



# *The Man*

## Taylor Swift

### GCSE Component 2: Understanding media forms and products

#### Focus areas:

- ♦ Media language
- ♦ Representation
- ♦ Media industries
- ♦ Audiences
- ♦ Contexts



[Taylor Swift – The Man  
\(Official Video\) – YouTube](#)

#### Product context

- Taylor Swift is one of the world's best-selling artists, having sold over 200 million records globally. She is the most streamed female artist on Spotify and the only artist to have five albums with over one million copies sold in the US.
- *The Man* was released in February 2020. It was the fourth single to be released from her 2019 *Lover* album. The music video has had 78 million views on Taylor Swift's YouTube channel (as of May 2023).
- The lyrics of the song explore how differently Swift feels she would be treated if she were a man. The key issue of gender bias is represented through the character in *The Man* and his interactions with others in a number of different settings.

- The video won a VMA at the 2020 MTV Music Awards for Best Direction, Swift's 11<sup>th</sup> VMA but her first for directing. She was also the first solo female director to win in this category.



Image by Raph\_PH / Wikimedia Commons / CC BY 2.0

#### Starting points – Media language

- Challenging music video **conventions**, the video does not include a performance of the song by the music artist. As she is playing a character role, she does not use direct mode of address, and the video is mainly **narrative** based with a short section at the end which reveals the making of *The Man*.



- The video constructs a linear **narrative**, by following the Man's typical daily activities in various locations including the subway, the office and the park. These everyday **settings** represent the sexism women encounter in their daily lives.
- The Man is also shown in more glamorous **locations** enjoying leisure time on a yacht and a tennis court, reflecting a more luxurious lifestyle associated with wealth and success.
- The character of the Man could be described as the false hero, according to **Propp's** character roles, as Taylor Swift is 'unmasked' as the real hero at the end of the video. This is highlighted by the credits 'written by' and 'directed by', encouraging the audience to view her as a powerful and successful woman.
- **Intertextuality** also creates layers of meaning in the video. For example, many intertextual references to Swift's other albums, including the words *RED* and *Reputation* that are graffitied on the subway wall.
- The **costumes** and **colour palette** in the video are important in constructing the character roles in the video, especially that of the Man. The business suit connotes power and status, and the gold Versace shirt he wears on the yacht suggests a glamorous, wealthy lifestyle. The women in the yacht scene all wear yellow bikinis, which objectifies them by taking away any sense of individuality.
- **Gesture codes** create meaning, such as in the scene on the subway where the Man is 'manspreading' and flicking cigarette ash onto the woman next to him. Both actions reflect a disregard for others.
- **Camerawork** also creates meaning in the video. The camera tracks the Man throughout and he is usually positioned in the centre of the frame, surrounded by many supporting characters, signifying his power and assumed importance.

For example, in the long shot on the yacht, the Man is centred and positioned higher than the women surrounding him and looking up at him, representing his dominance and their subservience. He is clearly the centre of attention and in control of the situation, suggested in his **gesture codes** as he smiles and holds the champagne bottle.

- **Reaction shots** from minor characters are used to show Swift's attitude towards certain male behaviours. For example, the disapproving facial expression of the male crew member on the yacht and the eye roll from Loren Gray, playing the tennis umpire, encourage the audience to share their feelings.

### Starting points – Representation

- Swift constructs the character of the Man to make a statement about misogyny and male privilege. Men are represented as disrespectful throughout, with the Man engaging in exaggerated versions of several male behaviours which are often criticised in society.
- The scene in the office where the Man tosses a crumpled piece of paper and three women try to catch it represents women being subservient, and audiences may draw a parallel with women at a wedding catching a bouquet, desperate to be 'chosen'.
- In the subway scene, the Man is positioned in the centre of the frame and is manspreading (when men sit on public transport with their legs spread, taking up more space than necessary). This represents the arrogant and self-obsessed nature of men and highlights an issue which *The New York Times* has called '*the bane of many female subway riders*'.



- The posters on the subway wall highlight hypermasculinity in action movies, and male stereotypes are reinforced in the newspaper the Man is reading, with headlines such as 'Year's most eligible CEOs' and 'Men we love in sports'.
  - In the park scene, the Man earns praise for spending a few seconds with his daughter, something that Taylor Swift feels many women do every day with no recognition. This represents the theme of gender inequality which is explored throughout the video.
  - Throughout the video women are represented as secondary, supporting characters rather than in the starring role, apart from at the end when the real 'star' of the video is revealed to be Swift.
  - In the tennis scene, the Man, after a time shift of 58 years, marries a visibly much younger woman, then pushes cake in her face. This plays on the negative stereotypes of arrogant and ego-driven men. A feminist reading would also highlight the objectification of women in the scene.
  - Swift is revealed as the director at the end of the tennis scene, directing her male alter-ego to 'be sexier' and 'more likeable'. This highlights the manner in which some male directors in particular speak to female actors.
  - The Man's voice is performed by Dwayne Johnson, a recognisable Hollywood star well known for portraying hypermasculine characters.
- used by fans to share responses to the video after its release.
- Swift posted thank you messages to the actors in her music video thanking them for the parts they played. She posted a message to Loren Gray who played the part of the tennis umpire, saying '@loren your eye roll really was aStOnIsHiNg'.
  - Swift's social media accounts often take a more personal approach to connect with her fans. She often posts about her cats and has also expressed her views through social media on issues such as the #MeToo movement and the 2020 US Presidential Election.
  - On International Women's Day in 2020, *The Man* was added to playlists on streaming platforms, including Apple Music and Spotify.
  - British politician Liz Truss quoted words for the song during a debate on gender equality in the House of Commons on International Women's Day in 2020.
  - According to the **Uses and Gratifications Theory**, the video could offer escapism, entertainment, and personal identification with the characters in the narrative.
  - **Audience responses:** According to the **Reception Theory** (Stuart Hall), the preferred reading of the video would be for the female audience to feel empowered by the feminist message which would be to campaign for gender equality. The representations in the video are also mocking stereotypes of men for entertainment purposes.

### Starting points – Audiences

- On 25 February 2020, Swift posted a short trailer for *The Man* music video on her social media accounts, announcing to her fans that it would be released two days later on her YouTube channel. Swift answered fan questions on 27 February 2020 in the hour before the premiere of the video. The hashtag #TheMan was
- A more oppositional viewpoint might come from a male audience, who may feel that the negative representations in *The Man* are misrepresenting them as a social group. For example, some responses to the video argue that the negative male stereotype represented is outdated and offensive.



## Starting points – Media industries

- Taylor Swift signed a song-writing deal with Sony Records in 2004 and a recording contract with Big Machine Records in 2005. She signed to Republic Records in 2018, the label under which her 2019 *Lover* album was released. After a dispute with Big Machine Records, she began re-recording her first six albums, the third of which is due for release in July 2023.
- Swift's music is promoted to audiences through her website and its convergence with her social media accounts. The official website promotes album releases such as 'Taylor's Version' of *Speak Now*, sells merchandise to global audiences and advertises tour dates such as The Eras 2023 US Tour.
- Prosthetic make-up was used to transform Swift into the Man. This involved her wearing a muscle suit and having facial sculptures which took 4–6 hours to apply for each day of filming. The final, *behind-the-scenes* shots of the video reveal the transformation of Swift into the Man and remind us that she is both the writer of the song and director of the video.
- Swift was the first person to receive the Woman of the Decade Award at Billboard's Women in Music Awards in 2019.
- The documentary film *Miss Americana* was released on Netflix in 2020 and follows Swift over several years of her life and career. This promotes her music to a wide audience and is an example of media convergence.

## Starting points – Media contexts

- The social context of feminism has influenced the video as Swift is assuming the role of a man in order to express her feminist views. She mocks the patriarchy throughout to make a serious point about gender discrimination.
- Swift is well known for using her videos to criticise people from her personal life, and this video appears to reference Jake Gyllenhaal, who Swift dated in 2010 and is similar in appearance to the Man.
- In the subway scene, The Bo\$\$ Scotch poster with the tagline of 'Capitalise on the feeling' and the word 'Greedy' graffitied next to the poster may refer to Scott Borchetta, who founded Swift's former record label. Borchetta owns the master copies of the artist's songs which were recorded before she switched to Universal Music Group in 2018. Swift accused him of bullying her and for barring her from playing her old music on TV.
- The scene where the Man smashes his tennis racket references John McEnroe, the tennis player notorious for his angry outbursts on the tennis court in the 1980s, especially a match in 1984 where he lost his temper with an umpire.
- Various members of Swift's family and friends make cameo appearances in the video, adding to the personal tone. Her father, Scott Swift, appears in the tennis scene as the line umpire, and the singer and TikTok star Loren Gray appears as the court attendant in the same scene.
- Swift's Netflix Documentary is referenced in a poster which shows an alternative version of the film starring her male alter-ego – *Mr Americana* (Tyler Swift).





- The video was inspired by the #MeToo movement at the time. A lyric from the song – ‘When everyone believes ya, what’s that like?’ – could be a reference to the slogan #believewomen which was used as part of the #MeToo movement.
- Swift is well known for her support of charities, including UNICEF and Red Cross, and has donated to aid disaster relief efforts in many areas of the US. For example, in 2020 she donated \$1 million to the Nashville tornado relief fund. She also sends donations to fans via their GoFundMe pages.



### Suggested reading/viewing

<https://www.billboard.com/music/pop/taylor-swift-cover-story-out-takes-the-man-8546109/>

[Taylor Swift – The Man \(Becoming The Man: Behind The Scenes\) – YouTube](#)