

Deconstructing The 'Eldest Daughter' Archetype in Taylor Swift's Illocutionary Acts

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the linguistic construction and deconstruction of the "eldest daughter" archetype in Taylor Swift's song of the same name, synthesizing Searle's taxonomy of illocutionary acts with Derrida's deconstructive framework. The lyrics were unitized into 27 segments, classified through pragmatic analysis, then reread deconstructively. Representatives (66.7%) and Commissives (25.9%) dominated, constructing a persona defined by hyper-awareness, confessional honesty, and unwavering loyalty, while the absence of Directives positioned the speaker as offering one-sided commitment without demanding reciprocity. Deconstructive analysis, however, exposed that this identity relies on unstable binary oppositions, namely responsibility/freedom, strength/vulnerability, and self-sacrifice/self-interest, that undermine its coherence. The "eldest daughter" archetype therefore functions not as a fixed identity but as a fluid, contradictory performance sustained within unresolvable tensions. This pattern offers a concrete analytical template that future studies of gender performance in popular music can apply to other songs and artists.

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INTRODUCTION

Taylor Swift is among the most prominent contemporary popular music artists. The recurring phenomenon of her new singles and albums rapidly reaching leading positions on platforms such as Billboard and Spotify can be attributed not only to the scale and mobilization of her fan base but also to the aesthetic and communicative qualities of her songwriting. Drawing extensively on personal experience, Swift crafts narratives that invite audiences to anticipate and interpret the stories and meanings embedded in her work. As [Fajrin and Parmawati \(2021\)](#) note, language enables individuals to connect and to articulate thoughts and emotions, a function that Swift's songwriting consistently enacts. Her lyrics are frequently poetic and highly figurative. [Santika and Syafryadin \(2023\)](#) observe that many songwriters employ figurative language to enhance interest, distinctiveness, and aesthetic value in song texts, allowing affective content to be conveyed in ways that admit multiple interpretations across audiences. In this respect, Swift's songs operate as literary artifacts, expressing emotion through carefully curated imagery and figures of speech informed by lived experience.

This trend reappeared in September 2025 when Taylor Swift revealed her upcoming album. Since August, anticipation has grown because of the perceived semantic richness and critical and commercial success of her prior release. *"The Life of a Showgirl"*, the most recent album, has also quickly dominated major music charts. The songs on this album have strong lyrical qualities and complex meanings, which is consistent with her earlier work. Special attention has been paid to "Track 5," a position her devoted fan base often views as symbolically charged, sometimes linked to intertextual "Easter eggs" and fan rituals like exchanging friendship bracelets. Swift's albums' fifth tracks, widely considered among the most heartbreaking songs in her vast discography, have long examined the relationship between heartbreak and self-worth while incorporating metaphors of death, childhood, and depressing fairy tales gone wrong ([Withington, 2025](#)). The phenomenon that makes this study's main focus is Taylor Swift's song "Track 5" from her album, which is titled "Eldest Daughter". At the same time, the term "eldest daughter syndrome" has become popular in psychology to describe the particular difficulties that firstborn girls endure. Swift's "Eldest Daughter", a powerful example of linguistic performance and identity creation, sits at this juncture.

"Eldest Daughter" by Taylor Swift is a moving cultural text that captures the nuanced subjectivity of the firstborn female. The song tells a story of self-discovery grounded in complex linguistic principles despite its seeming simplicity. This song has recently drawn scholarly attention. [Subakti and Imawan \(2026\)](#), for instance, offer a Barthesian mythological reading of the same lyrics. This study approaches the song from a different angle, combining speech act theory with deconstruction to examine how the text's grammatical structure builds and destabilizes the archetype.

This study breaks down this complexity by first analyzing how Swift's lyrical performance constructs the 'eldest daughter' archetype using John Searle's taxonomy of illocutionary acts, and then analyzing how a deconstructive reading of the performance exposes the inherent instability within that very construction. This paper posits that "Eldest Daughter" strategically deploys a sequence of illocutionary acts to forge a coherent identity, yet a deconstructive lens exposes the precarious binary oppositions upon which this identity is built. In other words, the archetype is not fixed. It is an ongoing, contradictory performance. Guided by this, the study addresses two central research questions. The first asks what illocutionary acts 'Eldest Daughter' employs. The second asks how the resulting 'eldest daughter' archetype can be deconstructed. To substantiate this claim, the analysis will first synthesize a theoretical framework from speech act theory and deconstruction. It will then apply this framework to a close reading of the lyrics, followed by an in-depth deconstruction of the archetype's foundational binaries, and conclude by considering the broader implications of viewing identity as a linguistic performance in popular music.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Speech Act Theory is a fundamental idea in pragmatics, first presented by J. L. Austin and then expanded by John R. Searle. According to the theory, uttering a sentence is itself an action rather than mere description, a view that contradicts the conventional idea that language's main purpose is to describe a situation ([Gawa, 2023](#); [Toisuta & Aritonang, 2024](#)). Because it captures the speaker's intended

meaning and communicative energy, the illocutionary act is regarded as the most important element of communication (Gawa, 2023; Sari & Emelia, 2022), revealing an utterance's underlying intent beyond its literal words, as demonstrated across research on song lyrics (Nasim & Mariana, 2024; Sari & Emelia, 2022).

Searle's Typology of Illocutionary Acts

Searle expanded on Austin's work by dividing illocutionary acts into five categories, a typology widely used across discourse forms including political speeches, social media comments, and song lyrics, and now established as a standard framework for pragmatic analysis (Afifah et al., 2025; Al Izyra & Sartini, 2023).

- a. Representatives (or Assertive) bind the speaker to the truth of a stated proposition through acts such as declaring, claiming, describing, informing, and concluding. Representatives are consistently the most prevalent category across song-lyric studies of artists such as Bruno Mars, Sia, and Taylor Swift, suggesting that describing circumstances and sharing the singer's reality are among song lyrics' main purposes (Gawa, 2023; Nasim & Mariana, 2024; Sari & Emelia, 2022). Gawa (2023), for instance, found that 70.52% of illocutionary acts in a Taylor Swift corpus were Representatives, used to express her values and life lessons.
- b. Directives are attempts to persuade the listener to act, including requesting, commanding, ordering, advising, warning, and proposing. Analysis of President Jokowi's G20 address shows Directives strategically used to direct and sway international leaders through instructions and warnings (Toisuta & Aritonang, 2024), while Directives are the second most prevalent type on Sia's album *This Is Acting*, frequently appearing as invitations or commands within the narrative (Nasim & Mariana, 2024).
- c. Commissive acts commit the speaker to a future course of action, including promising, pledging, offering, threatening, and refusing. Across Taylor Swift's and Bruno Mars' albums, Commissives make up a sizable, though not dominant, share of speech acts, frequently expressing strong emotional commitments or rejections (Gawa, 2023; Sari & Emelia, 2022). A similar pattern of Commissive dominance appears in Nursanti et al.'s (2025) analysis of "Golden" by HUNTR/X, where Commissives constituted 36% of utterances, second only to Expressives at 44%.
- d. Expressive acts convey the speaker's attitude or psychological state, including thanking, expressing regret, congratulating, confessing, and praising. Research on Sia's and Taylor Swift's lyrics shows Expressives used to convey remorse, gratitude, and grief, enhancing emotional depth (Gawa, 2023; Nasim & Mariana, 2024), while analyses of social media interactions similarly show expressive acts as teens' primary mode of communication (Afifah et al., 2025).
- e. Declaratives (such as "You're fired," "I declare war") alter a situation instantly and require extra-linguistic institutional authority, making them the rarest illocutionary act in informal and artistic contexts such as social media comments and song lyrics (Al Izyra & Sartini, 2023; Gawa, 2023); their omission is itself significant, underscoring a discourse's individual rather than institutional character.

Deconstruction Theory

While Speech Act Theory explains language's function as action, Deconstruction offers a critical lens to interrogate the stability of that very language. Developed primarily by Jacques Derrida, deconstruction is not a method in the traditional sense but a mode of reading that exposes internal contradictions and unresolved tensions within a text (Rolfe, 2004), challenging the Western philosophical tradition's reliance on "logocentrism," the belief that language transparently accesses a fixed, ultimate "presence" (Sahu et al., 2021). Meaning, in this view, is not inherent in words but generated through an unstable play of differences.

Deconstructive analysis centers on dismantling binary oppositions. Western thought has historically structured meaning through hierarchical pairs such as presence/absence, speech/writing, and good/evil, where one term is privileged as superior (Chaudhary, 2025); deconstruction reveals these

hierarchies as constructed by language itself, since the “superior” term depends on its “inferior” counterpart for its very definition. By reversing and displacing such hierarchies, deconstruction shows that a text’s seemingly stable ground is, in fact, built on contradictions (Taufiq et al., 2025). Recent applications to Indonesian literary texts illustrate this analytical purchase. Ariyanti (2026) shows how the novel *Ranting Sakura* destabilizes the binary between beauty and suffering, while Andika et al. (2024) demonstrate that oppositions such as loyalty/betrayal and honor/dishonor in *Sang Keris* similarly dissolve under deconstructive reading, confirming that binary collapse is a recurring textual phenomenon. Meaning, therefore, is never fully settled but is always in flux, a concept Derrida termed *différance*, a neologism combining “to differ” and “to defer,” signifying that a word’s meaning is derived from its difference from other words and perpetually deferred along an endless chain of signifiers (Sahu et al., 2021).

Applying this framework to the “eldest daughter” archetype reveals it as a social and linguistic construct built on unstable binaries: responsibility/freedom, strength/vulnerability, and self-sacrifice/self-interest. This cultural identity is often defined against other familial roles, such as the carefree younger sibling or privileged son, creating a hierarchical family structure (Chatterjee, 2024). This pressure, often called “eldest daughter syndrome,” stems from the expectation that they embody the “superior” terms in these binaries: responsible, strong, and self-sacrificing. While Chatterjee’s (2024) account remains an unreviewed working paper, the same pattern is documented in published, peer-reviewed research: birth-order scholars link comparable pressures to family position (Morosow & Kolk, 2020), qualitative work examines parentification among eldest daughters specifically (Ciarico, 2024), and research grounded in Adlerian birth-order theory and Islamic feminist critique documents a parallel pattern among Indonesian firstborn daughters (Awwalina & Saefulloh, 2025). Together, these sources suggest the concept describes a real, cross-culturally documented, still-emerging area of study rather than resting on a single unvetted source.

“Eldest Daughter” serves as a rich text for deconstructive reading precisely because it performs this archetype while exposing its fragility; its language is haunted by the very alternatives it seeks to suppress. This concern with linguistic mechanism distinguishes the present approach from Subakti and Imawan’s (2026) semiotic study of the same song, which works within Barthes’s framework of denotation, connotation, and myth and draws on interviews with eldest-daughter listeners to show how the song’s imagery is received by an audience already familiar with the experience it describes. The present study instead stays within the text itself, using Searle’s taxonomy to identify what kind of linguistic act each line performs and Derrida’s deconstruction to show how those acts undermine one another internally, without reference to audience interpretation.

Searle’s Speech Act Theory and Derrida’s Deconstruction are not naturally compatible. Searle assumes a speaker’s intention can be recovered from an utterance. At the same time, Derrida’s exchange with Searle over Austin argues that intention can never be fully fixed, since any utterance can be repeated and reused in contexts far removed from the one in which it was first spoken (Derrida, 1988). This paper does not resolve that disagreement but limits what each theory is asked to do. Searle’s taxonomy identifies only the conventional type of act a line performs, based on linguistic form rather than a claim about Swift’s actual intention, allowing the study first to map how the illocutionary acts build the ‘eldest daughter’ persona. Deconstruction then tests whether that classification holds up under close reading, exposing the unstable binary oppositions those acts depend on. Searle thus describes surface function, and Derrida questions its stability; the two operate at different levels rather than as a single unified theory, yet together they reveal the archetype as a complex, contradictory, and fluid linguistic performance.

METHOD

Research Design

Grounded in a constructivist paradigm, this study treats meaning as something constructed through language rather than fixed within a text, approaching the archetype not as a fixed reality but as a social construction performed and destabilized through language. This study follows a qualitative textual analysis approach, in which textual material is systematically unitized, coded into categories, and

interpreted (Krippendorff, 2018). Within this approach, the researcher serves as the "key instrument" (Moleong, 2018), interpreting the lyrics through pragmatic and deconstructive lenses and examining the text's internal contradictions rather than seeking a single fixed meaning. A single analyst conducted this analysis. The five categories themselves come from an established framework, Searle's taxonomy of illocutionary acts, so they are not arbitrary. What is interpretive is how each line was matched to a category. This is true of any qualitative textual analysis and reflects how different readers understand meaning differently. To manage this, the study combines two theoretical lenses, pragmatics and deconstruction, so that each reading is checked against a second framework rather than standing alone. Each category also followed a clear, stated rule (for example, separating factual statements from hyperbolic emotional expressions), and Table 1 shows the reasoning behind every classification so readers can follow the logic themselves.

The research design specifies the procedural framework through which the research approach is operationalized (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). This study uses a qualitative textual analysis design grounded in the interpretive traditions of linguistics and literary criticism (Litosseliti, 2024; Podesva & Sharma, 2014). This design is methodologically necessary because the research objectives extend beyond merely describing the linguistic functions within the text (the *what*) to critically analyzing the underlying philosophical and conceptual instabilities of the archetype they construct (the *how* and *why*). The design therefore requires both systematic linguistic categorization and critical theoretical interpretation.

This research design strategically synthesizes two distinct yet complementary analytical lenses, as established in the literature review:

1. Pragmatics (Speech Act Theory): This theoretical framework provides a systematic method, drawing on Searle (1979), for identifying and categorizing the illocutionary functions of language. Pragmatic analysis reveals what the speaker is *doing* with the lyrics, that is, the performative acts such as asserting, complaining, or confessing, through which the "eldest daughter" archetype is linguistically constructed and performed.
2. Deconstruction provides a critical and philosophical lens for analyzing how the text *undermines its own logic*. Deconstruction moves beyond the text's surface claims to identify internal contradictions, paradoxes (*aporia*), and the "play" of meaning that emerges as the text attempts to define and stabilize the "eldest daughter" archetype (Derrida, 2016). This lens exposes the archetype as fundamentally unstable and self-contradictory.

This combined methodological design addresses the study's research questions by keeping the two frameworks at separate levels of analysis rather than treating them as a single unified theory. Pragmatics provides a rigorous linguistic classification, mapping what type of act each line performs at the level of surface function. At the same time, deconstruction then tests whether that classification holds together under close reading, exposing the archetype's inherent instability. Used this way, the two methods examine both the construction and destabilization of meaning within a single textual artifact, without resolving their deeper disagreement.

Research Object and Data Source

The research method outlines the specific technical procedures for identifying, collecting, and analyzing the data in accordance with the research design. The primary source of data for this study consists of the officially published lyrics of the Taylor Swift song titled "Eldest Daughter." This constitutes a form of document data (Creswell & Creswell, 2017), which is appropriate for textual analysis research. The song was selected through purposive sampling, a common and methodologically sound qualitative sampling strategy (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). Purposive selection is justified because the song's title and lyrical content explicitly engage with and thematize the "eldest daughter" archetype, thereby providing a rich, concentrated, and contextually relevant text for analyzing the construction and deconstruction of this cultural phenomenon. The song's explicit focus on the archetype makes it an information-dense case suitable for the depth of interpretation required by this study's theoretical frameworks.

Data Collection and Analysis

Data collection followed a standard document collection method for qualitative research (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). The official lyrics of 'Eldest Daughter' were obtained from the official lyric video published on Taylor Swift's verified YouTube channel (Swift, 2025), accessed on July 8, 2026, and transcribed verbatim into a digital document that served as the complete dataset.

The analysis proceeded through a sequential two-stage process. Pragmatic functional analysis was followed by deconstructive interpretive analysis. Prior to analysis, the lyrics were unitized into discrete analytical units, namely individual clauses, phrases, or lines representing single illocutionary acts, to enable systematic classification while maintaining textual integrity.

In the first stage, each unit was classified based on Searle's (1979) taxonomy, which includes Representatives (committing the speaker to truth, e.g., asserting, describing), Directives (compelling action, e.g., requesting, commanding), Commissives (committing to future action, e.g., promising, vowing), Expressives (expressing psychological states, e.g., thanking, apologizing), and Declarations (effecting institutional change, e.g., "I resign"). This mapped how illocutionary acts construct the eldest daughter persona and worldview.

The second stage employed deconstructive reading (Derrida, 2016), shifting focus from construction to destabilization. Analysis centered on identifying and interrogating binary oppositions sustaining the archetype, namely responsibility/freedom, strength/vulnerability, and self-sacrifice/self-interest, through close reading to locate moments of *différance* where meaning becomes undecidable or self-undermining. These three binaries were selected through a directed, deductive procedure rather than an unguided emergent one. They were drawn from the eldest daughter syndrome literature reviewed above, which consistently identifies responsibility, strength, and self-sacrifice as the socially demanded traits defining the role (Awwalina & Saefulloh, 2025; Chatterjee, 2024). The close reading that follows therefore tests whether and how these pre-identified thematic pressures manifest as genuine textual instabilities in Swift's lyrics, rather than assuming their presence in advance. Findings from both stages were integrated through inductive interpretation (Creswell & Creswell, 2017), constructing a coherent narrative that explains how pragmatic function and deconstructive tension interact within the text to address the central research questions: how the archetype is linguistically constructed and simultaneously destabilized through unstable binary oppositions.

FINDINGS

The analysis of the 'Eldest Daughter' lyrics identified 27 distinct illocutionary acts across the song. The findings show that Representatives were the most dominant category, accounting for 18 occurrences (66.7% of the total). The second most frequent category was Commissives, with 7 occurrences (25.9%). Expressives appeared 2 times, accounting for 7.4% of the acts. The analysis found no instances of either Directives or Declarations.

The Linguistic Construction of the "Eldest Daughter" Archetype through Illocutionary Acts

The analysis reveals that Representatives dominate the illocutionary acts (66.7%), establishing the speaker as a cultural critic who diagnoses social ills through truth-claims (e.g., 'Everybody is so punk on the internet') and turns inward through confessional admissions of past deception (e.g., 'I have been afflicted by a terminal uniqueness'). Commissives (25.9%) perform the archetype's relational core through repeated vows of loyalty (e.g., 'I'm never gonna leave you out'). In comparison, Expressives remain limited (7.4%), voicing exhaustion ('I've been dying just from trying to seem cool') and appreciation for a remembered moment ('A beautiful, beautiful time-lapse'). Directives are absent, constructing a persona defined by hyper-awareness, restrained emotional expression, and one-sided commitment without demanding reciprocity.

Table 1. Classification of Illocutionary Acts in Taylor Swift's "Eldest Daughter" Lyrics

No.	Lyrics	Function of Illocutionary Acts	Reason
1	Everybody's so punk on the internet	Representative	Asserts a claim about online behavior and social media culture.
2	Everyone's unbothered 'til they're not	Representative	States an observation about people's emotional performativity.
3	Everybody's cutthroat in the comments	Representative	Describes the hostile nature of online discourse.
4	When you found me, I said I was busy	Representative	Recounts a past statement/describes past action.
5	That was a lie	Representative	Admits to the untruth of the previous statement.
6	I have been afflicted by a terminal uniqueness	Representative	States the speaker's condition as a factual, clinical-sounding diagnosis ('afflicted by,' 'terminal'), presenting it as true rather than as a feeling.
7	I've been dying just from trying to seem cool	Expressive	Uses 'dying' as a common hyperbole for feeling exhausted, not a literal claim. It expresses that feeling, not asserts a fact.
8	But I'm not a bad bitch	Representative	Self-assertion that denies a particular identity.
9	And this isn't savage	Representative	Describes what the situation/relationship is not.
10	But I'm never gonna let you down	Commissive	Commits the speaker to future reliable behavior.
11	I'm never gonna leave you out	Commissive	Promises inclusion and loyalty.
12	So many traitors	Representative	Asserts an observation about disloyal people in the world.
13	Smooth operators	Representative	Describes manipulative people.
14	But I'm never gonna break that vow	Commissive	Commits to keeping a promise.
15	I'm never gonna leave you now, now, now	Commissive	Emphatic promise of permanence.
16	On the trampoline in somebody's backyard	Representative	Shares a personal memory or recounts experience.
17	That was the night I fell off and broke my arm	Representative	Narrates a biographical event.
18	Pretty soon, I learned cautious discretion	Representative	Describes a learned behavior/character development.
19	When I said I don't believe in marriage	Representative	Recounts a past statement.
20	That was a lie	Representative	Admits untruth of previous statement.
21	Every eldest daughter was the first lamb to the slaughter	Representative	Makes a general claim about eldest daughters' experiences (metaphorical).
22	So we all dressed up as wolves, and we looked fire	Representative	Describes a collective adaptive response (metaphorical).
23	A beautiful, beautiful time-lapse	Expressive	Expresses emotional appreciation for the passage of time together.
24	Cause I thought that I'd never find that beautiful, beautiful life that shimmers that innocent light back.	Representative	Together, these lines form one complete assertion recalling a past belief about an idealized, unattainable life.
25	Never gonna break that vow (Oh)	Commissive	Reiterates the promise of fidelity; commitment to keeping the vow intact.

No.	Lyrics	Function of Illocutionary Acts	Reason
26	I'm never gonna leave you now, now	Commissive	Repeated promise of permanence; commits to staying with the addressee.
27	I'm never gonna leave you now	Commissive	Final, resolute commitment; the song closes on this promise of constancy.

Note. $N = 27$ represents the total number of unique illocutionary units in the lyrics; verbatim repetitions of the same line were counted once rather than at each occurrence. Table 1 lists the reasoning behind every classification; the interpretive implications of this distribution are developed in the discussion below.

Deconstructing the Instability of the "Eldest Daughter" Archetype

The deconstructive reading exposes that the constructed identity relies on unstable binary oppositions, namely responsibility/freedom, strength/vulnerability, and self-sacrifice/self-interest, that undermine its coherence. Each valued term contains its suppressed opposite, creating moments of aporia where meaning becomes undecidable. The archetype thus emerges not as a fixed identity but as a fluid, contradictory performance existing precisely through its unresolvable tensions.

Table 2. Summary of Illocutionary Acts in Taylor Swift's "Eldest Daughter" Lyrics

Illocutionary Act Type	Jumlah	%
Representative	18	66.7%
Commissive	7	25.9%
Expressive	2	7.4%
Directive	0	0%
Declarative	0	0%
Total	27	100%

DISCUSSION

The Linguistic Construction of the "Eldest Daughter" Archetype through Illocutionary Acts

The distribution of illocutionary acts in "Eldest Daughter" reveals a deliberate rhetorical strategy dominated by Representatives (66.7%) and Commissives (25.9%), with very few Expressives (7.4%) and no Directives or Declarations. This absence aligns with patterns observed across other studies of speech acts in pop song lyrics, where directive and declarative acts are typically marginal regardless of the persona being constructed (Nursanti et al., 2025). Even so, the absence fits the archetype itself. Directives are defined by their function of getting someone else to act (Searle, 1979), while the eldest daughter role is defined by acting for others rather than asking things of them (Chatterjee, 2024), so a persona built this way would rarely need to issue a command. The absence likely reflects both genre and archetype.

The high number of Representative acts positions the speaker as both cultural critic and confessor. In the opening verse, lines such as "Everybody's so punk on the internet," "Everyone's unbothered 'til they're not," and "Everybody's cutthroat in the comments" function as truth-claims rather than mere description, building a critique of fake detachment in digital culture, consistent with Gawa's (2023) finding that Representatives in Swift's lyrics typically "express her values and life lessons." Here, however, these Representatives do more: they construct a persona defined by hyper-awareness, a trait often linked to eldest daughters taught to be watchful caretakers who interpret emotions within their families.

The speaker's Representative acts also turn inward through confession. The lines "When you found me, I said I was busy / That was a lie" and "When I said I don't believe in marriage / That was a lie" are what Searle (1979) would call Representatives with confessional force. By admitting past lying, the speaker paradoxically creates a sense of present honesty, shifting from fake self-protection ("terminal uniqueness," "dying just from trying to seem cool") toward real vulnerability. Subakti and Imawan (2026) identify a similar tension in their denotative reading of the same lines, describing the admission as a self-protection mechanism that delays emotional openness rather than resolving it, a description that converges with the defenses-dropping movement traced here, even though their

analysis treats the lines as a symptom of guardedness rather than as a site of grammatical self-contradiction.

Commissive acts (25.9%) form the emotional and relational center of the identity. The repeated vows ("I'm never gonna let you down," "I'm never gonna leave you out," "I'm never gonna break that vow") are what [Austin \(1975\)](#) called performative utterances, statements that create commitment rather than merely describe it. At the level of cultural myth, [Subakti and Imawan \(2026\)](#) read these same vows as naturalizing the expectation that the eldest daughter must always be present and dependable, an ideological reading that complements, rather than duplicates. This present analysis locates the vow's instability in its own grammar rather than in the cultural narrative surrounding it. The repetition across choruses and the outro's escalation ("now, now, now") create an iterative performativity in which each repetition does not merely restate the promise but strengthens it, turning the vow into an ongoing ritual rather than a single act. This Commissive strategy directly answers the cultural disloyalty named by the Representatives "So many traitors / Smooth operators," creating a two-part structure in which an untrustworthy world is described. At the same time, a trustworthy self is performed, consistent with psychological research describing firstborn daughters as unfairly burdened with responsibility and emotional labor ([Chatterjee, 2024](#)).

The scarcity of Expressives (7.4%) is equally telling. The few that appear, such as "I've been dying just from trying to seem cool" and "A beautiful, beautiful time-lapse," are brief and subordinate to the Representative frames surrounding them. This restraint fits a persona built around observing, confessing, and promising rather than openly feeling, consistent with cultural expectations that position eldest daughters as caregivers rather than the cared-for. The contrast is sharpened against [Nursanti et al.'s \(2025\)](#) analysis of "Golden," where Expressives were the most dominant category (44%), reflecting a song built around emotional catharsis rather than observational restraint; "Eldest Daughter" instead prioritizes composure and reliability even relative to another contemporary pop anthem analyzed through the same framework.

Finally, the total absence of Directives and Declarations means the speaker makes no demands and claims no official power, unlike the political language analyzed by [Toisuta and Aritonang \(2024\)](#) or the teacher-student discourse examined by [Wailissa \(2023\)](#), both of which rely heavily on Directives to guide and influence. "Eldest Daughter," by contrast, builds a relationship on one-sided commitment: the speaker never says "you should," only "I will." This imbalance of observation and promise without demand positions the eldest daughter as one who takes on responsibility without claiming rights or power in return, performing an identity that is personal and relational rather than official.

Deconstructing the Instability of the "Eldest Daughter" Archetype

While speech act analysis shows how language builds the eldest daughter archetype, a deconstructive reading exposes the internal conflicts that destabilize it. Derrida's central insight is that meaning emerges through an unstable play of differences: the archetype depends on valued terms (responsibility, strength, self-sacrifice) that are always haunted by the opposites they suppress (freedom, vulnerability, self-interest), creating a puzzle where meaning becomes unclear. This instability surfaces across three interlocking binary oppositions, examined in turn below.

Three Binary Oppositions in the Archetype

First, the responsibility versus freedom binary surfaces most clearly in the Commissives, which build a strong sense of responsibility ("I'm never gonna let you down"), yet this focus on permanence betrays a hidden desire for freedom. "Every eldest daughter was the first lamb to the slaughter" presents responsibility not as power but as sacrifice and victimhood, matching research on parentification, where children take on adult roles too early and lose the boundaries needed for healthy development ([Ciarico, 2024](#)). The next line, "So we all dressed up as wolves, and we looked fire," attempts to reverse this through self-transformation, but "dressed up as" reveals it as performance: the wolves are costumes hiding the lambs, weakening the claim to strength into a defensive performance.

The convergence here is worth pausing on, since [Subakti and Imawan \(2026\)](#) analyze this same song. Their reading rests on Barthesian myth analysis supported by interviews with five eldest-daughter

informants, so the instability they identify is confirmed through audience experience external to the text. The present analysis instead locates that same instability inside the song's own grammar, namely the shift from Commissive vows of loyalty to the Representative admission of lying and the internal contradiction within the wolf metaphor itself, showing the archetype destabilizing at the level of illocutionary structure rather than through how listeners report experiencing it. The two studies thus reach a similar conclusion through independent kinds of evidence, textual mechanism versus audience confirmation, which strengthens rather than duplicates the claim that the archetype is unstable.

The metaphor also conflicts with itself: dressing up as wolves implies predator identities, yet the Commissives show the speaker as protective and loyal, not predatory. This is Derrida's *différance* at work, meaning perpetually delayed and slipping between terms. The "eldest daughter" is lamb and wolf, victim and agent, but finally neither, a linguistic effect rather than a settled meaning. Read alongside, rather than as proof of, sociological accounts of the role, this instability resonates with a structural pattern others have described: eldest daughters are taught to be responsible yet are not given the power that usually comes with it. Similarly, the confession "I've been dying just from trying to seem cool" performs mental suffering within the text; this textual performance is worth reading alongside, though it does not itself demonstrate, Chatterjee's (2024) account of real eldest daughters reporting "chronic stress and anxiety from managing multiple roles" and "conditional self-worth tied to performance." The line dramatizes a condition that separate psychological research describes, so the two are best treated as parallel rather than mutually confirming claims.

Second, the Strength versus Vulnerability binary emerges through the song's rejections, extending the same performative logic already visible in the wolf costume: just as the wolf metaphor claimed strength through disguise, the song's rejections claim strength through denial. 'But I'm not a bad bitch / And this isn't savage' explicitly refuses modern empowerment rhetoric. However, the word 'but' signals that rejecting is itself a form of claiming, so the speaker asserts strength by denying it. This recurring performance of resilience echoes Subakti and Imawan's (2026) broader finding that eldest daughters describe 'pretending to be resilient, but actually being fragile,' suggesting strength here functions as a maintained performance rather than a stable trait. The choral repetition suggests anxiety about this unstable position, reflecting a double bind in which eldest daughters must display both traditional virtues (nurturing, sacrifice) and modern feminist ideals (independence, ambition); the text cannot escape this bind but performs it through repeated denial.

Third, the Self-sacrifice versus Self-interest binary appears in the song's bridge. The Commissives initially seem focused only on others, but the bridge complicates this: 'Cause I thought that I'd never find that / Beautiful, beautiful life that / Shimmers that innocent light back' reveals the speaker's commitment as driven equally by her own fulfillment. Self-sacrifice and self-interest collapse into each other; the two-part structure falls apart, since commitment to another is also commitment to herself. The promise structure further contains a temporal conflict: "I'm never gonna leave you" claims foreverness, yet promises are always deferred, and the emphatic "now, now, now" cannot fix presence, since each "now" instantly becomes past. This temporal puzzle mirrors the experience of parentified children pushed into premature responsibility before they can be present.

The "eldest daughter" archetype thus resists clear definition. Strong or vulnerable, responsible or burdened, self-sacrificing or self-interested are not stable categories but shifting terms that depend on one another, reflecting the lived experience Ciarico's (2024) participants describe: a "resilience" inseparable from "perfectionism and anxiety," and a persistent sense of "feeling like always mothers" despite wanting different relationships. The archetype works in culture because of these conflicts, not despite them; its very impossibility is what makes it recognizable. Taken together, these shifting oppositions suggest that the archetype is less a stable identity than an ongoing performance, built by language even as that same language takes it apart, a dynamic the next section examines directly by returning to how Searle's and Derrida's frameworks operate together across the whole song.

The Dialectic of Identity: Construction and Process

Searle's framework shows language's constructive power: Representatives establish hyper-awareness and confession, Commissives perform loyalty, scarce Expressives perform emotional control,

and absent Directives build one-sided commitment. Together these acts perform the “eldest daughter” into social existence, most visibly through the repeated, intensifying Commissives of the chorus and outro. Derrida’s framework reveals a simultaneous unbuilding force within that same language: each valued term (responsibility, strength, self-sacrifice) depends on its suppressed opposite (freedom, vulnerability, self-interest), so the song takes itself apart from within even as it builds itself up. This instability does not cancel the archetype but continually reconstitutes it as something inherently unstable, both a social reality that shapes lived experience and a fiction that cannot hold together consistently. These three oppositions are not separate conflicts but mutually generative: the responsibility that burdens also grounds a consistent identity, the vulnerability that weakens strength also enables real connection, and the self-interest within sacrifice shows that caring for others cannot be separated from caring for oneself. Together they create a role impossible to fill, one the eldest daughter must occupy anyway, not a conflict to resolve but a tension to live in, since resolving it would dissolve the identity itself.

This two-sided understanding reframes eldest daughter identity as an ongoing, conflicting performance rather than a fixed thing, challenging both the view that identity is given and the view that it is freely chosen. Against the fixed view, the song shows identity as built through culture and language rather than innate: the speaker is made through social training (“I learned cautious discretion”), consistent with birth order research showing that firstborns develop “cognitive ability at a quicker pace due to higher intellectual stimulation” (Morosow & Kolk, 2020), a social process producing early maturity and hyper-responsibility. Against the free-choice view, the song shows the limiting power of cultural roles: the speaker cannot simply choose to stop being the eldest daughter, as it has shaped her psychology, relationships, and capacity for self-expression. The confession “That was a lie” reveals that her past attempts to reject the role (claiming to be “busy,” denying belief in marriage) were themselves performances, fake rejections that paradoxically strengthened the role by showing it inescapable. The “wolf costume” metaphor shows the same limit: the attempt to turn victimhood into power still looks like a costume and cannot fully escape its origin. Identity is thus formed not through free choice but through managing constrained options within limiting systems.

Implications for Understanding Gender, Care Labor, and Contemporary Identity

This construction-deconstruction dialectic, in which language simultaneously builds and dismantles eldest daughter identity, matters for contemporary discussions of gender, family roles, and emotional labor. “Eldest daughter syndrome” has gained cultural traction precisely because it names a common experience, the unfair burden of care placed on firstborn daughters (Chatterjee, 2024), and Swift’s song performs important cultural work by confirming these experiences and creating shared vocabulary for what was once private. The Representatives make hidden dynamics visible: “Every eldest daughter was the first lamb to the slaughter” names the planned sacrifice of daughters’ independence. In contrast, “So many traitors / Smooth operators” names the untrustworthiness eldest daughters counter through hyper-reliability. However, the song also complicates this naming. By exposing the archetype’s internal conflicts, it suggests “eldest daughter” is not a clean diagnostic category but a site of competing, irreconcilable pressures.

This deconstructive reading complicates simple narratives, challenging both victimhood stories that deny agency and empowerment stories that deny constraint, and suggesting that solutions are not as simple as eldest daughters refusing care work, since such refusal remains trapped in the same binary logic that created the problem; the “wolf costume” fails not from lack of willpower but because the system itself forecloses real choice. The song instead points toward a more complex stance: acknowledging the burden while acknowledging the desire for connection, recognizing past performance while claiming present honesty, and living with the conflict rather than resolving it.

The Promise That Cannot Be Kept

The final Commissive, “I’m never gonna leave you now,” crystallizes this tension, functioning as both ending and deferral. It offers the emotional resolution popular music typically provides, the promise of lasting love. Nevertheless, the deconstructive analysis shows this promise cannot be fully

trusted: it comes from a speaker who has already confessed to past lying, is stated in inherently unstable language, and is shaped by the very conflicts it tries to escape. The promise is sincere, but sincerity is itself a performance; meaning is never complete in the moment but always deferred through the temporal structure of promising.

This analysis shows the "eldest daughter" archetype is built through specific, analyzable speech act patterns, namely the dominance of Representatives and Commissives, the scarcity of Expressives, and the absence of Directives, while simultaneously showing that this construction is inherently unstable, full of conflicts that expose the impossibility of the coherent identity it tries to create. Methodologically, combining Searle's speech act theory with Derrida's deconstruction is necessary because neither framework alone captures this dual action: speech act analysis alone would show identity as successfully built, while deconstruction alone would miss language's real-world power to create social reality. Together, they show the archetype works as what this paper terms a necessary fiction, a structure that must be inhabited even though it cannot be stabilized. This formulation is the paper's own synthesis, grounded in Derrida's sustained discussion of the aporia. In his analysis, this structure is simultaneously impossible within its own internal logic and yet necessary to perform, examined at length across his treatments of decision, responsibility, and duty (Derrida, 1993). The eldest daughter archetype exhibits the same shape: a role that cannot be coherently sustained, yet must be lived out regardless, impossible yet unavoidable, unstable yet powerful.

"Eldest Daughter" thus shows identity as a process, an ongoing negotiation between cultural roles and individual power, between linguistic construction and deconstructive instability. This dual movement offers a model for understanding how modern identity forms in popular culture: identity comes not from resolution but from the productive conflict between the need for a consistent self and the impossibility of achieving it. The eldest daughter must be responsible yet free, strong yet vulnerable, self-sacrificing yet self-interested, not sequentially but simultaneously. The song offers no escape from this impossibility but expresses it clearly, transforming private experience into shared recognition and, in doing so, performing the very care work it also critiques.

CONCLUSION

This study analyzed Taylor Swift's song "Eldest Daughter" to understand how its central archetype forms and is understood. The research used a combined framework, applying Searle's speech act theory to identify how the identity is built and Derrida's deconstruction to see how it is destabilized. The central argument was that the "eldest daughter" identity is a complex linguistic performance. The song's own language simultaneously constructs and deconstructs this very identity. The analysis produced two main findings. First, the speech act analysis revealed that the song's linguistic structure is dominated by Representatives (66.7%) and Commissives (25.9%). This specific pattern builds a persona defined by hyper-awareness, confessional honesty, and strong loyalty. The complete lack of Directives further constructs this identity as one who offers one-sided commitment without making demands. Second, the deconstructive reading showed that this constructed identity is fundamentally unstable. It relies on unresolvable, internal conflicts across three interlocking binaries: responsibility versus freedom, strength versus vulnerability, and self-sacrifice versus self-interest.

This study concludes that the "eldest daughter" archetype functions as what this paper terms a "necessary fiction," a formulation grounded in Derrida's discussion of the aporia rather than a direct quotation from him. It is not a fixed, consistent identity but an ongoing, unstable process of performance. The archetype exists precisely within these internal tensions, where the speaker must be both responsible and burdened, or strong and vulnerable, at the same time. "Eldest Daughter" powerfully shows how language in popular culture can create and, at the same time, question powerful social identities. This tension is not confined to the song's Western pop context. Awwalina and Saefulloh's (2025) reading of eldest daughters within Indonesian patriarchal family structures and Islamic feminist critique describes a comparable bind, in which firstborn daughters are expected to embody responsibility and self-sacrifice regardless of the cultural setting. The linguistic instability traced here in one American pop song therefore speaks to a wider, cross-cultural pattern of expectation placed on firstborn daughters, rather than to an experience specific to any single cultural context.

This study is not without limitations. It examines a single text, and the patterns identified here cannot be generalized to eldest-daughter representations in popular music more broadly without analysis of additional songs. A single analyst conducted the classification and interpretation, and as discussed in the method, deconstructive reading is inherently interpretive rather than independently verifiable; a different reader attentive to different textual details could reasonably arrive at a different configuration of binaries. Additionally, the paper's framing of the archetype as a 'necessary fiction' draws on Derrida's concept of the aporia only as a supporting point of reference; it does not constitute a full philosophical treatment of aporia in its own right. These constraints do not undermine the analysis so much as situate it. The findings offered here are best understood as one close, theoretically grounded reading of one song, rather than as a definitive or generalizable account of the archetype. These findings open several paths for future research. This combined method could be applied to other Taylor Swift songs or other artists exploring similar themes, to audience reception through fan discussions on social media, and to other archetypes mentioned in the song, such as the "youngest child."

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