

# ETHICAL LINGUA

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# “Why She Disappeared” (A Study of Illeism in Poetic Discourse)

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## <sup>5</sup> Abstract

The paper in hand is an attempt to apply discourse analysis approach to analyze the use of illeism in poetic eloquence. Illeism is used in third-person self-reference forms for representing the views of someone else as distinctive technique of interpretation. Through this means, it creates illusion of the speaker linguistically and thematically trying to distance themselves in the narrative. The paper is an analysis of Taylor Swift's poem “Why She Disappeared” for her sixth studio album ‘Reputation’. The study explores qualitatively poetry elements in accordance to highlight the implication of illeism through signifiers. It utilizes a literary approach and the poem as the corpus of the study. The aims of the study are to address the way illeism functioning within the poem and the interpretation of the third-person self-reference in the poem. It is found that the poem presents the use of illeism in threefold: (1) it is used to distance oneself from traumatic occurrences; (2) it is used to refer to past-self indirectly; (3) it is used to give self-motivation. The third-person terms mentioned in the poem contribute to the actions that the speaker is employing through the discourse. Further study is needed to explore more about illeism in a variety of discourse.

## Keywords

Illeism  
discourse analysis  
poetic discourse  
third-person reference

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## “Why She Disappeared” (A Study of Illeism in Poetic Discourse)

It is often thought that using words to refer to people or things is uttered in a straightforward manner. When people intend to refer to themselves, for instance, they will use pronoun <sup>1</sup> and its grammatical variants, ‘me’, ‘my’, ‘mine’, and so on. It can be said that the pronouns act as reference to enable listeners or readers to identify something clearly in spoken or written language. Burner (2013) defined the things being referred to as a discourse entity—something that belongs within a discourse model, which in turn exists only within the minds of interlocutors. In other words, they are relatively dependent on the context of the situation in which the utterance takes place as the components of the context itself rather than concrete elements being.

In terms of personal reference, English speakers commonly refer to themselves via first-person narrative forms, such as “I think” or “in my opinion”. However, there is another disparity known as illeism in the type of self-reference where individuals use a third-person narrative form as reference to themselves (Carrington, 2017; Elledge, 2017). While the use of illeism is often closely related with narcissism as some public figures often use it to appear unbiased (Chilton, 2017; Hirsch & Craig, 2017), it is also implemented by average individuals in daily conversations (Billon, 2017) and even in literature as a stylistic device (Bär, 2016; Nordlund, 2017; Schupak, 2019; Bahmany, 2020). As a result, illeism can be a calculating device to provide a perception of the speaker trying to distance themselves in the narrative.

The relevancies of substituting first-person reference with third-person reference <sup>1</sup> may be twofold: (1) it may have a bearing on the relationship of speaker to the addressee and (2) it may indicate the attributes of the speaker <sup>3</sup> (conveyed either through describing them or through rendering them to particular category) (van der Wal & Rutten, 2013). Grunbaum & Zahavi (2013) provided two major differences in switching first-person terms with third-person terms for self-reference. Firstly, there is epistemic consciousness that first-person successfully referring to <sup>10</sup> the right object while third-person not fully realizing of reference to themselves. Secondly, there are important motivational differences between first-person self-reference and third-person self-reference in terms of emotional feeling, <sup>11</sup> thinking, and practical reasoning. Thus, the deferential functions and distance marking in illeism may have given way to self-polite motivation in the discourse.

A literary device can employ illeism in the discourse as well, and many apply it for a variety of purposes. Professionals developing evaluative reports, for example, will often refer to <sup>4</sup> themselves as “this writer” or some related reference to deliberately dodge the assumption of rendering a purely subjective personal opinion as opposed to providing a more objective summary of evidence that has been accumulated (Simon, 2016; Haucsa et al., 2020). In poetry, the story in the poem is mostly told by author being completely outside the <sup>8</sup> story through illeism. This way, the author can achieve interactional endeavors to the readers using third-person reference forms to speak as if from a recipient’s perspective (Land & Kitzinger, 2007; Tabata, 2017). It reduces the impact of <sup>6</sup> the self, thereby attempting to emphasize the importance of the message. This eccentricity removes the author from the narrative and invites the reader to enter the story-space for themselves.

Poetic discourse has a tendency to resort in which self-referentiality is disguised in order to highlight the significance of the narrator in a temporary position, while presenting the illusion of self-objectification (Nistea & Anghel, 2018). In other words, the use of illeism implies an embellishment of the perception of someone's reputation in public perception and thereby contributes to the action(s) a speaker is employing through their talk. It can also provide a twist, illustrating the feeling of being outside one's body and watching things happen while hiding the identity of the narrator from the reader until later (Metzger, 2013). Early literature such as Julius Caesar used illeism to divulge objective impartiality to the account which justified the author's actions (Dimitrova, 2017). In this way personal bias is presented, albeit underhandedly, as objectivity.

In order to apprehend the use of illeism, characteristics of poetry in general (rhyme, line structure, figurative devices) should be taken into account to derive the deeper meaning of the text (Hughes & Lee, 2012). This surpasses the basic sense interpretation of the poem as the readers must take into account an aesthetic standpoint by utterly heeding to the poetry style that affects their comprehension in fully understanding a poem. This idea is supported by Easthope (2013) that the meaning of a poem is always produced in a process of reading in order to project a necessary stability through conventional criticism of poetry that treats the poem in relation to the supposed intentions and personality of the author. Reading poetry in fact should not be carried simply as language but with the implicit assumption that it is a certain kind of discourse. A major reason why the theory of discourse shall be put forward is that it can explain the author as a product of the text to define how the text should be read.

A further discussion towards the use of illeism in poetic discourse was applied in a poem entitled "Why She Disappeared" written by Taylor Swift for her sixth studio album Reputation. Prior to the poem released, Swift had been through major incidents that destroyed her reputation, and she chose to disappear from public eyes. The poem serves as an answer for her disappearance with third-person self-reference, and it insinuates that Taylor (as the actual subject of the poem) was feeling overwhelmed by traumatic episodes that cannot be reconciled with the individual's own self-image resulting of psychological disconnection. The purpose of the current research is to examine and describe the interpretive strategies used in poem through illeism. The research aims to fill a gap in the literature by supplying information about illeism in comprehending poetry. The study seeks to answer the following: (1) Why is illeism used in the poem? (2) How does the interpretation of illeism serve in the poem?

## Method

The study is an attempt of qualitative study of the poem "Why She Disappeared" by Taylor Swift. It is analyzed by descriptive design of study utilizing primarily a literary approach, and the text of the poem is the corpus of the study. The textual analysis in qualitative paradigm is well apt to analyze the elements of poetry in the use of illeism. To analyze the data, the corpus is coded into the open, axial and selective coding. After the process of coding and categorizing has finished, the researchers interpret the categories and themes found from the data analysis into a descriptive discussion and later also drew the conclusion from the discussion. The focus of the study addresses the way illeism functioning within the text itself. Furthermore, interpretation of the use of the third-person self-reference will be explored in the discourse. In this way the distinctive uses of illeism can be highlighted and possible parallels noted.

## Results & Discussion

This study discusses the implication of illeism in poetic discourse using Taylor Swift's poem "Why She Disappeared", written for her sixth studio album Reputation, as the corpus. The poem is a reflection of Taylor's destroyed reputation and her realization that one should be true to oneself at the end. The illeism used gives multiple purposes in the poem as Taylor reforming her self-identity.

### Illeism as distance from traumatic episodes

*When she fell, she fell apart.  
Cracked her bones on the pavement she once decorated  
as a child with sidewalk chalk  
When she crashed, her clothes disintegrated and blew away  
with the winds that took all of her fair-weather friends*

<sup>2</sup> The poem opens with a description how Taylor lost her reputation and also her friends. The use of repetition in the first line gives emphasis that she is hurt and mentally damaged by the outcome. Second line shows irony that she "cracked her bones" with something that she loves dearly as "the pavement she once decorated". It implies that she gets hurt by the persona she once created innocently "as a child with sidewalk chalk". When everything falls to pieces, she was hurt mentally rather than physically with "clothes disintegrated" as the symbolic. "The winds" is a metaphor for her friends' insincerity since they are quick to leave her in the midst of troubles. The third-person reference provides clear imagination how Taylor retells the story as impartial to the narrative.

*When she looked around, her skin was spattered with ink  
forming the words of a thousand voices  
Echoes she heard even in her sleep:  
"Whatever you say, it is not right."  
"Whatever you do, it is not enough."  
"Your kindness is fake."  
"Your pain is manipulative."*

She further presents the situations with "spattered with ink" indicating in symbolic that she receives a lot of written abuse from the media, showing the juxtaposition that the words written are stronger than spoken as the words come into her dream as voices representing by quotation marks in the poem. The reference used here is in second person, creating three personas as Taylor sees, speaks, and hears the words for herself. The quotation marks imply that the words come from other people, but the words are embedded deeply since she can even hear them in her sleep. As she recalls the traumatic events, illeism is applied as a way to be further away from the experience to be merely observant.

### Illeism as indirect reference to old-self

*When she lay there on the ground,  
She dreamed of time machines and revenge  
and a love that was really something,  
Not just the idea of something.*

*When she finally rose, she rose slowly  
Avoiding old haunts and sidestepping shiny pennies  
Wary of phone calls and promises,  
Charmers, dandies and get-love-quick-schemes*

Taylor continues on to comment on her hope for “time machines and revenge” as a way to redeem herself. She refers to the idea of undoing what she did and fixing where she went wrong or the possibility of writing songs to humiliate those who mistreated her. This is what she did in the past when she encountered problems. However, she chose not to do it this time. Instead, she hopes for love, although it is ambiguous what kind of love she wants. She tried to change and, again, it is shown with repetitive expression to put a stress on her new-self reemerged. She tried of being ignorant of unreliable “phone calls and promises” and also people’s opinion about her “charmness, dandies and get-love-quick-schemes”. As she wants to change her image and reputation, she uses illeism to distinguish her past-self from her present-self where she is being true to herself.

### Illeism as self-motivation

*When she stood, she stood with a desolate knowingness  
Waded out into the dark, wild ocean up to her neck  
Bathed in her brokenness  
Said a prayer of gratitude for each chink in the armor  
she never knew she needed  
Standing broad-shouldered next to her  
was a love that was really something,  
not just the idea of something.*

Towards the last part of the poem, it still uses similar pattern of repetition “When she stood, she stood with a desolate knowingness” to convey the meaning that everything happened to her always gives serious effect to her. She remembers the “dark” difficult times in her life and how “wild ocean” as the symbol for abundant problems she encountered is “up to her neck” almost taking away her life for her. Nevertheless, this experience has taught her precious lessons in life. A “chink in one’s armor” is a figure of speech referring to someone’s vulnerability, and she is grateful for her ability to feel each emotion as it hits her, even if that means she is painted as weak or oversensitive. She also has really found love and not just the idea of love that could have only been lust and infatuation.

*When she turned to go home,  
She heard the echoes of new words  
"May your heart remain breakable  
But never by the same hand twice"  
And even louder:  
"without your past,  
you could never have arrived-  
so wondrously and brutally,  
By design or some violent, exquisite happenstance  
...here."*

*And in the death of her reputation,  
She felt truly alive.*

In the next stanza, Taylor finally "turned to go home" having a place to belong and she also combines second-person reference that implies she gives advice for herself and for the readers as well. By the end, Taylor wants herself to take the lessons in life, as one cannot have the future without the past, for she is here today because of her past. She feels truly alive because she decided not to worry anymore about what other people think about her. Summing up her theme, Taylor executes illeism to motivate herself to possess such qualities that could help her face the future years confidently with her true reputation.

## Conclusion

Based on the discussion above, it can be concluded that there are three functions of illeism shown in Taylor Swift's poem "Why She Disappeared". Firstly, illeism is used to distance oneself from traumatic experience. By doing this, the readers can focus on the problems rather than the subject and therefore it will be unbiased. Secondly, illeism is used to distinguish past-self from present-self. It highlights the change that a person went through and being objective at the same time to avoid similar mistake. Thirdly, illeism is used to give self-motivation. Giving motivation from third-person perspective can give impact that the message comes from, by, and to oneself. This study focuses on illeism in poetic discourse and several limitations such as the lack of variety in discourse should be considered for future study. Thus, the use of illeism can be further discussed in different kinds of context.

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