

THE PSYCHOLOGICAL PORTRAYAL OF OPHELIA IN THE SONG “THE FATE OF OPHELIA” BY TAYLOR SWIFT

Syarifah^{1*}

¹Sastra Inggris, Fakultas Hukum dan Sosial Sains, Universitas Deztron Indonesia, Indonesia
Email: syarifah@udi.ac.id

ABSTRAK

Ophelia dalam *Hamlet* karya Shakespeare selama ini dipahami sebagai simbol kerapuhan feminin, kebisuan, dan keruntuhan psikis. Namun, lagu Taylor Swift merekonstruksi Ophelia sebagai figur yang sedang menegosiasikan trauma, hasrat, dan ketahanan diri. Penelitian ini mengkaji bagaimana pengalaman psikologis Ophelia dibangun ulang melalui pendekatan psikoanalitik modern dengan menyoroti tiga dimensi utama, yaitu identitas tertekan, trauma psikis, dan agensi perempuan. Dengan menggunakan analisis tekstual kualitatif, penelitian ini menerapkan teori represi Freud, konsep abjeksi Kristeva, dan kerangka narasi trauma Vickroy untuk menafsirkan lirik lagu. Simbol-simbol seperti air, penguburan, dan memori dibaca sebagai penanda konflik bawah sadar dan transformasi psikis. Hasil analisis menunjukkan adanya pergeseran naratif dari pengekangan emosional menuju pengenalan diri, yang menandai perubahan dari kepasifan menuju subjektivitas reflektif dan berdaya. Kajian ini menegaskan bahwa teks musik kontemporer mampu menghidupkan kembali figur klasik sambil merespons isu trauma, feminitas, dan subjektivitas diri.

Kata Kunci: agensi, identitas, Ophelia, psikoanalisis, trauma

ABSTRACT

Ophelia in Shakespeare's Hamlet has long symbolized feminine fragility, silence, and psychic collapse, yet Taylor Swift's song reframes her as a figure negotiating trauma, desire, and emerging resilience. This study examines how Swift's song reconstructs Ophelia's psychological experience through modern psychoanalytic discourse, focusing on three core dimensions: repressed identity, psychic trauma, and female agency. Using qualitative textual analysis, the research applies Freud's theory of repression, Kristeva's concept of abjection, and Vickroy's trauma narrative framework to interpret the song's lyrics. Symbolic elements such as water, burial, and memory are examined as markers of unconscious conflict and psychic transformation. The analysis reveals a narrative progression from emotional containment toward self-recognition, suggesting a shift from passivity to reflective and empowered subjectivity. Swift's portrayal transforms Ophelia from a tragic emblem of silenced womanhood into a self-aware figure capable of articulating desire, confronting past wounds, and reclaiming agency. This psychoanalytic reading demonstrates how contemporary musical texts can reanimate classical figures while addressing enduring concerns of trauma, femininity, and selfhood.

Keywords: agency, identity, Ophelia, psychoanalysis, trauma

Article History:

Received : 03 - 01 - 2026
Revised : 10 - 01 - 2026
Accepted : 25 - 01 - 2026
Published : 10 - 02 - 2026

A. INTRODUCTION

Ophelia in William Shakespeare's *Hamlet* has long been understood as a figure of feminine fragility, emotional repression, and psychic collapse. Her character is often defined by silence, obedience, and loss of agency within a patriarchal world that leaves little space for self-expression (Iyengar et al., 2016). Over time, Ophelia has become more than a literary character. She functions as a cultural symbol whose suffering continues to be revisited, reinterpreted, and reimagined across different media and historical moments (Percec & Pungă, 2022). Beyond literary criticism, Ophelia has also circulated widely as

a visual and cultural icon, reappearing across painting, film, and digital media, where her image is repeatedly reshaped to reflect changing emotional and ideological concerns (Roussillon-Constanty, 2019).

Contemporary reinterpretations frequently challenge the tragic closure attached to Ophelia's story. Studies on Shakespearean women in modern media show a growing tendency to reframe female characters as psychologically complex subjects rather than passive victims (Aune, 2019). Such reinterpretations suggest that Ophelia's meaning is not fixed. Her figure remains open to transformation, especially when recontextualized within modern cultural texts that engage with questions of identity, emotion, and agency.

Popular music has increasingly been recognized as a serious site for psychological and literary analysis. Within this context, Taylor Swift's songwriting has drawn scholarly attention for its focus on emotional narration, memory, and inner conflict (Franssen, 2022). Her work often centers on introspection and self-reflection, presenting personal experience as a narrative process rather than a static confession (Fogarty & Arnold, 2021). Recent studies also note a renewed emphasis on craft and emotional honesty in Swift's music, particularly in moments shaped by social uncertainty and crisis (McGrath, 2022).

Psychological research supports the view that music and song lyrics play a significant role in emotional processing. Empirical studies indicate that lyrics can help individuals articulate distress, regulate emotion, and pursue well-being goals during periods of psychological strain (Levy et al., 2024). Clinical reviews further highlight the relevance of music-based interventions in addressing trauma-related symptoms, including posttraumatic stress disorder (Wang et al., 2024). Discussions of female agency in contemporary texts also intersect with broader feminist concerns about voice, subjectivity, and power, even when not approached through an explicit intersectional framework (Cho et al., 2013). These findings reinforce the idea that song lyrics may be read as narratives of psychological experience rather than as purely aesthetic expressions.

Despite extensive scholarship on Ophelia and a growing body of research on Taylor Swift's music, limited attention has been given to the psychological reconstruction of Ophelia within contemporary popular songs. Existing studies tend to focus on visual reinterpretations of Ophelia or feminist critiques of Swift's lyrics that emphasize gender politics without sustained psychoanalytic engagement (Amanda et al., 2024; Aune, 2019). Research rarely examines how a musical text reworks Ophelia's inner life through interconnected dimensions of repression, trauma, and agency. This gap points to the need for a focused psychological literary analysis that bridges Shakespearean character studies and contemporary song narratives. Recent popular music studies also highlight how listening practices create reflective spaces where audiences engage with emotion, memory, and identity, positioning songs as sites of psychological meaning rather than passive entertainment (Galloway, 2023).

This study addresses that gap by examining the psychological portrayal of Ophelia in Taylor Swift's song *The Fate of Ophelia*. Drawing on Freud's concept of repression (Freud, 1915), Kristeva's notion of abjection (Kristeva, 1982), and Vickroy's framework of trauma narrative (Vickroy, 2002), the research analyzes how the song reconstructs Ophelia's emotional experience through lyrical symbolism and narrative movement. The objectives of this study are to identify forms of repressed identity, examine

representations of psychic trauma, and analyze the emergence of female agency within the song. This research contributes to psychology of literature by showing how contemporary music can reanimate classical figures as psychologically dynamic subjects negotiating trauma, desire, and self-recognition.

B. METHOD

This study uses a qualitative approach with textual analysis as the main method. The object of analysis is the song *The Fate of Ophelia* by Taylor Swift, focusing on the official song lyrics as the primary data. The lyrics are treated as a literary text that conveys psychological meaning through language, imagery, and narrative movement. This approach allows the study to examine the inner life of the character represented in the song rather than musical structure or audience reception.

The analysis applies a psychology of literature perspective, drawing on psychoanalytic concepts to interpret the emotional and symbolic dimensions of the lyrics. Freud's concept of repression is used to identify moments where identity, desire, or emotion appears restrained or silenced within the text (Freud, 1915). Kristeva's notion of abjection is employed to read images related to loss, bodily boundaries, and emotional disturbance as signs of psychic instability (Kristeva, 1982). Vickroy's trauma narrative framework guides the analysis of how the song represents psychological suffering and movement toward self-recognition and agency (Vickroy, 2002). These theories function as interpretive tools rather than as rigid analytical formulas.

The data analysis follows several steps. First, the lyrics are read closely to identify key words, metaphors, and symbolic images related to emotion and psychological conflict. Second, these elements are grouped into thematic patterns corresponding to repressed identity, psychic trauma, and female agency. Third, the themes are interpreted using the selected psychoanalytic concepts to explain how the song constructs Ophelia's psychological experience. The findings are presented descriptively and interpretively, emphasizing meaning-making rather than measurement or generalization.

This methodological design is chosen to maintain close attention to the text while allowing psychological depth in interpretation. By combining close reading with psychoanalytic insight, the study aims to produce a focused and coherent analysis of how a contemporary song reworks a classical literary figure into a psychologically complex subject.

C. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Repressed Identity

Repressed identity in this song is not a result of negligence or emotional absence, but of overload and accumulation. The lyrics construct a self that has sunk inward, described as being "asleep at the bottom," suggesting a subject whose consciousness is weighed down by unprocessed emotion and memory. Swift's Ophelia does not appear as a complete or stable subject. Her sense of self feels locked, delayed, and difficult to access. From the beginning, the song frames identity as something that must be recovered rather than freely expressed, shaped by repression and prolonged waiting.

Data 1: *"As legend has it / you are quite the pyro / you light the match to watch it blow."*

This lyric presents a destabilizing figure whose actions initiate the suppression of Ophelia's identity. Within Freud's model of repression, the "pyro" functions as a trigger that ignites emotional conflict, forcing unbearable feelings out of conscious awareness (Freud, 1915). The act of "lighting the match" signals the moment when destructive impulses intrude upon Ophelia's psychic balance. In response, repression operates as a defensive mechanism, separating the self she can present from the emotions she cannot safely acknowledge.

Through Kristeva's concept of abjection, the pyro figure also represents a source of psychological threat. Fire symbolizes an intrusive force that disrupts Ophelia's sense of emotional boundary. The explosion that the other figure "watches" underscores her loss of control over the situation. Faced with this destabilization, Ophelia retreats inward, distancing herself from emotional chaos in order to preserve psychic coherence. The identity that emerges at this stage is marked by silence, avoidance, and internal division rather than collapse.

This lyric therefore establishes repression as a protective response. Ophelia's identity is not erased, but constrained. Her subjectivity survives by remaining partially inaccessible, suspended rather than destroyed.

Data 2: "And if you'd never come for me / I might've drowned in the melancholy."

This line depicts a self submerged in emotional heaviness, where sadness becomes the dominant internal climate. The verb "drowned" suggests more than emotional overwhelm. It signals the psychic danger of a subject overwhelmed by affect that has not been integrated. Within Freud's framework, such submersion reflects an identity structured by repression, where unresolved desire, loss, and conflict return as persistent melancholy rather than conscious articulation (Freud, 1915).

Kristeva's lens clarifies this condition further. Melancholy functions here as an abject space where the boundaries of the self begin to weaken. The water motif, long associated with the figure of Ophelia, reappears as a symbol of dissolution and threat. Without intervention, the self risks disappearance into an emotional void. At this stage, Ophelia's identity remains muted and suspended, sustained through endurance rather than agency.

The lyric emphasizes proximity to erasure rather than recovery. Repressed identity appears as something that can persist, but only at the cost of emotional stagnation and silence.

Data 3: "All that time / I sat alone in my tower / You were just honing your powers."

This lyric stages repression through prolonged isolation. The tower operates as a concrete metaphor for psychic enclosure. In Freudian terms, it represents a mental structure built to contain emotions and desires that cannot be safely confronted. Sitting "alone" signals more than solitude. It marks the silence of a subject cut off from her own emotional life, where repression maintains stability by limiting contact with inner conflict.

From Kristeva's perspective, the tower also signals abjection. It isolates everything the subject cannot integrate into her identity, including grief, shame, and unmet longing. The stillness of the tower reflects a suspended subjectivity, caught between what the self has been and what it cannot yet articulate. Meaning remains stalled, leaving identity incomplete and deferred.

The contrast with “you were just honing your powers” intensifies this repression. While Ophelia remains enclosed and immobilized, the other figure develops agency and control. This asymmetry reinforces the conditions that keep Ophelia’s identity restrained. Her silence is not chosen freely, but produced through relational imbalance and emotional pressure.

Taken together, these lyrics construct repressed identity as a state of containment rather than absence. Ophelia’s self is present but inaccessible, shaped by defense, delay, and emotional restraint. Repression functions as the psychological ground from which later experiences of trauma and agency will emerge, but at this stage, identity remains enclosed, unresolved, and waiting.

Psychic Trauma

Psychic trauma in the song appears through Ophelia’s unprocessed wounds, where overwhelming emotional experiences break through the boundaries of repression. What was previously contained begins to return in intrusive and unsettling forms. While repression shapes the conditions of her identity, trauma marks the moment when those defenses no longer hold. Through Vickroy’s trauma narrative framework, recurring motifs of water, silence, and reflection function as sites where unresolved pain resurfaces and demands confrontation, even when full integration remains impossible.

Data 4: “I heard you calling / On the megaphone / You wanna see me all alone.”

This lyric captures the intrusive quality of psychic trauma as it breaks into consciousness. The “calling” functions as an unwanted return of what Ophelia has attempted to silence, echoing Freud’s account of repressed material that refuses to remain buried (Freud, 1915). The megaphone amplifies this return, transforming quiet repression into forced exposure. Trauma here does not arrive gently. It intrudes, demanding attention before the subject is ready.

Kristeva’s notion of abjection sharpens the threat embedded in the line “you wanna see me all alone.” Being seen in isolation suggests emotional exposure without protection, a condition in which the self feels stripped of symbolic shelter (Kristeva, 1982). This moment destabilizes Ophelia’s sense of safety and coherence. Rather than restoring identity, the lyric positions her at the edge of psychological vulnerability, where fear and longing coexist without resolution.

From Vickroy’s perspective, this moment represents traumatic rupture rather than transformation. The call interrupts repression and forces confrontation, but it does not yet offer healing. In the music video, motifs of silence, water, and stillness reinforce this tension. Quiet immersion mirrors the inward pull of trauma, while reflective surfaces suggest an emerging awareness that remains fragile and incomplete. Trauma begins to speak, but meaning has not yet settled.

Data 5: “Late one night / You dug me out of my grave and saved my heart from the fate of Ophelia.”

This lyric presents one of the most explicit images of psychic trauma in the song. The “grave” operates as a metaphor for deep psychological burial, where unbearable affect has been sealed away. From a Freudian perspective, this burial reflects extreme repression, a condition in which emotional life is suspended rather than resolved (Freud,

1915). Being “dug out” does not signify closure. It marks a violent return of feeling, where what was numbed is abruptly reanimated.

Kristeva’s concept of abjection intensifies this image. The grave represents a liminal zone associated with decay, silence, and loss of identity. Ophelia’s position within it suggests a self hovering between presence and disappearance. To be pulled from this space is not yet to be whole, but to be exposed once more to pain, memory, and emotional risk. The abject does not vanish. It is crossed, leaving traces that continue to unsettle the subject.

Vickroy’s trauma narrative framework helps position this moment as forced recognition rather than rescue. Trauma narratives often depict survival as relational, but recognition does not immediately restore agency. “You saved my heart” signals the return of affect, not its mastery. The reference to “the fate of Ophelia” gestures toward an alternative outcome, yet this alternative remains provisional. Trauma has been interrupted, but its consequences persist.

Visual motifs in the music video reinforce this ambivalence. Water functions as a threshold between drowning and exposure, while silence marks the lingering presence of what cannot yet be fully spoken. Movement replaces stillness, but certainty remains absent. The lyric therefore stages trauma as confrontation without resolution.

Data 6: “‘Tis locked inside my memory / And only you possess the key.”

This lyric crystallizes the ongoing effects of psychic trauma through the image of sealed memory. The “locked” memory represents an experience too overwhelming to be fully integrated into conscious identity. Freud’s account of repression clarifies how such memories remain active beneath awareness, shaping behavior and emotion despite their inaccessibility (Freud, 1915). Trauma persists not because it is forgotten, but because it cannot yet be safely recalled.

Kristeva’s notion of abjection further explains the danger associated with this memory. What is locked away carries affect saturated with fear, shame, or loss. It occupies an internal zone that the self avoids while still feeling its pressure. The abject memory threatens fragmentation if approached too directly.

Vickroy’s trauma narrative model emphasizes the relational dimension of this image. The phrase “only you possess the key” suggests that access to traumatic memory depends on recognition and support from another figure. Healing, however, remains incomplete. The memory is not erased or transformed. It is only partially accessible, held between silence and articulation.

In this lyric, trauma is acknowledged but not resolved. The locked memory continues to structure Ophelia’s psychological world, even as the possibility of access becomes visible. Trauma, at this stage, remains an open wound rather than a healed scar.

Female Agency

Female agency in the song does not come out as a sudden victory or clean empowerment. It grows slowly, following the way Ophelia starts to reposition herself after repression and trauma have shaped her inner life. At this stage, agency is not about being free from pain. It is about being able to speak, decide, and respond with awareness. The self is still vulnerable, but it is no longer silent or frozen.

Data 7: “Keep it one hundred / On the land, the sea, the sky / Pledge allegiance to your hands.”

This lyric shows a clear shift in how Ophelia relates to herself. The line does not point outward. It turns inward. “Pledge allegiance to your hands” sounds like a decision to take responsibility for one’s own actions. From a Freudian view, this moment suggests that repression has begun to loosen. Instead of avoiding conflict or sinking back into silence, intention starts to guide response (Freud, 1915).

Kristeva’s idea of subjectivity helps explain the imagery here. Land, sea, and sky suggest a wider emotional space than before. Water, which earlier carried the threat of drowning, no longer stands alone as a symbol of collapse. It becomes part of a larger terrain. This does not mean fear disappears. It means Ophelia is no longer trapped inside it (Kristeva, 1982).

From Vickroy’s trauma narrative perspective, this moment reflects agency as decision, not recovery (Vickroy, 2002). The lyric does not erase the past. It shows how Ophelia begins to move while still carrying it. Action becomes possible even when certainty is not.

Data 8: “Don’t care where the hell you been / ’Cause now you’re mine.”

This lyric pushes the shift further by showing how Ophelia sets emotional limits. The refusal to look back at absence or uncertainty suggests a change in priority. Earlier fears linked to waiting or abandonment no longer control the situation. Within Freud’s framework, this can be read as a reduction in unconscious anxiety shaping behavior (Freud, 1915).

Kristeva’s concept of abjection also matters here. Traditionally, Ophelia is tied to fragility, loss, and emotional exposure. In this line, that position is resisted. The speaker does not beg or dissolve. She speaks from a place where attachment is chosen, not endured (Kristeva, 1982). The line sounds rough, even blunt, but that bluntness signals clarity rather than cruelty.

From a trauma narrative perspective, this moment shows agency taking shape through boundary-setting (Vickroy, 2002). The self is still relational. It does not stand alone. But it no longer accepts uncertainty as its only role. Engagement happens on terms that are spoken, not silently absorbed.

Data 9: “No longer drowning and deceived / All because you came for me.”

This lyric gives the clearest sense of Ophelia’s changed position. Saying “no longer drowning” does not mean the water is gone. It means she is no longer fully under it. From a Freudian angle, what was once pushed down into repression becomes more reachable, allowing reflection instead of collapse (Freud, 1915).

Kristeva’s notion of abjection helps clarify this shift. By stating she is no longer deceived, Ophelia steps away from a position of silence and loss of meaning. The self becomes more stable, even if memory and dependence remain part of the picture (Kristeva, 1982).

Within Vickroy’s trauma narrative framework, this moment reflects recognition rather than completion (Vickroy, 2002). The other figure still matters, but agency lies in Ophelia’s ability to name what has changed. She can now tell the story of her movement out of drowning. That act of naming is itself a form of agency.

Taken together, these lyrics show female agency as something negotiated, not inherited. Ophelia does not escape her past, and she does not overwrite it with confidence. She reaches a position where choice, speech, and boundaries become possible. Agency here is not loud or triumphant. It is steady, reflective, and grounded in the awareness that vulnerability still exists.

D. CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTION

This study shows that *The Fate of Ophelia* presents a psychological reworking of Ophelia that moves beyond tragedy and silence. Through the stages of repressed identity, psychic trauma, and negotiated agency, the song portrays Ophelia as a subject who survives emotional pressure and learns to speak from awareness rather than collapse. Repression appears as emotional containment, trauma as forced confrontation with buried pain, and agency as the ability to choose, set boundaries, and name change without denying vulnerability. Swift's portrayal does not erase Ophelia's wounds, but reframes them as part of a reflective and living self.

This research suggests that contemporary songs can function as meaningful psychological texts that reanimate classical figures for modern contexts. Future studies may explore similar reinterpretations in other musical or digital narratives to deepen discussions on trauma, femininity, and selfhood across media.

E. REFERENCES

- Amanda, V., Gumelar, R. E., & Riandi, R. (2024). An Analysis of Feminist Criticism in The Lyrics of "The Man" Song by Taylor Swift. *Journal of English Educators Society (JEES)*, 7(1), 8–17. <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.30653/005.202471.125>
- Aune, M. G. (2019). Ophelia's Space: Characterizing Shakespeare's Women in Popular Film. *Journal of Popular Film and Television*, 47(4), 198–206. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01956051.2018.1559132>
- Cho, S., Crenshaw, K. W., & McCall, L. (2013). Toward a Field of Intersectionality Studies: Theory, Applications, and Praxis. *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 38(4), 785–810. <https://doi.org/10.1086/669608>
- Fogarty, M., & Arnold, G. (2021). Are you ready for it? Re-evaluating Taylor Swift. *Contemporary Music Review*, 40(1), 1–10. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07494467.2021.1976586>
- Franssen, G. E. H. I. (2022). Policing the celebrity of Taylor Swift: introduction. *Celebrity Studies*, 13(1), 90–9. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19392397.2022.2026148>
- Freud, S. (1915). Repression. In J. Strachey, A. Freud, A. Strachey, & A. Tyson (Eds.), *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Volume 14 (1914-1916): On the History of the Psycho-Analytic Movement, Papers on Metapsychology and Other Works* (pp. 141–158). Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psycho-Analysis.
- Galloway, K. (2023). Podcasting Taylor: Listening Strategies, Fandom, and the Sonic Environments of Taylor Swift Podcasting. *Journal of Popular Music Studies*, 35(4), 91–110. <https://doi.org/10.1525/jpms.2023.35.4.91>
- Iyengar, S., Rowe, K., Hoenselaars, T., Kusunoki, A., Murphy, A., & Resende, A. da C. (2016). *The Cambridge Guide to the Worlds of Shakespeare* (B. R. Smith (ed.); pp. 1322–1325). Cambridge University Press. <https://www.cambridge.org/core/books/abs/cambridge-guide-to-the-worlds-of-shakespeare/iconic-characters-ophelia/DF6E85C797AA4193579567318D76F506>
- Kristeva, J. (1982). *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*. Columbia University Press.
- Levy, A., Granot, R., & Peres, R. (2024). Lyrics do matter: how "coping songs" relate to well-

- being goals. The COVID pandemic case. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 15, 1431741. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2024.1431741>
- McGrath, J. (2022). The return to craft: Taylor Swift, nostalgia, and Covid-19. *Popular Music & Society*, 46(1), 1–15. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03007766.2022.2156761>
- Percec, D., & Pungă, L. (2022). Ophelia, more or less: Intersemiotic reinterpretations of a Shakespearean character. *Open Linguistics*, 8, 414–426. <https://doi.org/10.1515/OPLI-2022-0198>
- Roussillon-Constanty, L. (2019). Tracing Ophelia from Millais to contemporary art: Literary, pictorial and digital icons. *Cahiers Victoriens et Édouardien*, 89. <https://doi.org/10.4000/cve.5438>
- Vickroy, L. (2002). *Trauma and survival in contemporary fiction*. University of Virginia Press.
- Wang, C. C., Emrich, M., Rives, H., Ovalles, A., Wright, D., Wyka, K., & Difede, J. (2024). Music interventions for posttraumatic stress disorder: A systematic review. *Journal of Mood & Anxiety Disorders*, 6, 100053. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.xjmad.2024.100053>