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Heartbreak and House-Parties: *Melodrama*'s coming-of-age love story

We have a certain fascination with the coming-of-age story: a young person's transition from childhood into adulthood. The *Harry Potter* series, *The Catcher in the Rye*, *The Breakfast Club* — some of the most well-known works in literature and film — encapsulate a protagonist just trying to make it out of his or her teenage years. But why is this narrative so compelling? Perhaps since coming-of-age is universal, and every story has *some* similarity if we look close enough. Or because the psychological and emotional growth an adolescent goes through allows the audience to reflect on their own lives — their own coming-of-age (even if the physical growth seems to have finished). Whatever the reason may be, the genre has clearly influenced creators in all different realms of art. In Lorde's *Melodrama*, an album released in 2017, the artist recounts her own experiences evolving into adulthood through a distinct, passionate event: a teenage break-up. She illustrates her emotional growth in the surroundings of a house-party — drunken dancing, crying-in-the-bathroom dramatics and post-party life realizations included. Through hard-hitting lyrics and a roller-coaster of musical texture, Lorde confesses her love story, and how the end was actually a beginning to maturity. Lorde's house-party storyline throughout *Melodrama* is a metaphor for the breakthrough from teenage heartache to finding oneself as a young adult; thus, this concept displays the necessity for a teenager to face some sort of emotional adversity before escaping adolescence and entering adulthood.

The album opens with "Green Light," a track that expresses the sheer frustration one goes through when they feel stuck in suffering, an unfortunate necessity for the loss of innocence. The

song begins with build-up; there's seconds between short beats with no music at all — only lyrics. The first verse discusses getting ready for a night of drinking, which begins the house-party metaphor: "I do my makeup in somebody else's car / We order different drinks at the same bars" (0:01). In an interview with *The New York Times*, Lorde explains the reasoning behind the idea: "With a party, there's that moment where a great song comes on and you're ecstatic, and then there's a moment later on where you're alone in the bathroom, looking in the mirror, . . . and you start feeling horrible" (Lorde quoted in Rhiannon). That is the roller-coaster of *Melodrama*, and that is the roller-coaster of the coming of age narrative. "Green Light" continues by releasing her pain induced by her ex-lover, singing that she hopes his "great white" lies bite him. At this point, the build-up is at its peak; drums and piano are introduced and the rhythm reflects a rapid heartbeat. In the chorus, she bursts out: "'Cause honey I'll come get my things, but I can't let go / I'm waiting for it, that green light, I want it" (1:17). This is the thesis for the entire song; the only way out is through, and Lorde is begging for her heart to graduate from pain. This post-heartbreak emotion is essential in any coming-of-age story. Maturity does not come easily; it isn't reflected in the loss of baby fat or school graduations — it is shown by the psychological growth only capable through emotional pain. Without heartache, the mind and heart stay at a place of innocence, a critical component of childhood. The loss of innocence is the key into entering adulthood. The piano and drums die down for a moment, and Lorde desperately sings: "Oh, I wish I could get my things and just let go" (2:58). Overall, the track displays Lorde's frustration with the pace of the road to healing, which is representative of the gradual, yet painful loss of innocence that catapults a teen into adulthood.

The house-party progresses with "Sober," a song that expresses the common theme of hiding emotional pain in something else, and often for teens, something self-destructive. "Sober"

has an electro-pop beat, and is the highlight dance song off *Melodrama*. It's the peak point in the party where everyone's dancing, forgetting the negative emotions that consume their minds in the daytime. Lorde touches on the concept of escaping pain in the chorus: "Ain't a pill that could touch our rush / (But what will we do when we're sober?)" (0:49). Simply drowning your emotions in something else — in Lorde's case, drugs and alcohol — is a common coping mechanism used to deal with pain. This theme is wildly popular in coming-of-age stories, and Lorde recognizes the hypocrisy in this theory: "We pretend that we just don't care / But we care / . . . Can we keep up with the ruse?" (1:07). However, the facade will soon fall apart, as Lorde shows on her following tracks. The callow use of alcohol to heal all wounds perfectly displays the nihilism of the teenage mind going through emotional trauma. "Sober" illustrates the failed first attempt towards her recovery. Thus, Lorde's reckless approach to healing exposes her emotionally immature teenage mentality.

On "Liability," Lorde releases pure, heart-wrenching pain that echoes the universal feeling of heartbreak; the track describes Lorde's psyche falling apart — which will eventually be rekindled, and reborn, as an adult. "Liability" is the "alone-in-the-bathroom-with-makeup-streaking-down-your-face-track," as described by Alexis Rhiannon in *Bustle*. The tone is somber and the structure is simple; the ballad only consists of a few piano chords. She opens with the lyric: "Baby really hurt me" (0:18). The straightforward sentence almost sounds like a throwaway line, but instead, it encapsulates the theme of the entire album: pain. Lorde's emotional heartache has finally been released — the facade has been stripped away. She continues the ballad with, in my opinion, the best songwriting of her career: "So I guess I'll go home into the arms of the girl that I love / The only love I haven't screwed up / . . . We slow dance in the living room, but all that a stranger would see / Is one girl swaying

alone, stroking her cheek” (0:31). In these few lines, Lorde captures the icy feeling of loneliness that hits in emotional distress; often, there’s a threatening belief that there is no one in the world that can bring comfort. The human heart is at rock bottom, and Lorde finishes by whispering, “you’re all gonna watch me disappear into the sun” (2:33). This line is melodramatic, but that’s the point. Teenage heartbreak is messy and sometimes overemotional, but the pain *needs* to escape. In this track, Lorde’s pain is being set free, and soon, she will reach another step towards healing and a slow emergence into adulthood.

Writing for *Uproxx*, Caitlin White analyzes *Melodrama* as a radical re-imagining of romance and its relation to self-care. She suggests that “Hard Feelings / Loveless” and “Writer in the Dark” have the same thesis; after the warm, safe harbor of someone else’s heart becomes bitter, one must find tenderness in themselves — the final measure to reach a mature heart. These tracks represent the climax of the transition from adolescence to adulthood. To start, “Hard Feelings,” the first part of the two part song, narrates the story of Lorde’s break-up. Again, she expresses her pain, but this time, she adds in glimmers of optimism and examples of self-care. In the second verse, she writes: “I light all the candles / Cut flowers for all my rooms / I care for myself the way I used to care about you” (1:26). The heartbreak isn’t over, the wounds aren’t yet healed, but Lorde is rising from the ashes. She has begun focusing on the necessities of her own heart instead of someone else’s. The stark change in her healing process represents the psychological growth she was gifted from her emotional pain. Similarly, in “Writer in the Dark,” Lorde sings: “But in our darkest hours, I stumbled on a secret power / I’ll find a way to be without you, babe” (1:07). She describes her newfound confidence as a supernatural strength, which would not have been discovered without the suffering she endured. This “secret power,” or emotional growth, is synonymous with maturity. Lorde has escaped the painful prison of a

teenage heart facing romantic pain; now, she is not a girl, but a *woman*. A woman who has gone through something — an experience that has helped shape her identity, beliefs and process of healing.

Finally, Lorde concludes the record with “Perfect Places,” a track that realizes the imperfections and heartbreaks of life are in fact what make it beautiful. The house-party has wrapped up and Lorde’s mascara-stained tears have dried. At the end of *Melodrama*, Lorde has become a self-aware woman. She reflects on her post-heartbreak habitual partying: “All the nights spent off our faces / Trying to find these perfect places / What the fuck are perfect places anyway?” (2:32). In other words, Lorde determines the flawless, painless route to “finding yourself” doesn’t exist. The euphoria drugs and partying produce is only temporary. It’s impossible to reach full fulfillment, or maturity, floating through life, chasing short-term happiness and dodging heartbreak. Because what are perfect places anyway?

Thus, Lorde’s house-party concept for *Melodrama* is a metaphor for the timeline of teenage heartbreak to emotionally maturing into a young adult; therefore, this shows the necessity for an adolescent to endure some sort of emotional hardship before leaving childhood and advancing into adulthood. The record debuted at number one on the charts in four countries, proving the emotions expressed on *Melodrama* are universal and multicultural. Sometimes, the loss of innocence is simplified down to when a child figures out Santa Claus isn’t real. However, the *real* loss of innocence is much more sour; often, it’s emotional pain and a period of darkness. And although this reality can be hard to swallow, the outcome is life-changing: the ability to experience life in all its bittersweet beauty.

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