

## RHETORIC STYLE IN TAYLOR SWIFT'S *BACK TO DECEMBER*

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### Abstract

This study is concerned with how a language of rhetoric is used in the lyric of Taylor Swift's *Back to December*. The study is led by a premise that the language of literature can be found in songs, and the study is carried out to support the premise. The study is intended to depict elements of the language of rhetoric in the lyric in order to designate the style of the lyric. The study takes the lyric as a text, so it voids the music to the lyric. The study applies a textual analysis to the lyric as its research method, and it adopts Chapman's concept of stylistic analysis to the lyric as its approach method. The textual analysis involves interpretation of the lyric's lines, and the stylistic analysis incorporates linguistic and literary description of the elements of the language of rhetoric. The analyses result in conditional expressions and figurative expressions, comprising imagery, symbol, personification, and irony. In brief, the study is expected to be supplementary to general readership in music and poetry: the lyric is stylistically appealing; it is not only musical, but it is also poetic.

**Keywords:** language of rhetoric, lyric, textual analysis, stylistic analysis, conditional expressions, figurative expressions

### Introduction

The lyric of Taylor Swift's *Back to December* was written in a language of rhetoric. The lyric is formed with words which are meant to say more than how the words are read. The words can be considered colloquial because almost all of the words are used daily. The colloquialism makes the lyric apparently simple to understand. Regardless of the simplicity, the lyric actually contains hidden feeling which the lyricist attempted to express when she wrote the lyric. Swift is said to have written the lyric to express how she regrets her breakup with her ex-boyfriend. The lyricist's regret tells that the lyric has an emotional effect; or, the lyric is written in the language of rhetoric. How Swift's regret is expressed rhetorically becomes what this study is primarily concerned with.

Generally this study is led by a premise which states that there is an individual message in a song lyric, and this study approves the premise. How the individual message is contained in the song lyric constitutes the style of the lyric. The

style typifies the lyric, but it has not been particularly described yet. Specifically this study is led by insufficient discussions about how the language of rhetoric is used in the lyric to express the regret. Reviewers share the opinion that the lyric is about the singer's regret; however, they do not show how the regret is expressed rhetorically. Based on both situations, this study is intended to determine the style of the lyric by describing how the individual message is written in the language of rhetoric in it.

As its research method this study applies a textual analysis, in which it involves interpretation of the lyric's lines. Besides that, as its approach method this study adopts Chapman's concept of stylistic analysis, in which it incorporates linguistic description and literary interpretation of conditional and figurative expressions as the language of rhetoric in the lyric. Based on the two methods, the analysis of the lyric in this study comes in three stages: one, linguistic description of the poetic elements; two, literary interpretation of the elements;

three, relation between the linguistic description and the literary interpretation.

The analysis shows that the singer's regret is stated in conditional expressions, in which she wishes she could return to the times when she and her boyfriend were still together; in addition, it shows that the regret is also stated in figurative expression, which comprises imagery, symbol, personification, and irony. This study is expected to be beneficial for any general reader, from which she or he can discover elements of poetry in the lyric; and, likewise, elements of music in it. The benefit is plausible because the lyric is both poetic and musical.

This study was started off with the writer's proposition that Swift's *Back to December* is a good source for the learning and teaching of English language and literature. The proposition is inferred from the premise which states that songs can be used "(t)o stimulate the real use of the foreign language to express personal meanings" (Murphey, 81). In other words, the lyric of the song can be used to examine English grammar and English poetry, and the words in the lyric can be interpreted to describe what the lyricist meant to express. This study is expected to supplement general readers with conditional and figurative expressions. Both aspects of the learning and teaching are discussed through this study: the discussion of the conditional expression belongs with English grammar, and that of the figurative expression with English poetry. Thus, the aspects are taken out of the lyric, and that makes the proposition.

The proposition, moreover, is developed from reviews on the lyric. This study chose three reviews because of their relevance and authorship to the aspects of discussion about the lyric. The three reviews mainly concern what Swift meant to express when she wrote the lyric, and they were written by copyrighted writers. The reviews were written by Reuben, Peacock, and Welly respectively. Reuben, a staff writer at *Trinity Tripod*, wrote that the lyric "was written about Taylor Lautner, and the song

apologizes for her poor actions and their breakup" (2013). Then, Peacock, a contributing writer at *Roughstock*, wrote that Swift "comes far too late to the realization that she messed up and wishes that she could change things, but of course she can't" (2010). Last but not least, Welly, a music blog writer at *creativemusic*, wrote that the lyric tells how somebody regretted what they had done to her ex-boyfriend (2011). However, the reviews do not specifically explain that Swift expressed her feeling through the lyric in conditional and figurative expressions. So, this study is carried out to explain the conditional and figurative expressions.

To explain the two types of expressions which Swift uses to express her regret in *Back to December*, this study applies a textual analysis and adopts Chapman's concept of language of rhetoric in stylistics. The textual analysis is applied because this study is concerned with the lyric and the lyric itself is a text which needs interpreting to reveal the feeling of regret. The textual analysis is done by "understanding the process of interpretation as the effect of a *relation* between a reader and a text" (Belsey, 163). Thus, the textual analysis in this study is carried out through a process of interpreting the lyric after it is read.

Chapman's concept of language of rhetoric is adopted because this study is oriented as a stylistic analysis of poetry, and Chapman's concept itself is presented as an introduction to literary stylistics. Chapman's concept states that "(t)he study of *rhetoric* rested on a special kind of attitude to language as a faculty through which the recipient—reader or auditor—could be influenced in the manner desired by the writer or orator" (73). Based on this concept, the approach to the lyric is made by describing the expressions through which the writer receives the effects which the lyricist sent. In other words, the approach is concerned with how to describe the lyricist's feeling using the stylistic analysis of the

lyric. Needless to say, the analysis is taken to explain how Swift's feeling is described in the conditional and figurative expressions.

The conditional expressions are referred to Swan's *Practical English Usage*. Swan's book can be used as a guide in English grammar because the book may serve as an informative reference for many problems in English. That makes the book usable to give suitable information about the conditional expressions in English. According to the book, there are three types of conditional expressions in English:

'first conditional'

<i>if</i> + present	<i>will</i> + infinitive
If we play tennis	I'll win.

'second conditional'

<i>if</i> + past	<i>would</i> + infinitive
If we played tennis	I would win.

'third conditional'

<i>if</i> + past perfect	<i>would have</i> + past participle
If we had played tennis	I would have won.

(Swan, 256)

Furthermore, the figurative expressions are referred to Morner and Rausch's *NTC's Dictionary of Literary Terms*. The dictionary is considered to give operational definitions of literary terms; consequently, for this study, it is suitable to define such literary terms as imagery, symbol, personification, and irony. Firstly, imagery is defined as "(t)he making of 'pictures in words,' the pictorial quality of a literary work achieved through a collection of images" (105). After that, symbol is defined as "something concrete—an object, a place, a character, an action—that stands for or suggests something abstract" (216). Then, personification is defined as "a figure of speech in which human characteristics and sensibilities are attributed to animals, plants, inanimate objects, natural forces, or abstract ideas" (163). Finally, irony is defined as "the recognition of the incongruity, or difference,

between reality (what is) and appearance (what seems to be)" (113).

### Methodology

The research method of this study applies the textual analysis of Swift's *Back to December*. The application of the analysis involves the interpretation of the words in the lyric to describe the lyricist's feeling. The interpretation is done literally: it involves the interpretation of the figurative expressions in the lyric. In this sense, the interpretation means how words of imagery, symbol, personification and/or irony designate the feeling. In addition, the approach method of this study adopts Chapman's concept of language of rhetoric in stylistics. The adoption involves the manner to the words in the lyric to describe the feeling. The manner is performed idiomatically: it involves the interpretation of both the conditional and figurative expressions in the lyric. Thus, the stylistic analysis of the lyric incorporates the linguistic description of the conditional expressions and the literary interpretation of the figurative expressions.

Both the research and the approach method form up the study method for the stylistic analysis of the lyric. Accordingly, the linguistic description needs to supplement the literary interpretation in order to construct the stylistic analysis. Yet, the description and the interpretation need a connector so that the two of them can relate to each other in order to complement the analysis. Together, the description, the interpretation and the connector become the components of the whole stylistic analysis. With regard to the components, the stylistic analysis is divided into three stages: one, the linguistic description; two, the literary interpretation; and three, the relation between the linguistic and the literary interpretation.

### Discussion

The discussion of this study takes the lyric as the text to be analysed stylistically. The discussion, moreover, concerns the stages in the stylistic analysis of Swift's *Back to*

*December*. Therefore, the discussion comes in three stages.

### 1. The linguistic description

The linguistic description explains how the conditional expressions in the lyric are used to express the lyricist's regret. The conditional expressions have three types of structures. One conditional expression in the lyric can be found in the chorus parts of the song, or in the second, the fourth, and the sixth verse of the lyric. The conditional expression is quoted in the following line: "Wishing I'd realized what I had when you were mine". The expression in the line is categorized as a third conditional expression, and it may tell how Swift wishes that she had realized what she had when her ex-boyfriend was still hers. When the conditional expression in the line is interpreted, the expression may tell that the lyricist did not really realize how her ex-boyfriend ever meant to her, so it may express her feeling of losing her ex-boyfriend; and, how she regrets their breakup. Another conditional expression can be found in the interlude part of the song, or in the fifth verse of the lyric. The conditional expression is quoted in the following line: "If we loved again (I swear) I'd love you right". The expression in the line is categorized as a second conditional expression, and it may tell how Swift says "I swear" to show that she seriously means that she would love him decently if they could love each other again. When the conditional expression in the line is interpreted, the expression may tell that the lyricist may realize that she will not be able to love him decently because they cannot love each other again, and it may express her feeling of being restrained from loving him; and, how she regrets her fault. The other conditional expression in the lyric can be found also in the interlude part of the song, or in the fifth verse of the lyric. The conditional expression is quoted in the following line: "So if the chain is in your door I understand". The expression in the line is categorized as a first conditional expression, and it may tell how

Swift seems to understand what it means if she finds the chain on her ex-boyfriend's door. When the conditional expression in the line is interpreted, the expression may tell that the lyricist will understand if one day she comes to him and he refuses to open his door for her, so it may express her feeling of being unwelcome anymore; and, how she regrets her misdeed.

The description of the conditionals expressions denotes that Swift feels regretful because now she cannot do anything to get her ex-boyfriend back to her. The description is made in the three types of conditional expressions, and the three of them share one common situation: the lyricist's feeling of regret. One conditional expression tells about their breakup, another about the lyricist's fault, and the other about her misdeed. So, the linguistic description denotes the regret in the first, second, and third conditional expression.

### 2. The literary interpretation

The literary interpretation explains how the figurative expressions in the lyric are used to express the lyricist's regret. The figurative expressions comprise imagery, symbol, personification, and irony. The imagery is realized through a series of words which creates pictorial quality in Swift's *Back to December*. One series of words of imagery in the lyric can be shown in the following line: "I haven't seen them in a while". The words in the line present an image of absent family members which the lyricist mentions in the previous line: "... tell me how's your family". The words of imagery involve the lyricist's vision to create a picture of the family members as concrete objects. The picture implicitly represents the lyricist's feeling: she regrets their breakup at the moment when she is face to face with her ex-boyfriend; she might not intentionally want to ask the question. She might simply try to make a conversation with him, recalling how she ever met his family. Another series of words of imagery in the lyric can be shown in the following line: "I

watched you laughing from the passenger's side". The words in the line present an image of the ex-boyfriend's laughter. The words of imagery involve the lyricist's vision and hearing to create a picture of the ex-boyfriend as a concrete object. The picture implicitly represents the lyricist's feeling of losing him. She seems to regret what she did to him in the past, and she might want to tell that she still remembers him although he is not around her at present. The other series of words of imagery in the lyric can be shown in the following line: "I miss your tan skin, your sweet smile". The words present an image of the absent ex-boyfriend. The words involve the lyricist's perception to create a picture of the ex-boyfriend as an abstract object. The picture implicitly represents the lyricist's missing him. She seems to regret things which made him only a memory for her, so she must want his physical presence instead.

The symbol is realized through the representation of a concrete object for an abstract one. In the lyric, the word 'roses' is a symbol because the word can represent Swift's ex-boyfriend's love for her. Structurally, the word 'roses' in the first verse is placed in the same position as the word 'love' in the third verse. Apparently the concrete object 'roses' stand for the abstract object 'love'.

Verse 1:

You gave me *roses* and I left them there  
to die

Verse 3:

You gave me all your *love*/ And all I  
gave you was goodbye

Accordingly, what happened to the roses represents what happened to his love. Besides that, the following line contains words of symbol: "And then the cold came and the dark days". The noun phrase 'the cold' can be designated as another symbol in the lyric. The phrase can represent the complication which befell on Swift's and her ex-boyfriend's relationship: their relationship became complicated as the relationship

froze. The adjective phrase 'dark days' can also be designated as another symbol. The phrase can represent gloominess: their relationship seemed to be unable to continue because of the complication. The word 'December' in the lyric can be designated the other word of symbol. The word can represent the month when they started their relationship, but then they lost it afterward. In other words, she regrets the loss; and that makes her want to have the relationship back again.

The personification is realized through attribution of human capacity to inhuman beings. The following line contains an expression of personification: "And then the cold came and the dark days". In the line, the structure of 'the cold came' is linguistically a clause; and, it figuratively exemplifies an expression of personification. The cold (weather), which is a natural force, is attributed with the ability to arrive, and the attribution makes the cold weather seem alive. The following line contains an expression of personification, too: "When fear crept into my mind". In the line, the structure of 'fear crept' is linguistically a clause; and, it figuratively exemplifies another expression of personification. The fear, which is a feeling, is attributed with the ability to crawl, and the attribution makes the fear seem alive as well.

The irony is realized through dissimilarity between what is expected to happen and what actually happens. The following line contains the words of irony: "It turns out freedom ain't nothing but missing you". In the line an irony of situation befalls on Swift: she thought that by leaving him and living her life by herself, she would experience what freedom would be like. Yet, what she did only gave her the experience of missing him. Thus, it is ironic how the lyricist wanted the breakup but then she regrets it.

3. The relation between the two

The linguistic description designates the first, second, and third conditional

expressions to convey Swift's regret. Furthermore, the literary interpretation designates the imagery, symbol, personification, and irony to convey the regret. Thus, in this study the linguistic description supplements the literary interpretation in order to describe the regret. In other words, the relation between the two is supplementary to each other.

### Conclusion

Swift's regret in *Back to December* is rhetorically expressed. The rhetoric has been specifically overlooked; however, this study figures out that her regret is expressed with the first, second, and third conditional expressions as well as with the imagery, symbol, personification, and irony. The textual analysis of the lyric in stylistics denotes that the linguistic description is mutually related to the literary interpretation. The relation, in all, indicates that the lyric is not only musical, but it is also poetic.

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### Appendix

Back To December

Taylor Swift

1 [Verse]

I'm so glad you made time to see me

How's life, tell me how's your family

I haven't seen them in a while  
 You've been good, busier than ever

Small talk, work and the weather  
 Your guard is up and I know why  
 Because the last time you saw me  
 Is still burning in the back of your mind

You gave me roses and I left them there to die

2 [Chorus]

So this is me swallowing my pride

Standing in front of you saying  
 I'm sorry for that night

And I go back to December all the time.

It turns out freedom ain't nothing but missing you

Wishing I'd realized what I had when you were mine

I go back to December turn around and make it all right

I go back to December all the time.

3 [Verse]

These days I haven't been sleeping

Staying up late playing back

myself leaving  
When your birthday passed and I  
didn't call  
Then I think about summer  
All the beautiful times  
I watched you laughing from the  
passenger side  
And realized I loved you in the  
fall  
And then the cold came and the  
dark days  
When fear crept into my mind  
You gave me all your love  
And all I gave you was goodbye

4 [Chorus]  
So this is me swallowing my  
pride  
Standing in front of you saying  
I'm sorry for that night  
And I go back to December all  
the time.  
It turns out freedom ain't nothing  
but missing you  
Wishing I realized what I had  
when you were mine  
I go back to December turn  
around and change my own mind  
I go back to December all the  
time.

5 [Interlude]  
I miss your tan skin, your sweet  
smile.  
So good to me, so right  
And how you held me in your  
arms that September night  
The first time you ever saw me  
cry  
Maybe this is wishful thinking  
Probably mindless dreaming  
If we loved again I swear I'd love  
you right  
I'd go back in time and change it  
but I can't  
So if the chain is in your door I  
understand

6 [Chorus]

But this is me swallowing my  
pride  
Standing in front of you saying  
I'm sorry for that night  
And I go back to December  
It turns out freedom ain't nothing  
but missing you  
Wishing I'd realized what I had  
when you were mine  
I'd go back to December turn  
around and make it all right  
I'd go back to December turn  
around and change my own mind  
I go back to December all the  
time  
All the time

Adapted from

<http://www.directlyrics.com/taylor-swift-back-to-december-lyrics.html>