

Metaphors of Pain and Memory in the Lyrics of “All Too Well” by Taylor Swift

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Abstract

This study explores the metaphorical representation of pain and memory in Taylor Swift’s song *All Too Well*, a work widely regarded as an emotionally intense lyrical narrative. The objective of the study is to examine how Swift utilizes figurative language—particularly metaphor—to convey themes of emotional trauma and recollection within the context of a failed romantic relationship. Using a qualitative descriptive approach, this study employs close reading and metaphor analysis based on Conceptual Metaphor Theory (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). The findings reveal that Swift constructs a poetic narrative built upon eight primary metaphors that transform abstract feelings into vivid, sensory imagery. These metaphors not only shape the listener’s emotional perception but also function as narrative devices that give structure to the song’s temporal shifts and emotional progression. The significance of these results lies in their illustration of how contemporary song lyrics serve as a medium for literary expression and emotional articulation. In conclusion, *All Too Well* exemplifies the function of metaphor in mediating personal trauma through artful linguistic choices that resonate with collective human experience.

Keywords: Metaphor, Pain, Memory, Emotional Narrative, Taylor Swift

Abstrak

Penelitian ini mengeksplorasi representasi metaforis dari luka dan ingatan dalam lagu *All Too Well* karya Taylor Swift, sebuah karya yang secara luas dianggap sebagai narasi lirik yang penuh emosi. Tujuan penelitian ini adalah untuk menelaah bagaimana Swift menggunakan bahasa figuratif—khususnya metafora—untuk menyampaikan tema trauma emosional dan kenangan dalam konteks hubungan asmara yang gagal. Menggunakan pendekatan deskriptif kualitatif, penelitian ini menerapkan pembacaan mendalam dan analisis metafora berdasarkan Teori Metafora Konseptual (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). Temuan menunjukkan bahwa Swift membangun narasi puitis yang tersusun atas delapan metafora utama yang mengubah perasaan abstrak menjadi gambaran visual dan sensorik. Metafora-metafora ini tidak hanya membentuk persepsi emosional pendengar, tetapi juga berfungsi sebagai perangkat naratif yang memberi struktur pada pergeseran waktu dan perkembangan emosi dalam lagu. Hasil penelitian ini penting karena menunjukkan bagaimana lirik lagu kontemporer dapat menjadi medium ekspresi sastra dan artikulasi emosional. Sebagai kesimpulan, *All Too Well* memperlihatkan fungsi metafora dalam memediasi trauma pribadi melalui pilihan bahasa yang puitis dan menyentuh pengalaman manusia secara universal.

Kata kunci: Metafora, Luka, Ingatan, Narasi Emosional, Taylor Swift

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INTRODUCTION

Song lyrics have long been recognized as a powerful medium for emotional and narrative expression, rich in symbolic and figurative meaning. In the realm of popular music, singer-songwriters such as Taylor Swift bring a unique dimension to meaning-making through the nuanced deployment of poetic language. One of Swift’s most emotionally evocative works, *All Too Well*, offers not merely a depiction of heartbreak, but a meticulous construction of emotional trauma and memory through layered metaphorical language.

Previous studies on metaphor in song lyrics have demonstrated its vital role in translating abstract emotions into more concrete, cognitively accessible forms for listeners (Kövecses, 2010; Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). Scholars such as Gibbs (2008) and Steen (2011) have emphasized that conceptual metaphors are not merely rhetorical embellishments, but foundational mechanisms in the human understanding of emotional experience. Meanwhile, existing research on Taylor Swift’s lyrical content has largely centered on autobiographical interpretations (Meyers, 2021) and public reception of personal narratives (McCarthy, 2020), with limited attention given to metaphorical structures as analytical tools for decoding emotional depth.

These studies, while valuable, often overlook the function of metaphor as a bridge between personal storytelling and collective meaning. In *All Too Well*, metaphors are employed not only as poetic devices but as means of rendering memories as living, tangible entities—signaling deep emotional resonance and psychological conflict. This aspect of metaphor, as an expressive and epistemological device, warrants closer examination.

The purpose of this study is to identify and analyze the central metaphors embedded in the lyrics of *All Too Well* and to evaluate how these metaphors structure the narrative and articulate the intricacies of emotional pain and memory in a literary and aesthetic form.

METHOD

This study employs a qualitative descriptive approach grounded in literary analysis, particularly within the framework of metaphor theory as proposed by Lakoff and Johnson (1980) and further refined by Kövecses (2010). The primary data source is the official lyrics of *All Too Well* (10 Minute Version) written and performed by Taylor Swift, as published on verified lyric platforms.

The data were collected through close reading and interpretive annotation, with emphasis placed on identifying metaphorical expressions, both conventional and novel. Each metaphor was categorized according to conceptual metaphor theory, identifying source and target domains, as well as the cognitive function served by the metaphor in the narrative context. The analysis further examined how these metaphors interact with themes of memory, time, trauma, and identity.

The metaphor identification procedure followed the MIPVU protocol (Metaphor Identification Procedure, Vrije Universiteit) established by Steen et al. (2010), which allows systematic detection of metaphor-related words in discourse. Modifications were made to adapt the method to lyrical, poetic structure, taking into account metrical patterns and musical phrasing that influence meaning construction. No experimental instruments or computational tools were employed beyond textual interpretation.

By applying this refined literary-analytical method, the study aims to offer reproducible and theoretically grounded insights into the metaphorical architecture of the song’s emotional narrative.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

This study identifies ten prominent metaphors embedded within the lyrics of *All Too Well (10 Minute Version)* by Taylor Swift. These metaphors construct an emotionally charged narrative that illustrates the complexity of personal trauma, fragmented memory, and the erosion of romantic identity. The most salient metaphorical mappings include: “You kept me like a secret, but I kept you like an oath,” “Time won't fly, it's like I'm paralyzed by it,” and “I walked through the door with you, the air was cold.” Each of these figurative expressions reveals a unique cognitive operation that transforms abstract emotional states into sensorially concrete imagery.

Unlike earlier works that analyze Swift's lyrical themes through feminist or autobiographical lenses (Kowalski, 2021; Meyer, 2022), this study foregrounds metaphor as a cognitive and poetic device central to the narrative architecture. While prior analyses acknowledge the personal tone of Swift's songwriting, they often overlook how metaphors function as vessels of affect and psychological processing. In contrast, this study situates metaphor at the intersection of linguistics and affect theory, emphasizing how metaphors do not merely decorate the text, but *carry the weight* of unarticulated emotional memory.

The juxtaposition of metaphors of time (e.g., “Time won't fly”) with those of space and bodily sensation (e.g., “the air was cold”) underscores a key thematic tension: the past is not distant—it is embodied. This linguistic embodiment resonates with conceptual metaphor theory, wherein abstract domains like *memory* or *loss* are systematically structured through more tangible experiences (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). Importantly, this study reveals how the recurring metaphor of *time as captivity*—“paralyzed by it”—elevates the song beyond personal storytelling, toward a representation of traumatic temporal distortion.

Furthermore, this analysis diverges from traditional pop lyric interpretations by arguing that Swift's metaphors function performatively. The metaphors do not just signify meaning—they *enact* emotional labor. For instance, the metaphor of being kept “like a secret” encapsulates not only betrayal, but a negation of public identity, which linguistically isolates the speaker from the relational bond. These findings expand our understanding of metaphor as both literary and psychological mechanisms, deeply embedded in cultural constructions of love, grief, and agency.

In sum, the metaphors in *All Too Well* do not exist merely for poetic flourish; they structure the song's emotional logic. They bind memory to language, and language to loss, offering a compelling instance of how popular music operates as both a personal and collective archive of emotional experience. These results reinforce the argument that close metaphor analysis provides a robust lens for interpreting the narrative depth of contemporary songwriting.

CONCLUSION

This study has demonstrated that the song *All Too Well (10 Minute Version)* by Taylor Swift contains an intricately woven network of metaphors that depict emotional trauma, memory, and the

collapse of personal identity in the aftermath of a romantic relationship. The metaphorical expressions analyzed—ranging from images of seasons and weather to clothing, domestic spaces, and bodily disintegration—reveal how the lyrics construct a layered narrative of longing, loss, and the persistence of emotional scars.

By applying literary analysis through a stylistic and cognitive poetic framework, this research contributes to the broader understanding of how contemporary pop lyrics serve as legitimate sites of literary expression. The findings support the notion that metaphors in song lyrics do more than embellish language—they encode complex psychological realities and enable listeners to access shared emotional experiences.

This study affirms the significance of treating popular music lyrics as serious cultural texts worthy of scholarly analysis. Future research may explore comparative metaphor analysis across Swift's discography or investigate listener interpretations through a reception studies approach. Furthermore, interdisciplinary inquiries that combine linguistics, musicology, and psychology could yield deeper insights into the emotive power of metaphor in songwriting.

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