

### The Romantics and Break Up Songs

an article by Anthony Howe, Reader in English Literature, Birmingham City University

- 1 Taylor Swift's recently re-recorded and released 2012 album 'Red' is a discombobulating affair for those interested in the singer's relationship status. 'Treacherous' and 'I Knew You Were Trouble' build into the earworm magnum opus 'We Are Never Ever Getting Back Together'. But this is pop, not tragedy, and Swift's "never ever" starts to take on a "never-say-never" tinge. 'The Last Chance Saloon' 16 and the next track is 'Stay, Stay, Stay'.



- 2 Also no stranger to break up songs, Adele's latest album, '30', takes relationship disintegration to the next level. This is a full break up album, charting the singer's divorce, her guilt at the effect of this on her son, and the prospect of picking up the wine-stained pieces. It is raw, straight-through-your-bullet-proof-vest stuff. Songs like 'To Be Loved' make you feel every hangover, every ugly cry, every vocal cord nodule to come. It's the break up song to break your speakers.
- 3 Break up songs express big, universal feelings: 1. Please don't go; 2. You've gone and the world is broken; 3. You've gone, and we are never ever ever... We can all get on board, which is why there are so many successful break up songs with equally or more successful cover versions. Sinéad O'Connor, with unscripted tears rolling down her cheeks, turned a song from Prince, 'Nothing Compares 2 U', into a break up classic.
- 4 The Romantic Poets defined, in many ways, the cultural concerns of the 19th century, and remain vitally influential to this day. They were preoccupied by lost states of innocence and the darkness we risk in trying to recover paradise. Break up pop, whether it knows it or not, is marked by this Romantic inheritance. The serial breaker-upper is an idealist, forever searching for a heaven on Earth that is either lost or withheld.
- 5 Being a grownup is a permanent state of mourning for the enchanted consciousness of childhood. Repetition of the experience wears away what William Wordsworth, in his poem 'Immortality Ode', calls the "visionary gleam". As a child, his world had been "apparelled in celestial light", but no longer. Wordsworth sought to compensate for the lost "gleam" through his lifelong enthusiasm for the natural world. Nature can still save us, if we accept the

shadows that build with age:

*To me the meanest flower that blows can give  
Thoughts that do often lie too deep for tears.*

But not everyone is in a position to make such sensible commitments. The serial monogamist seeks a lost paradise pathologically, in a series of echoes, in diminishing returns. Other Romantics took the path of chemical obliteration – Coleridge’s opium, Adele’s cases of rosé.

- 6 The titan of Romantic disappointment (and wine abuse) was Lord Byron, another great break up artist. When Byron departed England for the final time in 1816, he left behind a disastrous marriage (that lasted about as long as Adele’s), a young daughter he would never see again, and his half-sister Augusta, with whom he had an intense relationship. His always-fragile emotional world was shattered, and he wrote about his feelings in some of the most powerful, but also complex, break up lyrics in the English language:

*Love may sink by slow decay,  
But by sudden wrench, believe not,  
Hearts can thus be torn away*

Every “We will never ever...” has a “Stay, Stay, Stay” B-side because the wrench is never clean when sudden.



- 7 Byron’s break up lyrics are not always what they seem. His poems to Lady Byron are canny public relations exercises with a nasty side. Like Taylor Swift and Adele he was a major celebrity who knew the world was fascinated by his personal life. By taking control of the narrative in the public sphere, he could limit the damage to his reputation and deflect from his undoubted culpability in the affair. In the end, he realised that acceptance was the best policy. Heaven is for the young and should not bear repetition:

*Could I remount the river of my years  
To the first fountain of our smiles and tears  
I would not trace again its stream of hours  
Between its outworn banks of withered flowers.  
But bid it flow as now – until it glides  
Into the number of the nameless tides.*

Even if he could go back to the start he wouldn’t. 21, so attend to the part of the journey you still have left. If Adele ever does ‘35’, perhaps it will be a more Zen affair.

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