That’s Why I’m Here: James Taylor’s Lyrical Innovations

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Abstract

This paper and creative project serve to study the songwriting of James Taylor in an academic light. Two lyrical innovations employed by Taylor are studied over the course of the paper; these are character displacement and division by three. To provide context for the musical climate surrounding Taylor, works from his predecessors and contemporaries are studied as well as two songs written after Taylor's rise to fame in the 1970s. To round off the project, I have written and recorded three songs of my own employing the same strategies and innovations that Taylor has used in his songs over the years, adhering to the models discovered in my research as best I can. Over the course of my time working on this paper and the three songs, I have found that Taylor's strategies have done a world of good for autobiographical songwriting and should remain relevant when writing songs.

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Introduction

James Taylor's music has been a source of catharsis and creative inspiration in my journey both as a person and as a songwriter. One of the very first songs I learned as a musician was his 1970 hit "Fire and Rain," despite being too young to understand the lyrics. As I grew older, I developed a deeper understanding of both his songs and songwriting in general. I now take much inspiration from James Taylor, both musically and lyrically, describing his writing to friends as "heart-on-his-sleeve" and something to which I aspire.

Taylor's uniqueness as a singer-songwriter shines through in many areas. A strange combination of depression and wisdom permeates his lyrics, and his composition style adds slight twists to the conventional chord changes of popular music. His writing covers limited ground; in an interview with *American Songwriter*, he claims to have "written the same 25 songs ten times" (Zollo, 2020). However, each new variation of the same theme is presented with fresh, new perspectives.

For this specific project, however, I am focusing on two innovative songwriting strategies that permeate Taylor's work. The first is character displacement, in which Taylor writes his own real-life experiences in the perspective of third-person fictional characters to distract from the autobiographical nature of his storytelling, only to include a section that references himself in the first person. The second is division by three, in which Taylor splits the verses of his songs into three distinct stories that occur simultaneously and ties them all together with a simple chorus. The verses can differ either in terms of events or addressees. While neither of these strategies is ubiquitous or unique to Taylor's work, each appears multiple times within his entire catalogue and matures over time.

The song "Her Town Too," found on Taylor's 1981 album *Dad Loves His Work*, is an example for both character displacement and division by three. Taylor wrote the song with J. D. Souther about the divorce of someone whom they both knew.[1] Character displacement, though vague in this song, takes place through the use of "she" and "he" characters, vague figments of people that serve to drive the story forward. The story is set around "she" and the circumstances that surround her divorce. Paranoia, gossip, and the split of assets run through the song's story, and the perspective of the main character is written so sympathetically that one could almost make a claim that it was about Taylor's own divorce from then-wife Carly Simon. The element that ties Taylor into the song is found at the end of the third verse, in which he starts using first-person pronouns to address the main character. Although he simply states that he wants to call her, it is still the littlest self-insertion into a story that concerns this vague, fictional character.

In addition, division by three is present in this song, as the verses are split into three separate stories that occur simultaneously. The first verse concerns the main character's fear of answering anyone who calls her; the second verse concerns the rumors that spread about her divorce; and the third verse concerns the actual split of material goods with which the main character and her ex-husband part ways and the finality of the divorce itself. All three verses are tied together with a simple chorus, most of which consists of the line, "It used to be her town, too."

It would be an overstatement to say that these innovations are Taylor's alone. After all, every artist has a distinct and unique voice. However, these are strategies that Taylor

[1] As quoted in White (2002, pp. 276-277): "J. D. Souther and I wrote and sang that song about a couple who were long-term friends and had an acrimonious break-up….For some reason people thought that 'Her Town Too' had something to do with Carly and me but in fact it was entirely about the ex-wife of a mutual friend."

has incorporated into his own distinct and unique voice, developing them to serve his songs well. With this in mind, I am also analyzing a handful of songs that were written, recorded, and released before Taylor started making records. Two examples, one from Bob Dylan and another from Paul Simon, evoke character displacement but fall slightly short. An additional two examples, one from Stephen Stills and another from Joni Mitchell, are split into three distinct parts but do not follow "division by three" in terms of occurring simultaneously or being tied together by a common refrain. The discussion of these precursors is presented below prior to the discussion of Taylor's own writing, so as to maintain a sense of chronological order.

Before any of these songs are studied, however, some common songwriting techniques—in particular, the use of personal pronouns in songwriting and the time-shift paradigm in country music—are briefly observed and noted as common conventions for songwriting, allowing Taylor's innovations to shine through in the context of already-established studies. They are also studied in the *context* of Taylor's songs, and I will be pointing out how they are similar and how they differ.

After studying Taylor's works as well as his predecessors', I will analyze two songs from other artists who utilize Taylor's songwriting strategies. While they do not follow Taylor's strategies to the letter, this is to be expected, since each songwriter and artist has their own unique voice. However, in the context of this project, I am analyzing Billy Joel's song "Laura" in terms of character displacement and Taylor Swift's "Fifteen" in terms of division by three.

At the end of this paper, I discuss my own works that I have written according to Taylor's songwriting models. One song implements character displacement; one

implements division of three through different stories; and one implements division of three through different addressees. Thus, my written songs (and their respective recordings) will show that Taylor's innovations have stood the test of time—not only through his own work, but through the work of more current artists.

Chapter 1: Conventional Songwriting Styles

Although little has been written about James Taylor's songwriting specifically, many scholarly articles have been written about elements of the conversational songwriting he so often employs. Conversational and even confessional songwriting are not unique to Taylor's songwriting style, as predecessors-cum-contemporaries Joni Mitchell and Stephen Stills explored their personal voices through song. Taylor simply uses the form of confessional songwriting in unique manners to convey his messages. To understand a little more about Taylor's songwriting strategies in the context of already-established songwriting strategies, shifts in personal pronouns as well as different manners in which a song can be split are explored below.

First, an article by Matthew L. BaileyShea (2014) provides more insight into the shift in personal pronouns that permeates Taylor's lyrics, largely through his use of character displacement. BaileyShea (2014, p. 7) notes throughout his article that personal pronouns can shift at any given point in a song. Within these shifts, he observes a move from impersonal to personal discourse. One interesting example he uses is John Denver's "Back Home Again," and his explanation seems to be almost on par with the how I define character displacement in James Taylor's writing. The song concerns a trucker on his way back home who is introduced with second-person storytelling. Over the course of the song, the storytelling slowly shifts to first-person, with the narrative entirely in the trucker's persepective by the third verse. Other songs, both simpler and more complicated in their shifts, are discussed by BaileyShea, from Prince's "Sign o' the Times" to Led Zeppelin's "Stairway to Heaven," and they all follow a progression from impersonal to personal discourse.

The difference in this shift from impersonal to personal is evident in Taylor's songs—the impersonal is observed through character displacement, while Taylor's experiences bring in the personal flair. However, the difference between BaileyShea's examples and Taylor's music is that the subject material is often more universal or artistic in BaileyShea's examples, whereas Taylor's songs explore autobiographical material, giving them a sincerity that rings more clearly. The return to home explored in "Back Home Again," the plethora of tragedies uncovered in "Sign o' the Times," and the psychedelic sheen of "Stairway to Heaven" may all have autobiographical tinges, but Taylor intensifies this method of writing, which will be seen through his use of character displacement.

In addition, a common practice in country music must also be noted. The Time-Shift narrative paradigm is studied heavily by Jocelyn R. Neal in an article for *Music Theory Spectrum*. Neal (2007, p. 46) notes that the requirements for Time-Shift narrative paradigm include the presence of verses that are arranged in chronological order as well as a chorus that can be interpreted in different manners for different verses. Her initial example is "The Walk," a song recorded by Sawyer Brown in 1991. While the verses are tied together with the same chorus, each verse focuses on a different generation of the same family, and the characters age over the course of the song (Neal, 2007, pp. 46-47). The idea of a chorus that shifts meanings is further explored using Tim McGraw's "Don't Take the Girl," in which each chorus has different lyrics but the same hook (2007, p. 49).

Taylor's division by three is similar to the Time-Shift narrative paradigm in that the choruses are all the same and can be interpreted differently in the context of each verse. For example, the chorus of "Fire and Rain" is a blanket statement for loss, but what the loss concerns—his friend, his health, or his youth—is dependent on the verse that comes

before it. However, division by three differs from the Time-Shift narrative paradigm in that all of the verses in Taylor's songs do not occur over a given period of time, seemingly happening simultaneously. "B.S.U.R." is a fantastic example of this, as it conveys three different perspectives of Taylor's failing relationship that occur at the same time. The chorus is still the same for each verse; however, there is no time shift—or rather, time is not marked *clearly*, letting division by three stand separately from the Time-Shift narrative paradigm. This will be explored more fullywhen examining Taylor's songs.

Chapter 2: Before James Taylor: 1960s Songs Explored

Before Taylor came to prominence with his innovations, several songwriters rose to fame through the mid- and late 1960s with folk rock. The lyrics of many songs from this time period, especially the ones studied in this section, blend traditional folk music with real-life experiences from the writers themselves. The writers of folk rock combined vague language with a confessional style of songwriting that left the messages they conveyed somewhat abstract yet overall understandable on a surface level. Their songs employ imagery, alliteration, and vague addressees to create works of art that stand on their own but still jave room to grow from the listener's experience. In addition, they provide a foundation for what may or may not constitute "character displacement" and "division by three" as defined in the introduction.

Bob Dylan: "Mr. Tambourine Man"

Bob Dylan is widely recognized as one of the most influential songwriters of the twentieth century. He set the standard for songwriters in the 1960s, inspiring many writers after him, including Paul Simon, who will be discussed later in this paper. In an interview with biographer Robert Hilburn, Paul Simon succinctly sums up Dylan's importance in songwriting: he was writing music that drew from his own experiences, with songs that felt neither juvenile nor traditional.[2] According to Donald Brown's (2014, pp. 35, 36) biography of Bob Dylan, "Mr. Tambourine Man," written in 1965, is the song that marks Dylan's transition from "wry commentator ... to the bard of youth culture." Dylan was

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[2] As quoted in Hilburn (2018, p. 45): "Here's Dylan writing about subject matter that is neither teenage nor traditional folk. It wasn't just the thing you heard in so many old folk tunes…He was traveling on his own and writing about what he saw."

already an established performer in the folk scene by the time he wrote this song, and a re-recording by the Byrds hit the top of the charts in multiple countries in 1965 (Brown, 2014, p. 32). Both of these factors have contributed to the song's permanence in folk rock and rock-n-roll history.

Dylan begins the song with a chorus that calls out to the titular tambourine man, asking him to play a song while he is still awake and claiming that "there is no place [he is] going to." The verses find Dylan trying to sleep but realizing that he cannot sleep; instead, "evenin's empire has ... [l]eft me blindly here to stand." This could insinuate that Dylan is battling insomnia, and although he is alone and tired, needs the tambourine man's song to help him sleep. Dylan further claims that his "senses have been stripped" and that he is "ready for to fade." He commands the tambourine man: "Cast your dancing spell my way," ready for hypnotism to carry him anywhere but where he is. In the last half of the song, his language becomes more abstract, uttering "skippin' reels of rhyme" as though in a dream. He tells the tambourine man that if the latter saw these signs of insanity, he should not pay attention to them, for they are elements of "a ragged clown behind," leaving the preposition hanging to create befuddling ambiguity. The final verse shows Dylan's skill with imagery, as he asks the tambourine man to take him many places—"the smoke rings of my mind ... [t]he haunted, frightened trees ... beneath the diamond sky." His final plea to the tambourine man is to let him "forget about today until tomorrow," indicating an inclination to think about the past.

Through all four of the verses in "Mr. Tambourine Man," Dylan leans toward vaguer and slightly poetic language, giving his messages an element of abstraction through traces of imagery, metaphor, and redundancy to fit his verses' uniform meter and leaving

questions for the listener. Is Dylan battling insomnia, or does he want to vacate the real world and explore a hallucinogenic trip? In addition, the tambourine man is an abstract character with no concrete meaning—he is a displaced character, but *how* is he tied to Dylan? Is he a drug dealer or the Sandman? Whatever Dylan's motives and whoever the tambourine man is, he will follow the strange character "in the jingle-jangle morning."

Paul Simon: "The Sound of Silence"

"The Sound of Silence" is a song that is known by multiple generations—either in its entirety, for its cultural significance, or (in the case of younger generations) as a meme conveying depression. The subject matter is unclear, although it seems to have been adopted by Paul Simon's generation as an anthem of "alienation in America" (Hilburn, 2018, p. 58). However, in an interview conducted by biographer Robert Hilburn, Simon claims that he never intends to write about a particular subject matter but that it becomes about something while being written instead.[3] "The Sound of Silence" was originally included on Simon and Garfunkel's first album, *Wednesday Morning, 3 A.M.*, but a more widely-recognized version from their 1965 sophomore album, *The Sounds of Silence*, gave the song its prestige and timelessness and invited Simon and Garfunkel into mainstream success (Hilburn, 2018, p. 91).

Simon begins the song, much like Dylan, by addressing an abstract character; however, this time, it is more identifiable. He calls out to darkness, calling it his "old friend," and suggesting he has talked to it repeatedly with the use of the word "again."

[3] As quoted in Hilburn (2018, pp. 58-59): "Whatever came out, I didn't sit down to write about alienation in America. I'm not saying the song isn't about that, but it wasn't my intention, and that's still true of my writing today. I don't ever set out to write a song about something, though after a while it becomes apparent in the construction of a song that I'm writing about something."

However, he does not talk to darkness for a therapy session, as one might assume; instead, he conveys a "vision" that seems to be the subject of the remainder of the song. Simon casts imagery throughout the song, "narrow streets of cobblestone" opening to a neon light that becomes the focus of the song. The source of the neon light is unclear at first, but Simon reveals it in the final verse of the song: the "neon god" is man-made, a sign that reveals a cryptic message, which people can only see at its most skin-deep. Simon believes the crowd gathered in front of the neon is vapid, addressing them as "fools" and pleading them to listen to him so that he can "teach" them. However, the message falls on deaf ears like "silent raindrops," lost in the "wells of silence" that encompass the song entirely. Finally, in the final verse, Simon reveals the neon sign's message: "'The words of the prophets / Are written on the subway walls'" and located where people cannot hear them: in the titular sound of silence.

Simon acts as narrator, prophet, and sage in the song, trying to dissuade a myriad of people from following silence and take his wisdom. However, he veils his communication through dreams and heavy language that distorts the meaning of the song to someone who does not know him well, rendering this hit a slightly academic rock 'n' roll icon. In addition, Simon works with abstract characters throughout the entire song that could *maybe* be displaced characters but fall short of the term; darkness is his friend, but in what regard is it bound to him? In addition, the neon light—the focus of the song and the seeming antagonist to Simon's sage advice—represents what? How is the neon tied to Simon, and how is it disturbing his thoughts or the people around him? These questions are left unanswered in the sea of oxymorons that Simon utilizes.

Stephen Stills: “Suite: Judy Blue Eyes”

Only a few years after Dylan’s and Simon’s folk-rock revolutions, a new folk-rock supergroup continued the lyrical traditions established at the beginning of the decade. Crosby, Stills, and Nash’s 1969 eponymous record contained songs that expounded upon the poetic strategies of Dylan and Simon, and these strategies worked largely in their favor. According to journalist and music critic David Browne (2019, p. 52), *Crosby, Stills, and Nash* was received incredibly positively by critics and sold over 500,000 copies. The opening track of this acclaimed record is “Suite: Judy Blue Eyes,” which was written by Stephen Stills. Strung together from three separate songs, the suite is Stills’ expression of dedication and proposal of reconciliation to his former partner, Judy Collins, with whom he had a fragile relationship that was threatened by her therapy sessions and her move from California to New York (Browne, 2019, p. 46).

The first of the three sections in this mammoth composition consists of four verses, each ending with a simple refrain. It is the simplest and most confessional of the sections, focusing on Stills’s loneliness after Collins’s departure from him and reveals a deep-seated attachment he has to her. Within the verses, Stills combines lines like, “It’s getting to the point where I’m no fun anymore,” and “Don’t let the past remind us of what we are not now,” toeing the line between the vaguely poetic and confessional and sometimes extending his lyrical phrases to complicate matters. The refrain of the first section addresses Stills’s belief that he and Collins are meant to be together, claiming that she “make[s] it hard.” However, the pronoun “it” is never given an antecedent, leaving the meaning of this last line up to the listener’s interpretation. In the final verse of this section, Stills makes one final clear attempt to win Collins back: he claims that he knows a secret

of hers. This secret simply boils down to charm: "fear is the lock ... to [her] heart," and Stills knows how to unlock it with laughter.

The second section of the suite is comprised of mostly four- or five-syllable phrases. The four verses and a bridge detail Stills's fragmented musings on Collins's therapy sessions, which are noted in the several days of the week listed throughout this section (Browne, 2019, p. 47). In what is possibly the most abstract of the three parts of the suite, Stills writes the refrain, "What have you got to lose?" However, the listener would be lost without the added context mentioned above, wondering what exactly Collins would have to lose given Friday evenings and Tuesday mornings. A short bridge after the second verse returns to confessional songwriting; Stills "tell[s] it like it is," claiming that his heart is the thing that *he* has to lose.

The third section of the suite contains three short stanzas. The first half of each stanza uses abstract imagery to describe Collins and the couple's imminent breakup. Stills calls upon canaries and sparrows to "thrill [him] to the marrow," possibly referring to Collins's voice. The sparrow returns in the second stanza, this time in a question posed by an unnamed "she" (presumably Collins) asking how Stills can catch the bird. The third stanza relies heavily on alliteration, a tool that helps the lines flow as Stills laments "losing love." One last plea for Collins to "change [his] life" and "be [his] lady" gives way to coda that is written entirely in Spanish. While this is a surprising move, it is intentional; Stills wrote the coda in the foreign language to make it more complicated and harder to understand (Cavallo, 1999, p. 172).

"Suite: Judy Blue Eyes" is split into three distinct parts that share a common theme, and the events of each section all seem to happen simultaneously. However, the parts are

only tied together by way of musical interludes. No lyrical or melodic information is shared in between each part; they can stand as their own songs without complications or confusion. The structure of the song is more complicated than verses and choruses, much in keeping with the sometimes-obscure and abstract language of the song. Thus, while "Suite: Judy Blue Eyes" approaches the realm of division by three, it falls short by way of its structure and manner of storytelling.

Joni Mitchell: "Both Sides, Now"

Out of the four songs discussed in this section, "Both Sides, Now" marks the closest resemblance to any of Taylor's writing. Written by Joni Mitchell in the late 1960s, the song contains the hallmarks of confessional songwriting that also bare themselves in Taylor's works, including personal experiences and first-person storytelling (Bentley, 2016, p. 62). In addition, it is the closest example of division by three as defined in the scope of Taylor's songs; however, despite its closeness, it differs drastically by how the verses are framed and organized. The song proved to be a hit for both Judy Collins, who won a Grammy for Best Folk Performance in 1968 with the song, and Mitchell herself, who received positive reviews for the recording and the album on which it appeared, *Clouds* (Bentley, 2016, pp. 66, 73).

The verses of "Both Sides, Now" concentrate on elements of life that Mitchell has observed over the course of her life. The first verse concerns her ruminations on clouds, the second verse is about her thoughts on love, and the third verse tackles her observations on life. In addition, each verse is split into two distinct sections. The first four lines of each verse focus on the positive aspects of each element; clouds are "ice cream castles," love is

compared to fairy tales coming true, and life leaves the narrator "feeling proud." The last four lines of each verse juxtapose the positive aspects with negative aspects; clouds now bring rain and snow, love is "just another show," and the changes in the narrator's life draw disapproval from her friends. Each element takes its place in its respective chorus, in which Mitchell concludes that she "really [doesn't] know clouds/love/life at all."

While each verse has its own distinct element, much like a distinct story in a James Taylor song, the similarity stops there. The way Mitchell frames each element of life stays the same through each verse; she is observing in every single verse. This, compared to Taylor's manner of letting stories stand by themselves until the chorus arrives, falls only slightly short of division by three.

Chapter 3: James Taylor's Lyrical Innovations

At the end of the 1960s, James Taylor began recording and releasing music of his own. His works were tinged by the folk rock explored in the previous section, but they possessed their own qualities that made them different from earlier recordings. The poetic elements were stripped back, letting the stories themselves shine through, and Taylor's lyrical innovations began to arise. Character displacement and division by three were strategies used in hits from *Sweet Baby James* onward, and Taylor started to stand out among his peers because of these innovations. These strategies were first heard in the 1970s, but they continue through Taylor's entire body of work, as seen through the examples below.

Character Displacement

One innovative strategy that Taylor employs in his songwriting is character displacement, in which he plants his own real-life experiences into fictional characters—which either reflect himself or someone close to him—to distract from the autobiographical nature of his storytelling. Taylor has written a handful of songs with this strategy, starting in 1970 with "Sunny Skies" and evolving from there. Most of the songs that use character displacement deal with more grueling aspects of life—depression, addiction, and loss. However, in each of these songs, he includes a section that ties himself (in the first person) to the fictional character he has been discussing, providing an easy link for the listener to find. As mentioned before, this is akin to the shift from impersonal to personal discourse observed by Matthew BaileyShea (2014); however, Taylor's unique twist on this already-

established strategy comes from the personal subject material and sometimes even intimate details that are shared throughout his songs.

"Sunny Skies"

A simple example of Taylor's tendency to replace himself with fictional characters can be found in "Sunny Skies," the third track from his critically acclaimed and commercially successful album *Sweet Baby James*, released in 1970. Taylor wrote the song while receiving psychiatric treatment at Austen Riggs, a clinic in Stockbridge, MA (White, 2002, p. 143). In his authorized biography of Taylor, Timothy White (2002, p. 143) calls the tune "deceptively upbeat" and notes that the lyrics reflect Taylor's situation at the time of writing.

The majority of "Sunny Skies" focuses on the titular character; indeed, Taylor writes two verses and a chorus about Sunny Skies. In the first verse, he chronicles Sunny's morning habits: he has a bad case of sleeping in that leads him to "[throw] his morning hours away." Taylor invites the audience to view Sunny yawning and claims that while he may not know when to wake up, he simply "closes his weary eyes upon the day." This denotes a character who is too psychologically troubled to have a normal circadian rhythm.

This pattern of psychological abnormality is continued in the second verse. Taylor reveals that Sunny spends his evenings crying, quickly dismissing the listener's obvious curiosity in the next line by claiming that "[i]t doesn't much matter why." However, the reason becomes clear at the end of the verse: everyone close to Sunny is leaving him behind. He simply has no one close to him, which drives him to cry during the night and sleep during the day.

Both verses are tied together with the same simple chorus, in which Taylor claims that "everything is fine," almost as if he knows Sunny's plight and can dismiss it with a wave of his hand. He claims that the audience will be "pleased to know" that Sunny is friendless, invoking a sense of *schadenfreude* that he almost anticipates his listeners will feel towards the piteous character. However, the real indicator that Sunny Skies is an autobiographical portrayal of Taylor himself is in the outro, in which Taylor switches to narrating the story through his own eyes. He establishes the landscape that he can view outside his own window, indicating that he is viewing the world through his bed like Sunny is. Timothy White (2002, p. 143) also uses the lyrics from the outro to draw parallels to Taylor's situations; coming off the heels of recording his first album with the Beatles in London, Taylor did not understand the importance of his accomplishments. The question that Taylor poses at the end of the song is one that relates to both his and Sunny's lives: he wonders if the places where he has gone are worth "the things [he has] been through," leaving himself, the fictional character, and the listener with uncertainty about the entire situation.

In this case, Taylor leaves his autobiographical touch out of the song almost entirely until the final four lines. He lets Sunny Skies stand isolated for most of the song, inserting himself only to relate to the forlorn character. However, as he grew older and wrote more songs, Taylor combined himself more thoroughly with the fictional characters that he developed to deal with his issues.

"A Junkie's Lament"

Taylor's 1976 album *In The Pocket* opens with the friendly and light hit "Shower the People," but once the breeziness fades out, the second example of Taylor's character displacement, "A Junkie's Lament," switches the mood to a sense of melancholy. White (2002, p. 238) notes that this song discusses how methadone can cause damage to a person; however, Taylor himself has claimed otherwise. In an interview with *Rolling Stone*, Taylor states that "A Junkie's Lament" is about the damage relationships can suffer because of an addiction and a reminder to the listener that addicts are not "complete functioning human being[s]" (Greene, 2015). In the album's initial review from *Rolling Stone*, Kit Rachlis (1976) does not look kindly upon this song, calling it "the album's principal failure" and claiming that the description of addiction contained within is "rife with platitudes." However, looking past the presumed platitudes and slick mid-seventies production, the stark story and character displacement remain.

Taylor splits "A Junkie's Lament" into four verse and two bridges. The verses chronicle the troubled habits of an addict named Ricky, whom Taylor observes "kicking the gong," which is archaic slang for taking drugs. Over the course of the four verses, Taylor plays the role of sympathetic narrator: after introducing Ricky and his habit, Taylor claims that it is sad to witness Ricky succumbing to his addiction in private and in pain. In the third and fourth verses, Taylor stresses that the monkey on Ricky's back will "[s]end him to hell and home again" with nothing to show for his torturous trip. Even if people give Ricky the drugs that he craves, he will ultimately be "all on his own" to deal with his demons. In the overall context of the song, Ricky's story is thinly-written and contains the platitudes about which Rachlis wrote. However, this could possibly be understood as

Taylor trying to avoid just how much he knows about his situation. Still in the throes of addiction in the middle of the 1970s—something that would plague him until the mid-1980s—Taylor might possibly have been embarrassed to share his own experiences.

In the bridge sections, Taylor ties his own experiences to Ricky's plight, combining the two to create a warning to his loved ones not to trust an addict fully. In the first bridge, he warns his mother not to call Ricky by Taylor's own name, claiming that the former would not be able to hear her. He claims that Ricky is a stranger, only motivated to visit his mother for the drugs that feed his addiction—"[a]sk him what's he come here for," he urges, a desperate warning not to give in to the mangled junkie's requests. In the second bridge (which includes the final lyrics in the song), Taylor now pleads with his partner, asking her not to "throw [her] love away" on Ricky. Because this may come across as unkind, Taylor quickly backtracks and clarifies: he knows Ricky's situation well enough to make a calculated assumption that it will devastate his partner and any relationships that he tries to manage. "[T]he man / That the monkey can leave behind" is nothing more than a shell of himself, which is something that Taylor has stated publicly—as seen in the aforementioned *Rolling Stone* interview.

The final line of the song muddies the waters somewhat, as Taylor claims that he "used to think he was a friend of mine." "He" could be Ricky, or it could be the monkey that Taylor has tried to kick so many times. Either way, Taylor ties his own experiences in again, lending what at least could be construed as a sympathetic perspective toward Ricky's plight while shifting the focus of the song away from him completely. This avoidant nature that first reared its head with "Sunny Skies" and depression would naturally find its way into the darker depths of addiction, a difficult subject to address.

“Enough to Be on Your Way”

Grief inspired the third example of Taylor’s character displacement technique, “Enough to Be on Your Way,” the second track from his 1997 album, *Hourglass*. In the 1990s, Taylor lost both his father, Ike, and his brother, Alex. The latter died on Taylor’s birthday—March 12, 1993—of acute alcohol intoxication that resulted in a heart attack. In his interview with White, Taylor claims that a large part of the song was inspired by Alex’s death and that it centers around someone who is unable to find their home and is stuck travelling through the latter years of their life.[4]

“Enough to Be on Your Way” opens on an evening funeral. Following the path of the sun, Taylor notes that it shines on funerals and births alike, but this time, it “[s]pends the day’s last rays upon this fucked-up family.” Taylor’s use of the determiner “this” to point to *both* the opening funeral and the family in the penultimate line of the introduction could point to Alex’s funeral, and a promotional music video depicts Taylor and actors portraying his family attending this ceremony. The final line of the introduction—“So long, old pal”—points even more to this assumption. However, Taylor stated to White that the family is “the family of mankind, … searching for home” (White, 2002, p. 308).

After the introduction, which could be seen as a framing device for the overarching story, Taylor focuses on the fictional character “Alice”—a name which sounds similar to Alex but is obviously female, steering any focus away from the real Alex Taylor and the circumstances surrounding his death. Taylor claims that when he saw Alice last, she had left Santa Fe with Buddhists, who abandoned her in Texas—one of the driest and most desolate states in which to be abandoned. This narrative strays from the location of the real

[4] As quoted in White (2002, p. 308): “The idea of ‘Enough to Be’ is of somebody who can’t get home, who can’t find home, and it’s *late* for them to find home, late in their lives.”

Alex—Sanford, Florida—further separating the geographical locations of Alex and Alice from each other (White, 2002, p. 306). At the end of this initial part of the story, however, Taylor claims that Alice is "on the edge of the unknown"—travelling into the spiritual realm, wondering what comes after mortal life, just like Alex. This is followed by a chorus that reassures the listener—and maybe Taylor himself—that it is "enough to be moving on," to keep traveling, and to carry one's home "in [their] heart."

By Taylor's own admission, the third verse summarizes Alex's real-life cremation.[5] Taylor acknowledges that Alex died on his [James's] birthday by noting that the fictional Alice brought back home on the "same day [he] was born." The remainder of the verse is a personal touch from Alex's own cremation—Taylor has stated that when Alex was cremated, his ashes went up a smokestack and gave the illusion of turning into a giant storm that followed the Taylor family home from Florida to Massachusetts (White, 2002, p. 308). In the song, however, Alice's ashes *return* into inclement weather, the threat of which Taylor claims is "what she knew the best." Alice's ashes travel through the storm over the San Juan Mountains of New Mexico—her final journey through the world before she "spent herself at last." As the images of ashes flying through a raging storm permeate the listener's mind, the chorus plays again, reinforcing the idea that home is a construct that can be carried within themselves, "[s]afe among [their] own" spirits.

The final verse focuses on Taylor himself; after the grief of losing a loved one has washed over him, after the storm has passed, he finally finds the strength to write about these events, and he dedicates an entire verse to finding the song in the mesas of New

[5] As quoted in White (2002, p. 308): "[T]he mention in the lyric of smoke and a storm refers to an actual event after his cremation, when the ashes that went up a smokestack in Florida seemed to turn into an amazing storm that followed us home from that ceremony, tearing up the East Coast from Carolina to Massachusetts."

Mexico. Here, without Alice, Taylor removes himself from his usual location of Massachusetts to garner distance from the looming specter of grief that haunts him. He claims that the song "woke [him] up … An hour before the sun." As the inspiration seeps in, he dresses himself—a familiar routine—as he observes Highway 591's pre-dawn traffic, then finally steps outside, "stumbl[ing] on this song" somewhere in the middle of nowhere. His own spiritual journey complete, he finally chronicles his own grief, masking his brother's demise through the character of Alice, turning Florida and Massachusetts into New Mexico and Texas, but leaving personal clues along the way that point to his own life and experience. A final valedictory of "So long, old gal" bookends the song, bidding farewell to Alice and her tragic travels, thereby closing the book on Alex's passing, as well.

Division by Three

Another unique technique that Taylor employs in his writing is that of dividing the main sections of songs into three distinct parts. While the division of a song into three distinct sections or verses is not unique to Taylor alone, the uniqueness instead comes from how he arranges each verse. While many songs will arrange sections or verses chronologically, Taylor instead uses each section or verse of the main body of a song to express a different perspective of the main theme of the song, and these perspectives often occur simultaneously within the time frame of the song. He conveys the main point of each song in the chorus, which can sometimes change in meaning over the duration of the song but will never change in sentiment.

"Fire and Rain"

The most obvious and recognizable example of this division by three is "Fire and Rain," which is the song that launched Taylor's rise to both commercial success and fame. The seventh track from *Sweet Baby James*, "Fire and Rain" rose to number 3 in the *Billboard* Hot 100 in October 1970. The verses of the song focus on three separate events with which Taylor struggled around the same time: the loss of his friend, his addiction to heroin, and the psychological struggles of his teenage years.

Taylor started writing "Fire and Rain" after hearing about the suicide of his friend, Suzanne Schnerr. His friends only notified him about this loss six months after she passed (White, 2002, p. 141). In stark, short phrases, he wrote the first verse about hearing about and dealing with this loss. Addressing Schnerr directly, Taylor claims that "the plans they made put an end to [her]." In another interview conducted by Timothy White, Taylor claimed that "they" simply meant the Fates—meaning that it was Schnerr's fate to die.[6] Dedicating the song to Schnerr, Taylor says that he wrote the song but could not "remember who to send it to," maybe indicating that since Schnerr is gone, he has no one to whom to send the song—or that since it took so long for him to find out, he has forgotten her spirit. The chorus is simple, listing a number of both positive and negative elements and moods that Taylor has seen and experienced in his life. It ends with the line, "But I always thought I'd see you again," Taylor's repeated acknowledgement of loss.

The second verse veers away from the grim specter of suicide to deal with an entirely different demon. While writing "Fire and Rain," Taylor was desperately trying to give up heroin, so he devoted the second verse to his addiction (White, 2002, p. 142).

[6] As quoted in White (2002, p. 142): "And I always felt rather bad about the line, 'The plans they made put an end to you,' because 'they' only meant 'ye gods,' or basically 'the Fates'."

Maybe realizing that humans cannot help him, he cries out to Jesus to "help me make a stand" and "see me through another day." He goes on to claim that his "time is at hand," afraid that he will die from the deadly drug. He has no other options at this point, his missive to Jesus becoming his last attempt to come clean from his habit, which he would reference later in many songs. Another chorus after this verse could point the focus of the song this time *at* Jesus, adding him to a roster of figures Taylor has lost in his life and compounding his initial grief with physical illness.

The third and final verse finds Taylor telling yet another story, this time attempting to relive his past with his "back turned towards the sun." White notes that this verse was written during Taylor's stay at Austen Riggs—the same clinic where he wrote "Sunny Skies"—and claims that this verse "summon[s] up demons ... from his days before and after [his treatment at] McLean [Hospital]" (2002, p. 142). In the third verse, Taylor discusses how he spends "hours of time on the telephone line" talking about his future, but in the very next line, his dreams are "in pieces on the ground," lying next to "flying machines." The reference to "flying machines" is one of Taylor's most obscure references, one pointed toward the Flying Machine, the band that failed in Taylor's teenage years due to the members' separate addictions tarnishing their reputation (Ribowsky, 2016, pp. 66-67). Here, Taylor's final chorus can be interpreted as a farewell to the band he used to front, one last nostalgic look.

"That's Why I'm Here"

In a similar vein, Taylor's 1985 song "That's Why I'm Here," from the album of the same name, provides his audience with three main stories and another simple chorus.

The song was after he performed a transformative series of concerts at Rock in Rio that year that returned his creative spark after an extended dry spell (Ribowsky, 2016, p. 266). Taylor himself has said that "That's Why I'm Here" has three main objectives, three reasons why he is here.[7] The divisions for this song again happen simultaneously: reconnecting with an old friend, reacting to the death of Taylor's friend John Belushi, and balancing fame with his private life.

Taylor's reconnection with an old friend with whom he had a falling out starts the song casually. The first half of this verse finds him establishing the context, imploring either the listener or the old friend to "listen to reason" as he reconnects. The second half of the verse digs in depth to what Taylor hears from his friend—a casual sob story about how the old friend has lost his love and had bad luck in the time they spent apart. As someone who is down on their luck, the friend cannot even find the money to leave his current situation, so he asks Taylor if he can "borrow [his] truck," his objective for reconnecting made clear by the favor that he asks. Almost as if shrugging off the favor, Taylor replies with the chorus of the song: a friendly "that's why I'm here," claiming that he has "no better reason" to be there than to lend his old friend his truck.

The second verse takes a much darker route, tackling the death of Taylor's friend, John Belushi (White, 2002, p. 286). Belushi's death from a speedball injection at the age of 33 seemed to devastate Taylor, who was ten months older than Belushi and sang at his memorial ceremony. Taylor described it as a "wake-up call" for him to recover from his

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[7] As quote in White (2002, p. 286): "The basis of the 'That's Why I'm Here' song, for which I named the album, was threefold….The first verse was about hooking back up with an old musician friend of mine who I had fallen out with. The second verse was about John Belushi's death….The last verse was about career pressures and personal responsibilities and putting both in balance."

own addictions, which took him ten months to do.[8] Perhaps the most important verse in the song because of its grip, it chronicles Belushi's death with the Cockney slang "brown bread," discarding a joke for the "wave of dread" that would follow upon hearing the grim news. Taylor follows the loss of his friend with the revelation that he himself must "turn on a dime" if he wants to survive the 1980s. He must change his life, even if it proves challenging, because the other option is what he warns the listener *not* to do—let people "take and waste [their] time" from overworking. Perseverance is key, and this proves to be Taylor's second reason for being here. He half-promises, half-admonishes "no more messes" in the second chorus, marking a diligent effort to recover.

After a short bridge, Taylor tackles his third reason: the balance between his personal and public lives. Through this verse, he seems fazed—or perhaps amazed—by the thought that so many strangers would know his name. He references his first large hit, "Fire and Rain," wondering why people would want to "pay good money" to listen to him perform it multiple times. However, there is a routine to some of his fans' attendance—he compares them to summer, which is guaranteed to return every year. Amid the wonder and slight confusion, he claims to "break into a grin" from his vantage point on the stage, thrilled that his songs still garner as much attention as they do. This, he claims, is truly why he is here. The favor his friend asked and the long haul to recovery are forgotten in the joy of "singing tonight, tomorrow, and every day." Penance and new reasons to exist find Taylor at his most creative again, tying separate stories into a coherent message about finding new life in recovery.

[8] As quoted in White (2002, p. 285): "John's death was a wake-up call for me. There were a number of wake-up calls; I didn't exactly turn on a dime immediately, it took another 10 months or so before I got serious about leaving my mess."

"B.S.U.R. (S.U.C.S.I.M.I.M.)"

Taylor's division of three applies to his songs not only in separate stories, but in separate addressees and perspectives, as well. In 1979, he released the album *Flag*, which contains the track "B.S.U.R." Written a mere four years before he and his first wife Carly Simon divorced, the song examines their floundering relationship, and Ribowsky calls it "an obvious pin prick at … Simon" (2016, p. 243). When interviewing with White, Taylor claims that the song was written in the context of partners "speak[ing] in terms of transgression" and "keep[ing] *immaculate* score."[9] Any way one looks at the song, with or without the proper context, it paints a bleak portrait of a relationship that is beginning to fall apart. "B.S.U.R." contains a different type of division than "Fire and Rain" or "That's Why I'm Here." While the events of the song are still happening simultaneously, the first verse uses first- and third- person pronouns observe the initial issue, the second verse uses first- and second-person pronouns to establish a one-sided conversation from Taylor to his wife, and the third verse exclusively uses the pronoun "we" to show where the relationship is heading.

Taylor uses the first verse to invite the listener to view the state of his relationship with Simon. The two characters in this verse are identified as "she" and "I," establishing an outside perspective. He claims that she hopes that he will change, a futile dream to which "[s]he's been holding on too long." He writes this verse as though he is at fault for returning home "looking and acting strange" and discouraging his partner from clinging to the hope

[9] As quoted in White (2002, p. 267): "Although when intimate couples argue, they so often make the point of who's done what right and who's done what wrong. In other words, they speak in terms of transgressions, in terms of codes of behaviour. And they keep *immaculate* score."

that he can improve.[10] The last line, albeit clever wordplay, makes the situation more grueling, as Taylor finds himself "putting her down for putting up with me." Simon's sympathies fall on deaf ears as Taylor concludes the first verse and transitions into the chorus. "Be as you are as you see as I am" here (and throughout the entire song) signals a sense of finality—nothing has changed, and nothing ever will.

This belief is confirmed in the second verse, in which Taylor shifts perspectives and begins to use second-person pronouns, replacing "she" with "you." Speaking directly to Simon, he provides an example of his putdowns mentioned in the first verse. He accuses her of spying on him, "trying to take control" so that she can change him for the better. Furthermore, he likens what he perceives as her manipulation to a "leading role" in a movie. Just like the first verse, the last line is the most devastating and stark, as he tells Simon that he believes neither of them are behaving normally. "Mama this ain't me and I don't / Believe that's you" leads into another chorus, reinforcing that even though this is not typical behavior in the Taylor household, it will not change anytime soon. The bridge can also be tied into this verse, as Taylor still speaks to Simon in second-person pronouns about chasing a fool's dream and turning it back on him. He accuses her of pretending that he believes the things she "make[s] believe," which can only end in him letting her down. This leads to the perspective that it is *he* who has been "purposely misleading" while the only mistake she made was believing in him.

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[10] This entire verse sets the stage for the relationship—but exactly *how* Taylor is acting differently from how he normally does is not well-known until reading Timothy White's biography of him. In 1979, Taylor was suffering from a combination of depression and extreme alcoholism that caused him to commit, in his own words, "awful actions" that he eventually regretted (White, 2002, p. 269-270). This ties in to the first verse of "B.S.U.R."—it is a textbook case of a woman witnessing her partner stumble home intoxicated again, wondering when—or if—he will sober up. However, as classic as that image may be, it hits home a little harder because Taylor, the singer, narrator, and describer of the relationship, is the one coming home intoxicated this time.

In the third verse, Taylor only uses the pronoun "we." He and Simon are enduring this last verse together, mirrored in their actions. He envisions himself and Simon circling each other, conjuring up the image of a fight about to happen, but drops the pretense almost immediately; they circle each other not out of fear or aggression, but because they do not know each other anymore. No longer as close as they used to be, they now have completely forgotten each other's names because their actions towards each other have obfuscated who they *really* are. All the while, though, as the final line describes, they do not see the "mistakes [they] must have made." Neither party thinks that they are in the wrong; Simon is struggling to hold tight to a dream of a sober husband, and Taylor remains obstinate in the fact that he will not change. A final round of "be as you are" makes it clear: even if it means estranging a partner, the situation will remain dire, and neither person will change their mind.

Chapter 4: Taylor's Songwriting Strategies Modified

James Taylor's staying power in music is not only reflected in the numerous charting albums and singles he has received, nor is it found only in the accolades he has received for over forty-five years. It is also found in the influence, direct or indirect, that he has had on other songwriters and artists from the 1970s to the present day. While many artists have cited him as an influence on their writing, what exactly do they mean? To explore this, the lyrical innovations that were just discussed are now applied to songs written after Taylor's emergence to fame in 1970.

Character Displacement: Billy Joel's "Laura"

To my knowledge, Billy Joel has never cited James Taylor as a direct influence on his songwriting. However, he rose to fame around the same time as Taylor, and his music is still revered by many people across many generations to this day. In addition, some of his music bears resemblance to Taylor's, as seen in "Laura," a track from his 1982 album *The Nylon Curtain*. For a long time, the subject of "Laura" was unclear. During a Q&A session in 1996, Joel claimed that it was not about anyone specific; instead, the song concerned someone who "knows how to push your buttons" (Joel, 2013, 3:18-3:31). However, in a biography on Billy Joel published in 2007, his drummer, Liberty DeVitto, discloses that Laura is about Joel's mother.[11]

Joel's ties to the character of Laura are evident through the entire song, much like Taylor's ties to Alice in "Enough to Be on Your Way." Joel plays the role of victim in the song, prey to Laura, who calls him at odd hours and traps him in a codependent

[11]As quoted in Bego (2007, p. 187): "Yes, this is about his mother. The word 'mother' has the same amount of syllables as the word 'Laura."

relationship. It is clear that Joel does not want to be in this relationship; he expresses vitriol in the verses and feelings of being manipulated in the bridge. His verbiage through the song includes graphic descriptions of being "caught in … vice[s]," "aggressive actions," and general frustrations. The climax of the song is in the bridge, in which he claims that he is simply Laura's "machine," through which she can torture and manipulate him.

While the song in general evokes feelings of despair, it is interesting to see how the character of Laura plays a role in the song, especially when compared to Taylor's work. The biggest difference is that Taylor's fictional characters drive the story almost by themselves, needing barely any assistance from the personal ties that Taylor adds to the narrative. Even in "Enough to Be On Your Way," the story is firmly rooted in the character Alice, while Taylor narrates as someone who knew her. In "Laura," Joel intertwines himself much more with the titular character, showing that not only is she a prominent figure in the song, but that she also is a prominent figure in Joel's life. One part that drives this point home is in the second verse, in which Joel sings, "I fight her wars / While she's slamming her doors / In my face." This does feed into the emotional neglect and abuse Joel could have suffered at the hands of his mother, and he makes it clear to the listener that Laura affects *him*. In short, Laura is much more evidently bound to Joel throughout the song than Taylor's characters are to him. Whether this is an improvement over Taylor's method of character displacement or not is unknown, since Taylor and Joel each have their own unique style of writing. However, the elements of character displacement are still evident in "Laura," albeit slightly modified.

Division by Three: Taylor Swift's "Fifteen"

Taylor Swift is one of my generation's most acclaimed artists and songwriters. I would be remiss not to include one of her songs in this study—especially since she was named after James Taylor and has shared the stage with him on more than one occasion (Allaire, 2019). Some of that namesake may have seeped into her writing, as her song "Fifteen," found on her 2008 album *Fearless*, almost adheres to Taylor's strategy of division by three. Swift wrote "Fifteen" about her and her best friend's high school experiences, ambitions, and broken hearts (Smith, 2008).

As a caveat, the song structure of "Fifteen" is slightly different than any of the James Taylor examples covered in this thesis. Instead of three straight verses and choruses, Swift uses two verses and a bridge to cover three different perspectives. In addition, post-choruses are added that flush out the stories told in the verses. However, the three distinct sections (verse, verse, and bridge) each have their own stories to tell, and they are all tied together with the same simple chorus, which is seen in all three of the Taylor songs mentioned before.

The first verse of "Fifteen" addresses a fifteen-year-old freshman's nerves and hopes when arriving at a new school. Using second-person pronouns to address the listener, Taylor juxtaposes two conflicting feelings by describing "try[ing] and stay[ing] out of everybody's way" and "hop[ing] one of those senior boys / Will wink at you." This leads into the first chorus, which establishes a simple mantra of believing someone who "tells you they love you." The post-chorus adds onto the first verse by giving advice to the listener, as she has been through high school and wants to impart her wisdom.

The second verse describes the events that happen during high school. Best friends are made, first dates are had, and curfews are broken. The “redhead named Abigail” mentioned in this verse is a reference to Swift’s real-life friend at the time (Smith, 2008). The second post-chorus makes a stronger tie to the second verse and shifts perspectives for a few seconds; Swift claims that “[she] didn’t know” she was capable of greater things than first dates when she was fifteen and tells the listener that they, too, are capable of much more.

The bridge of “Fifteen” takes the place of the third verse in James Taylor’s songs and combines aspects of the Time-Shift narrative paradigm with division by three. Swift looks retrospectively on her and Abigail’s high-school experiences and how they differed. Swift relates that she realized she had bigger dreams to follow, while Abigail fell in and out of love, leaving high school with a broken heart and a friend in Swift. The final post-chorus, as usual, continues this narrative with the adage that time heals all wounds. However, Swift adds more of her personal opinions at the very end, claiming that she “didn’t know who [she] was supposed to be,” ending the song on an autobiographical note.

Just like “Laura,” “Fifteen” is an example of Taylor’s songwriting strategies being modified to fit the voice of the individual writer, and Swift modifies division by three with great success. The substitution of the third verse for a bridge is the biggest difference, along with the post-choruses adding narrative elements, but the essential framework of division by three remains, slightly combined with Time-Shift narrative paradigm to create something slightly more timeless.

Chapter 5: *The Thesis Tapes*: Studying Through Songwriting

The end goal of this thesis was, after observing Taylor's songwriting style, to write songs in the same vein as the traits pointed out in Taylor's work. I have written three songs influenced by the different qualities explored in Taylor's work. "Solitary Sam" reflects what I learned from my study of character displacement, and "Open the Lines" reflects my observations on division by three through personal pronoun shifts. All three songs have been recorded and are available at this SoundCloud link: tinyurl.com/thesistapes

Character Displacement: "Solitary Sam"

Solitary Sam the highway man

Is doing everything he can

To stay awake on the Interstate

As another night passes by

It's been eight long years of living this way

Coast to coast and day by day

Running away's become a working pain

And you can see it in his eyes

If you ask him how he's doing

He'll say he's fine

Then he'll heave a sigh and wave goodbye

And leave your town behind

Well, Solitary Sam the highway man

Blinks his eyes and moves his hand

To the photos on the dashboard

That he's taped down carefully

There's the friends he left so long ago

Who never even bother to say "hello"

And the family who says he can come back home

When he's done being lonely and free

If you ask him how he's doing

He'll say he's fine

Then he'll heave a sigh and wave goodbye

And leave your town behind

Solitary Sam isn't always alone

He meets my eyes peering back in the rearview mirror

And we both wonder how much longer on our own

It's gonna take for the world to make things clearer

Solitary Sam the highway man

Is doing everything he can

To keep it together in the worst of weather

To keep on running away

"Solitary Sam" is written in the style of Taylor's character displacement, which (as a reminder) is the implantation of real-life experience into a fictional character to avoid autobiographical storytelling. Taylor dedicates a portion of each song that uses character displacement to a first-person narrative, effectively tying the fictional character to himself. Essentially, Solitary Sam is a stand-in for myself, and I must make it clear at some point that he is tied to me in some fashion.

The tempo, title, and character serve as a pastiche of Taylor's "Sunny Skies," an upbeat tune with rather heavy subject material within. I came up with the idea to write about the character of Solitary Sam while driving, which has become a common habit for me. I have had plenty of places to travel to in the past two or three years, and as such, I have spent a fair amount of time by myself on the road at various hours of the day. Driving allows me to reflect on my past, on the people who have come in and out of my life, and what I would do differently given a second chance.

To infuse this into the character of Solitary Sam, a few things had to change from my own personal story. In the first verse, I changed the amount of time spent on the road, solidifying the number into "eight long years." In addition, Sam is more of a continuous traveler, a roamer. Also, instead of traveling *to* a certain point, as I often do, Sam is constantly running away—although neither I nor the listener will be sure from what he is running away.

The second verse concerns photographs of loved ones that Sam keeps taped to his dashboard. This is purely fictional—my dashboard is clean. However, I do often think about the people I hold dear to me while driving, and sometimes, as with any college student, insecurities tend to shine through. *Why don't my friends ever reach out? Does my family truly believe in me?* Those are the insecurities that are preyed upon, solidified, and even confirmed in the latter half of the second verse of "Solitary Sam." Sam is catastrophizing, his fears becoming concrete rather than staying abstract questions.

The chorus of "Solitary Sam" is simple—the easiest lie to tell is that someone is all right, even when they are not. In the main frame of the song, it is easy for Sam to tell this lie, since he may never see the person who addresses him again. I switch to second-person

narrative for a bit in the chorus, again to reflect Taylor's "Sunny Skies," which addresses the listener in a couple of places and acknowledges their place in the song.

The bridge is where I have decided to tie Solitary Sam to myself. I do this by alluding to Sam's and my eyes meeting in the rearview mirror. The listener has to do a little work to make the connection—am I a passenger in the car, or am I Sam? Hopefully, this question is answered by the mutual thoughts that Sam and I share. I used the bridge to explore both Sam's and my actions to mimic "A Junkie's Lament," but my involvement is more prominent with the fictional character here, similar to "Enough to Be on Your Way."

The final half-verse of "Solitary Sam" serves to bring the story full circle. Ending on a bridge, much like "Sunny Skies" did, felt incomplete, so bringing the story's focus back to the character of Sam was fully intentional. In addition, the ending line "To keep on running away" leaves a hanging ending, suggesting that there may be more to Sam's story than what is laid here.

Division by Three: "Livin'"

I've been searching for someone that I can call a friend

And it's safe to say that I found that in you

It's been a long and lonely year, and I was hoping it would end

And with you with me, I feel I can start anew

So I hope you don't mind if I start to crack a smile

It's gonna stay on my face for a while

'Cause after all of the breaks that I've been given

I deserve to have a little bit of livin'

Another night on the highway, another show for the books

Could be a dive or a diner, I don't care

Out in a chair in the middle, I can see you give a look

It's so nice to know that you're listening and you're there

So I hope you don't mind if I start to crack a smile

It's gonna stay on my face for a while

'Cause after all of the breaks that I've been given

I deserve to have a little bit of livin'

There's a light at the end of the tunnel, my work is almost done

And so I think that I can turn in for the night

After hours of trying, yeah, I think this is the one

And I’m satisfied as I turn out the light

So I hope you don’t mind if I start to crack a smile

It’s gonna stay on my face for a while

‘Cause after all of the breaks that I’ve been given

I deserve to have a little bit of livin’

I deserve to have a little bit of livin’

“Livin’” is written in the style of Taylor’s division by three in terms of separate stories. It is my attempt to combine the more straightforward structure of “Fire and Rain” and the uplifting message of “That’s Why I’m Here,” and this was due to the opinion that it is harder to write an upbeat song than it is a sad song. Besides, in the scheme of a three-song collection, three consecutive sad songs never feels appropriate.

In “Livin’,” I use three positive experiences from my own life for three different verses. The first verse deals with a newfound friendship and the idea of becoming closer to someone after a long spell of not feeling close to anyone. The second verse addresses a consistent gigging schedule that I have been keeping in tandem with my schoolwork and the satisfaction of knowing that someone is listening. The final verse has to do with this thesis—this song was the last song I wrote for the project, and this section is the last section that I am writing. The relief of finishing a giant project is evident in this final verse. All three verses are bound by the same chorus, just like Taylor’s division by three examples, and they have different meanings when examined in the context of each verse.

The first verse concerns the satisfaction and warmth of finding a new friendship. I use second-person pronouns in this verse to address the friend directly and express my gratitude to them, claiming that "I can start anew" because their friendship gives me a reason to do so. Friends are something for which people constantly search, myself included, and when one finds true friends, it is very easy to be grateful. The first chorus continues addressing this new friend, saying that despite a seemingly bad hand that life has granted me, they are one of (in this case) three reasons I can "crack a smile" and feel a little more alive.

The second verse concerns gigging life. Balancing gigs while still a full-time student has been challenging, but it has also been rewarding. I have played a lot of bars and grills over the past year, and that is reflected in the second line of this verse: "Could be a dive or a diner, I don't care." In addition, whether I am playing a song that I wrote or a cover, it is always a fantastic feeling when someone notices and listens. That is what the second half of the verse states. Again, I use second-person pronouns to address a spectator at one of these gigs, much like Taylor shifts his perspective from Suzanne to Jesus in "Fire and Rain," and give them a little nod in the song, as well. The second chorus is addressed to this hypothetical spectator—pardon the smile, I am too busy living to care how I look.

The final verse addresses the relief I feel upon finishing the creation of this thesis. While it has been a joy to create, the project was so large that anyone would feel satisfaction and relief upon finishing. A lot of the work done on this project was done late at night, which is why, in the third verse of "Livin'", I am "turn[ing] in for the night." Like "Fire and Rain," the third verse of my song addresses no one in particular. It is simply a third story. The "you" in the chorus can be pointed to the listener this time, who is observing me

wrapping up my work, getting ready for bed, and "turn[ing] out the light." Even when asleep, I am still living.

Division by Three: "Open the Lines"

She hasn't said a word in just about a year

Her silence fills me up with nothing but fear

She said she'd sort it out, but that day never came

So now I'm searching for a way, without any shame

To open the lines

To talk one more time

To share in this life

Or just to say goodbye

It must be a surprise, I'm coming back to you

Leaving you was hard enough—what did it put you through?

But here I am again to try to make amends

Now the rest is up to you: would you like to be friends?

To open the lines

To talk one more time

To share in this life

Or just to say goodbye

No is no and yes is yes

And I'll accept it more or less

Your final answer's my best bet

To moving on…

So now we're both confused, and nothing yet has changed

We just can't sort it out, it cannot be arranged

Both shaken from the split, both conquered by the fall

We wonder if it was a good idea at all

To open the lines

To talk one more time

To share in this life

Or just to say goodbye

"Open the Lines" is written in the style of Taylor's division by three in terms of personal pronouns. I followed the structure of "B.S.U.R." closely in crafting this song, including three verses, three short choruses, and a bridge that ties to the second verse. In addition, I lifted the personal pronouns in "Open the Lines" directly from "B.S.U.R." The first verse still uses first- and third-person pronouns to introduced the story, the second verse and bridge use first- and second-person pronouns to establish the same type of one-sided conversation that Taylor expresses to his partner in *his* song, and the third verse exclusively uses "we" to conclude the story, leaving both prominent characters in shambles in an anticlimax.

While I do not know the ups and downs of marriage, I have had failed friendships in the past, and "Open the Lines" is about one particular disaster that still runs through my mind. The failure of this friendship came down to lack of communication from both parties. I decided to leave the friendship silently, which was a grave mistake, and in the middle of the process of trying to make amends and understand each other better, the other party dropped the conversation without further acknowledgement. Enough time has passed to heal from this; however, without proper closure, healing may not be as effective, leaving room for a song to be written about the situation.

The first verse of "Open the Lines" mirrors the first verse of "B.S.U.R." by using third- and first- person pronouns. It retells only one side of the story: the other party's side, establishing only one part of a two-party conflict. Here, the story is expressed through lack of communication on the other party's part, while the narrator is attempting to reopen communication between us. Thus, the chorus takes its first meaning—the narrator is trying "[t]o open the lines," to find closure from the whole situation.

The second verse fleshes out the story by allowing the narrator to address the other party using second-person pronouns. The listener can now observe the other side of the conflict: the narrator has left the other party behind and am only now coming back "to try to make amends." This verse, *unlike* Taylor's second verse of "B.S.U.R.", extends an offer of friendship to the other party rather than a harsh criticism of the other party's actions. In addition, the narrator admits fault in the story, a trait which I wish was explored further in songwriting. The questions asked in the final line of the second verse allow a seamless transition in the second chorus, allowing the second meaning to take form. This time, the narrator is asking the other party if she wants "[t]o open the lines," to communicate further.

The bridge can be observed as an extension of the second verse as well, exactly like "B.S.U.R."

The third verse observes the narrator and the other party as one unit. When I wrote this verse, I almost envisioned both parties sitting side-by-side, making the same actions and wearing the same confused face. "B.S.U.R." uses the third verse in the same fashion, allowing both Taylor and his partner to gauge each other, almost as in a fight. However, in "Open the Lines," both parties seem more passive, shocked from the whole ordeal, and wondering if they can move on at all. They both have the same regrets—the unfinished conversation and the re-extension of friendship both may have been mistakes in the end, and this gives the chorus its final meaning. Was opening the lines ever advisable in the first place? Will either party get their final goodbye? Like "B.S.U.R.", the story is left unresolved, closure is not an option, and both parties are stuck in a fruitless loop that may never end.

Conclusion

Taylor has made his mark on songwriting through innovations that stem from his predecessors' work. His versions of character displacement and division by three provide a new twist on storytelling in songwriting, providing a template for autobiographical songwriters to come after him. His influence can be traced through a number of songwriters, including Billy Joel and Taylor Swift, who modified his already-modified innovations even further to suit their unique voice. This thesis, though, begins and ends with me. My songs have strived to adhere to the style of James Taylor's writing while maintaining the integrity of my story and voice. I thus hope to have proved that Taylor's songwriting style should remain relevant in the present day and days to come.

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