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## A Female Affair: A Feminist Analysis of the Love Trilogy in Folklore

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### Abstract

Women had long been known to take various characterization of personas in literature and music. Women in literature, similar to other characters, go through phases that determine their role in both music and literature. This study focused on the characterization of women based on the three phases on women in literature of Elaine Showalter (1977). These phases namely the Feminine, Feminist, and the Female Phase. Each phase corresponds with a set of characteristics that women take as a role in literature. The study focused on the female characters present in the love trilogy in Taylor Swift's album, Folklore. Based on the analysis of the songs *betty*, *august*, and *cardigan*, there are three female personas. These female personas are Inez, identified as feminine; Betty, identified as a feminist; and Augustine, identified as female. The characterization and analysis of the three female personas are based on the descriptions and representations utilized in the songs.

**Keywords:** Feminine, Feminist, Female, Taylor Swift, Folklore, *betty*, *august*, *cardigan*, music, songs

### Introduction

<i>betty</i>	<i>august</i>	<i>cardigan</i>	<i>house</i>	<i>August slipped</i>	<i>When you are</i>
Betty, I won't make assumptions About why you switched your homeroom But I think it's 'cause of me Betty, one time, I was ridin' on my skateboard When I passed your	Salt air, and the rust on your door I never needed anything more Whispers of "Are you sure?" "Never have I ever before" But I can see us lost in the memory	Vintage tee, brand new phone High heels on cobblestones When you are young, they assume you know nothing Sequin smile, black lipstick Sensual politics	It's like I couldn't breathe  You heard the rumors from Inez You can't believe a word she says most times But this time, it was true The worst thing that	August slipped away into a moment in time 'Cause it was never mine And I can see us twisted in bedsheets August sipped away like a bottle of wine 'Cause you were never mine	young, they assume you know nothing  But I knew you Dancin' in your Levis Drunk under a streetlight, I I knew you Hand under my sweatshirt

<p><i>I ever did</i> Was what I did to you</p> <p>But if I just showed up at your party</p> <p>Would you have me?</p> <p>Would you want me?</p> <p>Would you tell me to go fuck myself?</p> <p>Or lead me to the garden?</p> <p>In the garden, would you trust me</p> <p>If I told you it was just a summer thing?</p> <p>I'm only 17, I don't know anythin'</p> <p>But I know I miss you</p> <p>Betty, I know where it all went wrong</p> <p>Your favorite song was playin'</p> <p>From the far side of the gym</p> <p>I was nowhere to be found</p> <p>I hate the crowds, you know that</p> <p>Plus, I saw you dance with him</p> <p>You heard the rumors from Inez</p> <p>You can't believe a word she says most times</p> <p>But this time, it was true</p> <p>The worst thing that I ever did</p> <p>Was what I did to you</p> <p>But if I just showed up at your party</p> <p>Would you have me?</p> <p>Would you want me?</p> <p>Would you tell me to</p>	<p>Your back beneath the sun</p> <p>Wishin' I could write my name on it</p> <p>Will you call when you're back at school?</p> <p>I remember thinkin' I had you</p> <p>But I can see us lost in the memory</p> <p>August slipped away into a moment in time</p> <p>'Cause it was never mine</p> <p>And I can see us twisted in bedsheets</p> <p>August sipped away like a bottle of wine</p> <p>'Cause you were never mine</p> <p>Back when we were still changin' for the better</p> <p>Wanting was enough</p> <p>For me, it was enough</p> <p>To live for the hope of it all</p> <p>Cancel plans just in case you'd call</p> <p>And say, "Meet me behind the mall"</p> <p>So much for summer love and saying "us"</p> <p>'Cause you weren't mine to lose</p> <p>You weren't mine to lose, no</p> <p>But I can see us lost in the memory</p> <p>August slipped away into a moment in time</p> <p>'Cause it was never mine</p> <p>And I can see us twisted in bedsheets</p> <p>August sipped</p>	<p>Baby, kiss it better, I</p> <p>And when I felt like I was an old cardigan</p> <p>Under someone's bed</p> <p>You put me on and said I was your favorite</p> <p>A friend to all is a friend to none</p> <p>Chase two girls, lose the one</p> <p>When you are young, they assume you know nothin'</p> <p>But I knew you</p> <p>Playing hide-and-peek and</p> <p>Giving me your weekends, I</p> <p>I knew you</p> <p>Your heartbeat on the High Line</p> <p>Once in 20 lifetimes, I</p> <p>And when I felt like I was an old cardigan</p> <p>Under someone's bed</p> <p>You put me on and said I was your favorite</p> <p>To kiss in cars and downtown bars</p> <p>Was all we needed</p> <p>You drew stars around my scars</p> <p>But now I'm bleedin'</p> <p>'Cause I knew you</p> <p>Steppin' on the last train</p> <p>Marked me like a bloodstain, I</p> <p>I knew you</p> <p>Tried to change the ending</p> <p>Peter losing Wendy, I</p> <p>I knew you</p> <p>Leavin' like a father</p>	<p>go fuck myself?</p> <p>Or lead me to the garden?</p> <p>In the garden, would you trust me</p> <p>If I told you it was just a summer thing?</p> <p>I'm only seventeen, I don't know anythin'</p> <p>But I know I miss you</p> <p>I was walkin' home on broken cobblestones</p> <p>Just thinkin' of you when she pulled up like</p> <p>A figment of my worst intentions</p> <p>She said "James, get in, let's drive"</p> <p>Those days turned into nights</p> <p>Slept next to her, but I dreamt of you all summer long</p> <p>Betty, I'm here on your doorstep</p> <p>And I planned it out for weeks now</p> <p>But it's finally sinkin' in</p> <p>Betty, right now is the last time</p> <p>I can dream about what happens when</p> <p>You see my face again</p> <p>The only thing I wanna do</p> <p>Is make it up to you</p> <p>So I showed up at your party</p> <p>Yeah, I showed up at your party</p> <p>Yeah, I showed up at your party</p> <p>Will you have me?</p> <p>Will you love me?</p> <p>Will you kiss me on the porch</p> <p>In front of all your</p>	<p>away like a bottle of wine</p> <p>'Cause you were never mine</p> <p>'Cause you were never mine, never mine</p> <p>But do you remember?</p> <p>Remember when I pulled up and said, "Get in the car"</p> <p>And then canceled my plans just in case you'd call?</p> <p>Back when I was livin' for the hope of it all, for the hope of it all</p> <p>"Meet me behind the mall"</p> <p>Remember when I pulled up and said, "Get in the car"</p> <p>And then canceled my plans just in case you'd call?</p> <p>Back when I was livin' for the hope of it all (for the hope of it all)</p> <p>For the hope of it all</p> <p>For the hope of it all</p> <p>(For the hope of it all)</p> <p>(For the hope of it all)</p> <p>You see my face again</p> <p>The only thing I wanna do</p> <p>Is make it up to you</p> <p>So I showed up at your party</p> <p>Yeah, I showed up at your party</p> <p>Yeah, I showed up at your party</p> <p>Will you have me?</p> <p>Will you love me?</p> <p>Will you kiss me on the porch</p> <p>In front of all your</p>	<p>Running like water, I</p> <p>And when you are young, they assume you know nothing</p> <p>But I knew you'd linger like a tattoo kiss</p> <p>I knew you'd haunt all of my what-ifs</p> <p>The smell of smoke would hang around this long</p> <p>'Cause I knew everything when I was young</p> <p>I knew I'd curse you for the longest time</p> <p>Chasin' shadows in the grocery line</p> <p>I knew you'd miss me once the thrill expired</p> <p>And you'd be standin' in my front porch light</p> <p>And I knew you'd come back to me</p> <p>You'd come back to me</p> <p>And you'd come back to me</p> <p>And you'd come back</p> <p>And when I felt like I was an old cardigan</p> <p>Under someone's bed</p> <p>You put me on and said I was your favorite</p>
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<p><i>stupid friends?</i></p> <p><i>If you kiss me, will it be just like I dreamed it?</i></p> <p><i>Will it patch your broken wings?</i></p> <p><i>I'm only 17, I don't know anythin'</i></p> <p><i>But I know I miss you</i></p> <p><i>Standin' in your cardigan</i></p> <p><i>Kissin' in my car again</i></p> <p><i>Stopped at a streetlight</i></p> <p><i>You know I miss you</i></p>		
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Literature and music have been interconnected for some time. The link between poetry and music has been around for thousands of years. Lyricists in ancient Greece performed their work with the accompaniment of the lyre, the Shijing (the oldest anthology of Chinese poetry) was a collection of songs. Meanwhile, troubadour poets in the Middle Ages were granted unprecedented freedom of speech and social influence their words influenced European poetry and continued to do so in the form of ballads in poetry and songs (Poetry and Music, n.d.).

The role of women in literature has been encompassed by the changing society. Women play the role of different characters, of various social and economic backgrounds, and from different generations. Women have played many roles in literature, including challenging societal norms, expanding understanding of gender and identity, and inspiring visions of a more just world.

Women in literature have played significant roles that change the path of stories and perhaps, history itself. Helen of Troy, the woman who launched a thousand ships, changed the course of life for the Trojans as well as those who fought for her return—and all these occurred because of a promise of another woman, the goddess of beauty, Aphrodite. Both women used their beauty and charm to achieve their goals. For Aphrodite—to be named the most beautiful goddess in all the land and seas, for Helen—to gain freedom from her husband.

The Song of Songs from the Bible discussed themes of womanhood and defined the sexuality of women (Gaiser, 2024). The roles that women take in these songs fall in the category of Feminine based on the three stages of feminism.

Likewise, women in the lyricism of songwriters play the same varying roles. Songwriters like Taylor Swift and Olivia Rodrigo have shaped a generation of listeners who are mostly women. Likewise, their lyricism embodies female rage, love, and desire.

This study uses a feminist approach in analyzing the portrayal of women in the selected songs of Taylor Swift from the Folklore album. The feminist approach is a method of literary criticism that utilizes feminist theory to examine how literature is influenced by and portrays patriarchal narratives. This approach challenges the assumptions that were thought to be universal. Moreover, it

supports the inclusion of the knowledge and value of women's experiences in literature (Napikoski, 2020).

In this study, the focus is on the female personas in the love trilogy of Betty, James, and Augustine by determining in which phase of women literature the characters involved truly belong (feminine phase, the feminist phase, and the female phase). The selection of the songs for analysis is limited to the songs that encapsulates the love trilogy.

The songs *betty*, *august*, and *cardigan* belong to Taylor Swift's eighth studio album, Folklore, which was released in July 24, 2020. The album falls under the genres of Alternative rock, Indie folk, Chamber pop, and Indietronica. In the long pond studio sessions (film), directed by Swift, the singer-songwriter has revealed that the above-mentioned songs surround the love triangle between Betty, James, and Inez. Thus, the analysis is limited to the three songs.

Thus, this paper was conceived based on the boundaries and objectives of this research.

## Research Method

This study used qualitative research utilizing textual analysis through the feminist lens. In using the feminist approach, the researcher aimed to analyze the existence of female personas in the selected songs of Taylor Swift. The study focused on the characterization of the identified female characters based on the phases of women in literature.

The phases of feminism according to Elaine Showalter (1977) are composed of three namely the feminine phase, the feminist phase, and the female phase. The feminine phase of women in literature is the adherence of women to the standards set by the patriarchal society. The feminist phase discusses the struggles of women in a society whose standards were set by men. Lastly, the female phase is the realization of a woman's being, the phase that is referred to as the "self-awakening and self-discovery" of women (Barad, 2013).

## Results and Discussion

### The Feminist Analysis

The three songs that compose this love trilogy are used to analyze the female characters mentioned in them. The songs are *betty*, *august*, and *cardigan*. All three songs belong to Taylor Swift's 2020 album, Folklore. Based on the analysis of the songs *betty*, *august*, and *cardigan*, there are three identified female characters in the love trilogy Betty, James, and Augustine. These female characters are identified as Betty, Inez, and Augustine.

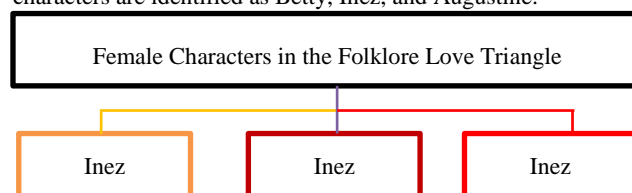


Figure 1. Female Characters in the Folklore Love Triangle

### A. *betty* by Taylor Swift

In the song *betty*, written from the perspective of James and is somehow a monologue, there are three women mentioned namely Betty (the addressee), Inez (the woman who spreads the rumors), and an unnamed woman. Betty is the previous girlfriend of James whom he has ghosted over the summer. The song *betty* was written

from the perspective of James trying to get Betty back after his summer affair with the unnamed woman.

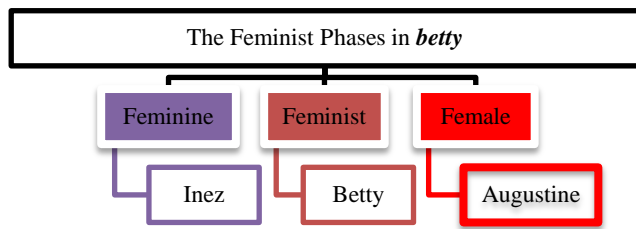


Figure 2. The Feminist Phases in *betty*

In the first stanza of the song, the addressee is named and revealed as Betty. Betty in the first stanza is identified as feminine. James sees her as a woman who changed because of him, making Betty's choices a product of his actions. The first three verses of the song indulge in this idea that Betty makes choices based on James.

*"Betty, I won't make assumptions  
About why you switched your homeroom  
But I think it's 'cause of me"*

Here, James ironically assumes that Betty changed classes because of him. This idea presents itself as a byproduct of the feminine phase that states a woman adheres to the ideologies and choices that the patriarch makes of her. However, James also realizes that Betty knows what he has done. His hesitation to knock on her door shows that Betty has taken charge of her own life choices and has realized the impact of his betrayal. This can be found in the third and is repeated in the sixth stanza.

*"But if I just showed up at your party  
Would you have me? Would you want me?  
Would you tell me to go fuck myself?  
Or lead me to the garden?"*

The same hesitation can be found in the ninth and tenth stanzas. In the verses James does show up to the aforementioned party, however, his hesitation and questions are still there.

Ninth stanza's 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> verse:

*"So I showed up at your party  
Yeah, I showed up at your party"*

Tenth stanza:

*"Yeah, I showed up at your party  
Will you have me? Will you love me?  
Will you kiss me on the porch  
In front of all your stupid friends?  
If you kiss me, will it be just like I dreamed it?  
Will it patch your broken wings?"*

Thus, indicating that Betty belongs to the second phase of feminism which is the Feminist phase.

The second female character identified is Inez. To James, he identifies her as a woman whose sole existence is to create rumors based on his existence. Despite Inez's freedom to create these rumors, this is the only thing that makes her stand out in this live trilogy. This is also her role based on James. In this context,

Inez belongs to the feminine phase. Despite her capability to create rumors, her established role is set by James and he leaves no room for other characteristics of Inez to show. He mentions her twice in the song, first in the second stanza and then in the fifth stanza. The fifth stanza is a repetition of the second stanza, emphasizing that the role of Inez in this story is limited to a person who spreads rumors.

2<sup>nd</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> stanza's repeated verses:

*"You heard the rumors from Inez*

*You can't believe a word she says most times*

*But this time, it was true"*

However, he states that despite the reputation of Inez being a liar and a spreader of rumors, she indeed speaks of the truth about James and the reason he had ghosted Betty. Due to the repetition of these verses, it is concluded that the existence of Inez is limited to the characteristics that James has given her, proving that she belongs in the feminine phase of feminism.

The last woman identified in the song is unnamed. It leaves room for mystery as to who this summer fling is. Moreover, James describes her as a woman who took control. In his perspective, it was the unnamed woman who wanted to be with him. The seventh stanza explores not much of this unnamed woman. However, based on the word choice, it implicitly speaks of the woman as a Female, the last phase of feminism.

Verses from the 7<sup>th</sup> stanza:

*"I was walkin' home on broken cobblestones  
Just thinkin' of you when she pulled up like  
A figment of my worst intentions  
She said "James, get in, let's drive"  
Those days turned into nights  
Slept next to her, but  
I dreamt of you all summer long"*

The words "James, get in, let's drive" combined is an imperative sentence. This unnamed woman is giving James a command indicating that she has power over him. The succeeding verse suggests that she did not give James a choice but to follow her. The next verse indicates that James spent multiple days and nights with her as if he could not leave and tell her no.

### B. *august* by Taylor Swift

This unnamed woman was later revealed by Taylor Swift herself in the Long Pond Studio Sessions as Augustine. The song *august* is written from the perspective of Augustine. In this song, Augustine describes her relationship with James. She recalls the events that occurred in August. She describes herself as a woman who did everything for James to stay. However, she also knew that the moments that they had shared were merely passing.

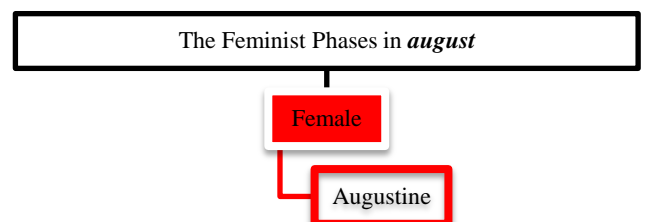


Figure 3. The Feminist Phases in *august*

Everything she had done in August was to keep James by her side. The independence of Augustine is shown throughout the song however, her recollection of their memories makes her naïve and hopeful.

Stanzas one to six show her awareness and realization of the fact that James was never hers to begin with. In the first stanza, her recollection of their conversations indicates that there were hesitations with the relationship as well as the bravery to take risks despite the hesitations.

The first stanza, verses three and four:

*"Whispers of "Are you sure?"*

*"Never have I ever before"*

The second and fourth to sixth stanzas repeat the same verses indicating that she has awakened from the fantasy that she and James experienced in August.

Verses 3 and 6 from the 2<sup>nd</sup>, 4<sup>th</sup>, and 6<sup>th</sup> stanza

*"Cause it was never mine...*

*...'Cause you were never mine"*

Verses 8 and 9 from the 5<sup>th</sup> stanza

*"Cause you weren't mine to lose*

*You weren't mine to lose, no"*

She knew and she understood the limits of their relationship. She understood the reality of it and accepted this want as a product of her inhibitions. Her awareness and understanding indicate that she is part of the Female Phase of feminism.

### C. *cardigan* by Taylor Swift

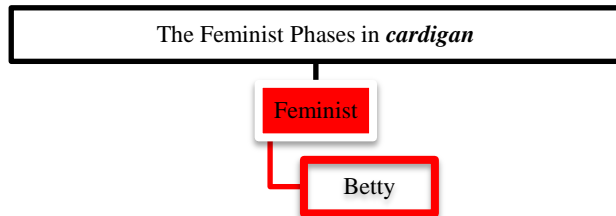


Figure 4. The Feminist Phases in *cardigan*

This love trilogy from folklore is concluded by the song *cardigan*. This song is written from the perspective of Betty. Betty was mentioned as the addressee of the song *betty*, which was written from the perspective of James. This time, James is the addressee and Betty is the persona or the narrator.

The first stanza of the song describes the physical attributes of Betty. She showed her disagreement with the standards set by society on how she should dress. She spoke about how people assume that the young do not know anything. Verses one, two, and four described her choice of clothing. Verse five describes her ideology which is something that is not expected to be known by a young woman, hence, the following verse.

Verse 1, 2, and 4 of stanza 1:

*"Vintage tee, brand new phone"*

*"High heels on cobblestones"*

*"Sequin smile, black lipstick"*

Verse 5 of stanza 1:

*"Sensual politics"*

Verse 3 and 6 of stanza 1:

*"When you are young, they assume you know nothing"*

The phrase *sensual politics* has no definitive meaning, however, according to Radford (2022), sensual politics may be *"the rules and agreements, the ways that we behave that are considered acceptable and unacceptable to do with sensual experiences"* or an ideology that may represent a relationship established under the rules made by the society. In an online magazine called The Rumpus, Goodwin (2015) states that the attempt to write a genderless act is politics. In this case, sensual politics may indicate the standards dictated by Betty herself in her relationship with James. Yet despite the standards that Betty had set for her relationships, it seemed like she did not act based on them. She speaks of it but is held back by her emotions to act on these standards.

Furthermore, the second, third, and fourth stanzas indicate how much she knew about James. The second stanza describes the physical attributes of James and how he had made her feel.

Verses 1 to 3, stanza 2:

*"But I knew you*

*Dancin' in your Levis*

*Drunk under a streetlight, I"*

Verses 4 to 9, stanza 2:

*"I knew you*

*Hand under my sweatshirt*

*Baby, kiss it better, I*

*And when I felt like I was an old cardigan*

*Under someone's bed*

*You put me on and said I was your favorite"*

The third stanza tells how Betty knew about the betrayal that James had done. Yet she thought that people still assumed that she knew nothing about what had happened. She knew that James was dating her and another woman, hence the lines:

Stanza 3:

*"A friend to all is a friend to none*

*Chase two girls, lose the one*

*When you are young, they assume you know nothin'"*

In the fourth stanza, Betty describes how she knew that James was hiding something from her. She also mentions that he only spent time with her on the weekends. However, despite knowing this she still chose to be with him.

Verses 1 to 3, stanza 4:

*"But I knew you*

*Playing hide-and-peek and*

*Giving me your weekends, I"*

In the same stanza, Betty describes how nervous James felt every time they were together. In verses four to six, she describes how the situation made James feel like he was living multiple lives at the same time.

Verses 4 to 6, stanza 4:

*"I knew you*

*Your heartbeat on the High Line*

*Once in 20 lifetimes, I"*

The fifth stanza talks more about how the relationship went. In the days they were together, to her the things they did equate to the need to heal her scars by James's drawing stars around it. However, she reveals that everything they had done only made her bleed.

Stanza 5:

*"To kiss in cars and downtown bars*

*Was all we needed*

*You drew stars around my scars*

*But now I'm bleedin'"*

The same explicit description of her knowledge is shown in stanzas six to nine. The verses repeat multiple times throughout the rest of the song. The words may change but the word "knew" remains.

Verse 1, 4, and 7 of stanza 6:

*"Cause I knew you"*

Verse 1, and 2 of stanza 7:

*"But I knew you'd linger like a tattoo kiss*

*I knew you'd haunt all of my what-ifs"*

The verses in the seventh stanza focus more on her knowledge that James will leave a mark on her life. But despite this, she still chose to love him. Also, regardless of the hurt, she knew that when James had gotten tired of the thrill, he would return.

Her awareness and knowledge of everything James had done make her an example of a woman belonging to the Feminist phase of feminism. Despite acknowledging and knowing she chose to be blind and still spend her weekends with him. She knew but she didn't act on them.

Based on the feminist analysis of these songs, there are three characters identified as women. The categorization of these women is based on Elaine Showalter's Phases of Feminism (1977).

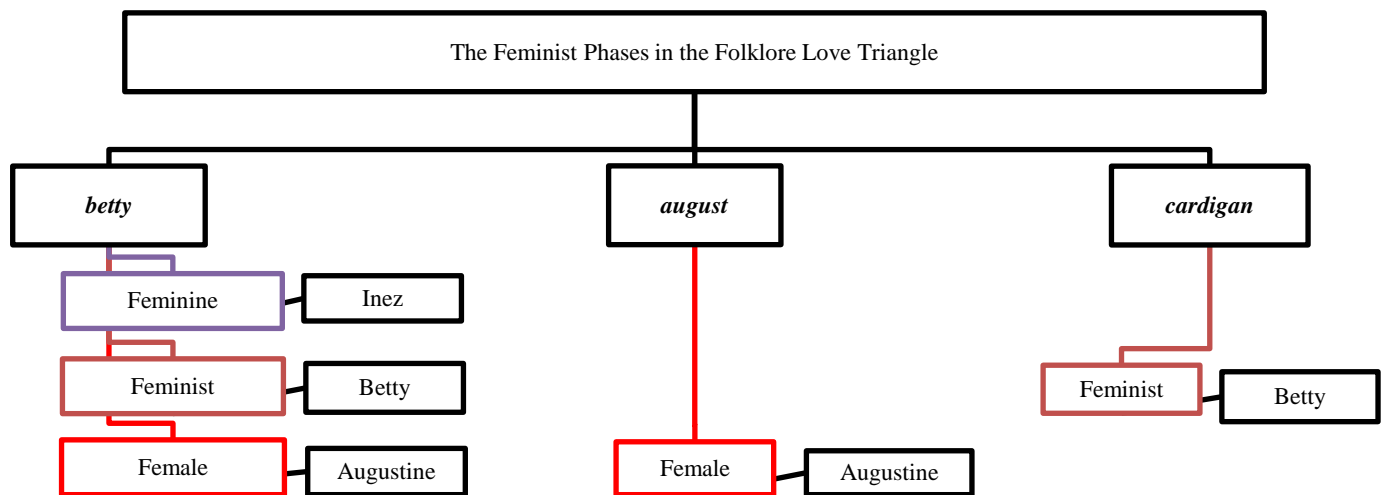


Figure 5. The Feminist Phases in the Folklore Love Triangle

## Conclusion

Through the eyes of the Feminist Theory, the songs *betty*, *august*, and *cardigan* from Taylor's Swift Folklore album tell the story of three different women that are described and represented through music. The women identified in the songs are embodiments of how the role of women affects the flow of a story. The descriptions of Inez, Betty, and Augustine rely on the descriptions provided from three different perspectives. While Betty and Augustine have their songs that describe them, Inez is defined solely from the description given by James from his perspective. The love trilogy presents itself with three different perspectives on the story of Betty, James, and Augustine. Furthermore, this love trilogy considers how women are portrayed in different perspectives and how this difference impacts how the portrayals of these women are concluded.

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