happens "through a series of acts".

With this in consideration, having a young girl's identity and sense of self as a somewhat blank canvas, unable to yet assume a performance through not experiencing what could be considered a "series of acts" (Butler, 1988), one could argue that the sexism born out of patriarchal structure is the repetitive series of acts that begins to construct the identity of the young girl. Moreover to Butler's theory, one can now add in Freire's theory on oppression, "the very structure of their thought has been conditioned by the contradictions of the concrete, existential situation by which they were shaped". The existential situation shaping their identity being patriarchy and sexism.

Internalized sexism, also known as internalized misogyny, is an involuntary belief that stereotypes and the way that men view women, is true. It creates a contradiction, as Freire suggest, as young women grow up using inflammatory language towards other women, such as slut or bitch, whilst also knowing that they are a woman and would not want to be called that by somebody else.

Internalised Sexism and the Implications of Slut Shaming

“She’s better known for the things that she’s done on the mattress”- Better Than Revenge (Swift, 2010)// “He was a moth to the flame she was holding the matches” Better Than Revenge (Taylor’s Version) (2023)

What we can learn from this opening example is that during a girl’s teenage years they can use sexist rhetoric towards other women and view themselves through this same lens, an internalized sexism, but also that with time and hindsight, their perceptions and understandings can change, leading to a form of liberation from this type of shame.

One of the most apparent effects of internalized sexism within our culture is ‘slut shaming’. Organisation Planned Parenthood defines slut shaming as,

“Accusing someone — usually girls and women — of being “too sexual,” and using that as an excuse to humiliate, bully, or harass them. The reason slut-shamers target people is to make themselves feel more powerful by putting other people down.”
(Planned Parenthood, 2023)

Originally written when Swift was nineteen the song Better Than Revenge crafts a narrative of a boyfriend being ‘stolen’ by another woman. She begins with the lyrics *“she came along got him alone, and let’s hear the applause”* conveying an orchestration and manipulation of the situation. As well as this

she writes *"she took him faster than you could say sabotage"*, which implies that the man in this situation is an object to be taken. Since viewing women as objects is a patriarchal idea, we can assess that not just women but ultimately men too become oppressed by patriarchy- everyone involved in this storyline is affected by sexism.

If we focus on the depiction of the other woman in this story she is painted as calculated. She has crafted the perfect ploy to gain the interest of this man and manipulated the situation. There is an undercurrent of seeing her as competition, a constant comparison between the two of them, discussing her appearance such as *"her ever-present frown"* which can parallel the frustration women feel when being told to 'smile more' by other men, as well as *"sophistication isn't what you wear... no amount of vintage dresses gives you dignity"* where we can draw the traditional view that women dressing sophisticatedly, wearing vintage dresses which could be considered more modest, this modesty having more value to within patriarchal structures as it's linked to purity culture.

Ultimately instead of seeing a more objective view in this story, the man who is cheating or leaving Swift to immediately date see this new woman, she blames not him, but the other woman, she is her competition, who she will compare herself to. There is an overwhelming sentiment of imbued distrust of other women, the need for 'revenge'.

If we return to our base theory of women's identities and internal thoughts being shaped by men and repetitive patriarchal ideas, it's easy to see the

correlation of how Swift's perspective at the time of writing this song is informed this way.

“As a teenager, I didn't understand that saying you're a feminist is just saying that you hope women and men will have equal rights and equal opportunities. What it seemed to me, the way it was phrased in culture, society, was that you hate men.” (Hoby, 2014)

Like all women, Swift's coming of age is in a patriarchal society, and the repetitive acts of hearing what a woman should be from the perspective of a man allows for distrust for the movement and the knowledge that is attempting to absolve you from the oppressive way of thinking. Like the previous quote says, within the society and culture that Swift grew up in, being a feminist was viewed at hating men, so within her teenage perceptions they conformed to those patriarchal views and viewing herself and others through a misogynistic lens.

This line of thinking parallels Freire's theory of the oppressed, he says:

“the oppressed, having internalized the image of the oppressor and adopted his guidelines, are fearful of freedom. Freedom would require them to eject this image and replace it with autonomy and responsibility.”

When women have internalized distrust of other women, it isolates them to become dependent on patriarchal views since freedom and autonomy would

mean a loss of identity and sense of self. It requires rebuilding a new way of thinking not just about other women, but about themselves.

“[Arthur] Schopenhauer asked: “why do men have beards?” and the answer he supplied was that the beard served as a mask, necessary for defense against women, who by nature, are skilled in the arts of deception, which is to say, acting, dissimulation, lying, secrecy, and mimicry...”(Taussig, 1995)

What is so interesting about Swift is that her songwriting is extremely diaristic, making her highly relatable to her audience, but also one can argue that due to this earnest relatability, it reflects the wider views and experiences of her young female audience. It's a larger point of how not just Swift, who was 19 at the time of writing the song, but how most young women seem to go through this transitional period where they turn on other women and fall into sexist rhetoric.

The desire to feel a sense of power, a form of control in a system they are controlled in, feeds internalized sexism such as 'slut-shaming'. When women's oppression is informed by patriarchal ideals, they grow up in a system where equality can be confused with becoming more powerful than their peers or having power over others. Systems of hierarchy and power are intrinsically rooted within patriarchy, so it's not a surprise that as a young woman, to have a higher social standing, and hoping to earn respect from men, holding power within their communities is a form of currency- slut-shaming is currency. This desire for respect from the men in their lives will absolve them to turn against

other women. They will turn on each other someone else down before it can be done to you. It leads to a desire to isolate from one another, consider themselves different. They are better, they are special and valuable.

“Women were both potential recipients of sexual stigma and producers of it - simultaneously engaged in both defensive and oppressive othering. As one insightful woman put it, "I feel like you're more likely to say [slut] if you maybe feel like you could potentially be called that"" (Armstrong *et al*,2014)

In the 2014 journal, *"Good Girls": Gender, Social Class, and Slut Discourse on Campus*, the university campus-based research found that participating in slut-shaming was often to establish hierarchies and disconnected from commenting on sexual activity.

Like in the lyricism of *Better Than Revenge*, “women discussed and demarcated the line between good and bad girls - labeling others negatively while positioning themselves favorably - were common.” The research suggested that women from more affluent backgrounds used slut-shaming language towards women of lower-class backgrounds, and the women from lower class backgrounds doing the same to the more affluent women. It further supports women using derogatory language against each other for feeling a sense of power against each other stemming from competition, as well in parts jealousy.

As Taylor Swift has gone on through the process of re-recording her first 6 albums, she has seemed to stay true to the original material, aiming to make

carbon copies of the source material. This makes a controversial song like *Better Than Revenge* set apart further given that on '*Taylor's Version*', Swift changed a line in the chorus. Instead of the infamous mattress line, it had been re-written to "he was a moth to the flame she was holding the matches".

The change conveys Swift's growth in perspective, in her 2020 documentary film, *Miss Americana*, she discussed how society informed her own viewpoint when it came to feminism and more importantly how it had changed.

"I'm trying to be as educated as possible on how to respect people, on how to de-program the misogyny in my own brain. Toss it out, reject it, and resist it," she says. "Like, there is no such thing as a slut. There is no such thing as a bitch. There is no such thing as someone who's bossy, there's just a boss." (Swift, 2020)

'Taylor's Version', conveys to us not just the growth within an artist, but the growth reflected within a fan base. Women who have had Swift legitimize their experiences from their adolescence continue to have it into adulthood, where they too realize they must "de-program the misogyny" within their own brains.

Power Imbalances and being Viewed through the Male Gaze

“Don’t You Think Nineteens to be Messed With?”- Dear John (Swift 2010) //

*“Damn Sure Never Would Have Danced with the Devil at Nineteen”- Would’ve
Could’ve Should’ve (Swift, 2022)*

As discussed with *Better Than Revenge*, when we talk about imbalance of power, the word imbalance is key. Throughout a woman’s girlhood there will be smaller, more mundane repetitive acts that will inform her perspective on what she can achieve, and what her position in the world will be.

The traditional western nuclear family structures place importance on a mother- father unit. The male breadwinner is “responsible for economic provision through employment while women are responsible for the home and family.” (Marjan, 2015).

If we were to assume that many women grew up within this structure, there is an unconscious message being received already about male and female imbalances. Young girls’ primary example for a man within their lives is a ‘ruler’ of the household. He has authority, and responsibility over the family, implying a matter of importance the family, especially over mother- girls can grow up seeing their fathers possibly earning more money compared to their mothers, meaning within a capitalist society the role of mother and care giver is deemed less important than the work father must do.

“Globally, we estimate that less than a third of leadership

positions are held by women. In the United States and Canada, the situation is not much better, with only 37% and 35% of leadership positions being held by women, respectively, despite women comprising 47% and 46% of the workforce.” (Baird, 2023)

Media supports this same perception, sitcoms including nuclear families feature a father coming through the door to his wife and kids saying, “honey I’m home”. Mother is already making dinner, she has picked up the kids from school, father is home later, implying he has been working harder.

In school, girls may experience being pushed away from leadership positions or subjects that are deemed more academic or dominant. A subconscious bias which informs steering a young girl into being a nurse, or a teacher, does she want to be a mother when she grows up. In recent years, to rectify this issue there have been more initiatives to bring girls into STEM subjects, however according to American Association of University Women, women still only make up 34% of the workforce within STEM subjects. They are also paid \$15,000 less than their male counterparts, showing that this area is still difficult to access and pursue.

All these smaller experiences that are ingrained into our society have enormous effects. It becomes natural and expected to trust what a man is telling you, as you are conditioned to think he is right. It adds an uneasy layer to the discussion of power, and women trying to obtain it. It can lead women to feel they must be in certain situations for the sake of their career, thus lacking

autonomy and feeling they can't be assertive without being labeled 'bossy' or 'high maintenance.'

It's not uncommon to see this imbalance within relationships. Media coverage and attitudes normalize romantic relationships between young women and much older men. This is evidenced by actor Leonardo DiCaprio, who at 48, has never dated a woman under the age of 25. A reddit user by the name TrustLittleBrother noticing this created a graph of this information, clearly showing that as DiCaprio ages, the women who chooses to involve himself with do not age with him.



Figure 2

This happened to Swift, having a short relationship at 19 with a musician John

Mayer who was 32 at the time. Swift is quoted as being a fan of his music which creates an immediate unequal dynamic. She is young, and new to the industry, on a pursuit to be taken seriously, as opposed to Mayer who was already an established and respected artist 13 years her senior.

Swift releases her song *Dear John*, which is heavily implied to be about the experience of this relationship, mentioning his name, her age of 19, as well as the guitar style instrumentation emulating the work of Mayer's.

“Long were the nights when my days once revolved around you,
counting my footsteps, praying the floor won't fall through
again... You paint me a blue sky and go back and turn it to rain,
and I lived in your chess game, but you changed the rules every
day, wondering which version of you I might get on the phone
tonight...” (Swift, 2010)

In the opening verse Swift paints a story of a volatile relationship, referencing the “floor falling through”, as well as narrating control with the “blue sky” being “turned into rain”, and living in her partners “chess game”. If we further analyze this reference, chess requires forethought and strategy adding a double meaning to its usage in the lyrics towards Mayer. Playing the game and countering the other players moves to come out as champion, as well as him changing the rules. Again, we see the previously discussed themes of competition coming into effect. The lyrics depict power and control, and how Swifts has none.

In the chorus she says, “I see it all now, it was wrong, don't you think nineteen's too young...”. Mentioning the young age of the narrator of this story, calling her a girl- not a woman, depicting her crying in a dress, it invokes childlike and innocent imagery. It conveys that the antagonist is older, he should have been wiser, he “should have known” better. It's implied that Swift trust in Mayer was betrayed.

The mention of age can invoke an interesting part of the culture around girlhood including more recent trends such as coquette, which stemmed from writer Vladimir Nabokov's controversial book *Lolita*. Lolita is in itself its own sub culture, originating in Japan in the 1990's, the street style referring to cuteness, modesty, and elegance and “of a simple world without dirt or blemish that reflects the pure and innocent hearts of young women” (V&A, 2011). The difference however between newer coquette styles, as opposed to its Lolita predecessor, is the focus on hyper femininity rather than on sexual innocence, a reclamation of the style removing the patriarchal gaze.

Nabokov's 1955 book *Lolita* is an example of the critique of older men having romantic ideations and relationships with much younger girls. In *Lolita*, character Dolores is only 12 years old, and the intent behind the story is to act as a mirror for the audience, provoking thoughts of how the romantic language towards Dolores normalizes our view of main character Humbert Humbert's relationship with her. This intent has become misconstrued in wider society, instead of the social awareness and the knowledge that this relationship is wrong, ignoring its intent enables these dynamics to exist in real life.

This links back to Swift and Mayer's relationship, it was encouraged rather than questioned, and when Mayer was questioned in a *Rolling Stone's* article, he responds "'I don't want to go into that.'" Mayer has refused to engage seriously on the topic of Swift's age at the time and the power dynamic between them having a 13-year age difference"(Renfro, 2023)

In 2022, Swift releases the song *Would've Could've Should've*, which we can analyze as a parallel to *Dear John*. The song conveys a new interpretation of the situation, as well as reflecting how with it the wider audiences has too.

"I miss who I used to be the tomb won't close...I regret you all the time, I can't let this go, I fight with you in my sleep the wound won't close... If clarity's in death, then why won't this die? Years of tearing down our banners, you and I, living for the thrill of hitting you where it hurts, give me back my girlhood, it was mine first."(Swift, 2022)

Swift was 32 when releasing this song, the same age as Mayer during their relationship, adding a new level of introspection and understanding, as well as empathy. Her questions lay responsibility with him, saying had he never taken interest, she "never would have danced with the devil at nineteen". She reveals how he made her feel "important" and like in his dismissal of her in the previously referenced rolling stones article, he "tried to erase us [their relationship". This song also acknowledges the theme of girlhood directly, depicting a lack of control over the loss of it, and asking for it back which mirrors the exact conversations many women are currently having over the

concept.

To remain objective whilst discussing power imbalances in depth, one could argue that Swift herself is now in a position of great power. She is projected to become a billionaire after the newest ventures in her career including a concert movie of the eras tour, and the continuation of her re-recording project. In recent years, just posting an Instagram story encouraging people to register to vote increased registration numbers,

“the 35,252 new registrations on National Voter Registration Day were the most since 2020, the organization said, and a 23% jump over last year. The number of 18-year-olds registered was more than double 2022” (Sullivan, 2023).

The difference between discussing Swift’s success in comparison to a man’s, however, is that she is still never seen as an equal to those at her level. She reflects the difficulty of women obtaining respect for being in a position of influence and leadership and face other men refusing to legitimize their success.

“By and large the people who run the corporations, the government departments and universities are men, who so arrange things that it is extremely difficult for women to get access to top positions.” (Connell, 1987)

Swift still faces judgement for what she wears, her physical appearance, and the people she dates and surrounds herself. Her age and gender are questioned, she’ll be asked when she’ll marry and have children. She faces

constant scrutiny for existing.

When discussing Swift attending NFL games, she is called “bad for football” by two *Barstool Sports* presenters, feeling her popularity detracts from the sport. They continue this topic, falling into deeply sexist language.

“Katz joked that the team had scored “every single way this game... Sollenberger added: “That’s what they should call Taylor Swift’s vagina... Elsewhere in the podcast, Katz admitted that he’d accept Swift’s presence at Chiefs games if she and [Travis] Kelce were to “release a sex video”” (Clark, 2023)

This point illustrates further the imbalance of power, and how a man’s voice and position always find a way to manipulate and limit the experiences of women. Swift’s career has been plagued by men diminishing her successes- Kanye West infamously storming her acceptance speech at the 2009 VMAs, Mayer calling her songwriting ‘cheap’, and Scooter Braun and Scott Borchetta allegedly selling and buying her masters without her knowledge. The re-records aren’t just symbolic of wider reclamation but she’s also trying to physically reclaim her own stories and narratives from powerful men.

Conclusion

You Are the Best Thing That's Ever Been Mine- Mine (Taylor's Version)

(Swift, 2023)

What has been covered in this essay is only a small part of the discussion, this essay largely focuses on a girlhood which is heteronormative and white which leaves many other women's experiences, and other systemic issues within intersectional feminism out of the argument. Many women of colour have a very different experience of girlhood, often having to grow up quicker than their white counterparts, and facing shame and stereotyping for racist remarks, as well as sexist. Whilst acknowledging this pitfall of the essay, the use of Taylor Swift as a larger reflection of girlhood, was in the hopes that it was her relatability through empathy that connects those who identify with having a girlhood. One might not have lived through an experience of a boyfriend cheating on you, or him leaving and immediately dating another woman, like in *better than revenge*, and they may never have experienced a relationship with someone who is 13 years their senior, but what everyone will have experienced is the feelings behind the stories. What connects us is the mutual understanding of feeling jealous, hurt, distressed, and petty.

Swift's openness within her writing gives legitimacy to women's emotions, and her recent re-releasing project have given the women who once felt shamed for those experiences, or shamed for enjoying Swift's music, an opportunity to engage with the art form without the weight of a male gaze.

This collective feeling has shown a huge sense of community has come out of

it. Many women now can connect with each other without shame, over an artist they love. The making of friendship bracelets and swapping them with strangers, strengthening that collective bond, rejects the isolationism and shame of our past selves and the internalized misogyny that was built inside. The collective defies the power struggle of their youth, and instead forming deeper relationships and community which is an inherently anti patriarchal notion.

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