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ROUNDTABLE

Opalite Happiness

Ryan W. Davis

Department of Political Science, Brigham Young University, Provo, UT, USA
Email: rwdavis@byu.edu

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Abstract

Taylor Swift has dreamt of two things: fame and success, and a quiet life with someone she loves. She dreams of *making it* and of *escaping it*. The problem is that these dreams seem to conflict. Achieving one can feel like giving up on the other. Swift's new album, *The Life of a Showgirl*, finds both dreams well represented. She wants immortality and a basketball hoop in the driveway. She also has a new insight for reconciling them. Happiness can be made, she tells us. And if you make it with another person, you might be able to live two dreams that once felt impossible to fit together.

Keywords: action; agency; intention; Taylor Swift; values

You can discover happiness, but you can also make it yourself. In *The Life of a Showgirl*, a newly triumphant Taylor Swift has some advice about how. Even though you cannot make another person happy, you can make happiness with another person.

From her earliest writing, Swift has dreamt of two kinds of life.[1] She imagined writing her music, overcoming the odds, changing the world, crowds going wild, and—one day—being remembered.[2] The final tracks of her first three albums all echo a common theme: Swift herself can make it happen.[3] She will write the song, tell the story, and move mountains. This is a dream of *making it*.

The second dream is for a very different life. She dreams of sharing a love story. She imagines rocking her babies on the very front porch she grew up on.[4] She dreams of growing old with a friend who really knows her.[5] This is a dream about *escaping it*.

These dreams have something in common: They both have to do with getting out. She dreams of getting out of the small town where she grew up, but she also dreams of quitting

[1] Or at least: Her songwriting represents two kinds of dreams. Taylor Swift is often seen as writing autobiographically, but for now I will make claims only about the views represented in her music.

[2] Swift 2021, 2023a.

[3] Besides "Change" and "Long Live," her debut album's original final track, "Our Song," ends not with her partner's statement of what "our song" really is, but with Taylor's writing down "our song."

[4] Swift 2006.

[5] Swift 2019b; cf. Swift 2017.

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the chase for fortune and fame and instead taking her money and her dignity and getting out alive.[6] The trouble is that if you are *always* dreaming of getting out, it can be hard to know where you want to end up. "Maybe I've stormed out of every room in this town," she once lamented.[7]

Can you live both dreams in a single human life? Swift's last album faced the question head-on, though without resolution. By the time she was writing as the chair of *The Tortured Poets Department* (*TTPD*), Swift really had lived the revolution her younger self once foresaw.[8] But she also wondered if it was too late to change the prophecy. "Don't want the money // Just someone who wants my company," she sang.[9]

It's common for a new Taylor Swift album to pick up around where her last album left off. Reputation began with an ellipsis, alluding both to the unusually long time between albums and to significant changes in her life and musical style in the interim.[10] Lover's lead single started with the *Reputation* era snake exploding into pastel butterflies.[11] The first line of *TTPD* appears to be a reference to the final song of *Midnights* (a theory "liked" by Swift herself on social media).[12] Tortured Poets left us with an image of Swift as a modern, conflicted Clara Bow. Would *The Life of a Showgirl* offer new insight into how to deal with tension in dreams?

Both dreams are all over the new album. The album's themes include both the glamor and perils of fame and industry intrigue ("Elizabeth Taylor," "Father Figure," Actually Romantic," "CANCELLED!") and the quiet details of past and present loves ("Ruin the Friendship," "Honey"). And there are songs that survey both thematic centers of gravity at once. "Opalite" tells a story of two unlucky lovers. The speaker spends her time thinking about past loves, surrounded by "all the perfect couples" who have it figured out. The addressee languishes in a dead-end love; though he's in the relationship, his partner is "in her phone." This is a Taylor Swift song, so our protagonists find each other. "Never met no one like you before // You had to make your own sunshine."[13]

Even before the album dropped, Travis Kelce revealed that "Opalite" was his favorite track, and it's no secret that the song is for (and about) him. In interviews, Swift reports that opal is Travis's birthstone. She also shares something further: Opalite is the gem's manmade version. Her point is simple enough that she does not need another metaphor. "Happiness can also be manmade, too," she explains.[14] This is, indeed, the point of the song. "You had to make your own sunshine // But now the sky is opalite."[15]

Swifties will already know the lesson of having to make it yourself. Young Swift underscored that she had to make it on her own, and grown-up Swift remembered and passed along the lesson. "Fake it 'til you make it 'til it's true, 'til you do," and then later, "Babe you gotta fake it 'til you make it, and I did."[16] But the speaker in "Opalite" has spent more time with the ghosts

[6] Swift 2022a, 2023b.
[7] Swift 2019a.
[8] Cf. Swift 2021.
[9] Swift 2024b.
[10] Boyle 2017.
[11] Swift 2019c.
[12] Pattypopculture 2024.
[13] Swift 2025a.
[14] Capitalofficial 2025.
[15] Swift 2025a.
[16] Swift 2022b, 2024a.

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of her past relationships, and now she has something to add.[17] During the *Midnights* era, Swift confessed that she had the power to make relationships happen.[18] However, there's a big gap between being able to mastermind a relationship and being able to mastermind your partner's happiness in that relationship. *TTPD* was—in part—about how no amount of trying can make another, separate human happy. "I stopped trying to make him laugh // Stopped trying to drill the safe // Thinkin' how much sad did you think I had?"[19] There's a longstanding question among Swifties about whether you can keep another person's brittle heart warm.[20] The answer, as Olivia Carson explains it, is that you cannot.[21] You cannot just make sunshine for another person who is not helping you make it.

The need to make your happiness does not mean you have to go it alone. "Opalite" is about our protagonists coming together. She invites him to take shelter with her, and together they'll find that the night's storm is not so dark, and life's speedbumps aren't so bad.[22] You cannot make someone's happiness, but you can bring them love.

What does this mean for the tension between the dream of making it and the dream of escaping it? It looked like you had to pick one or the other. You can either live the prophecy as it's written, or you can speak to someone about redoing it. But now we can start to see another option. You can think of happiness as something two people have to share in the project of making. As Swift observes in the track "Elizabeth Taylor," the right guy can promise he'll stay, but it comes to nothing if he withers under the bright lights of showgirl success.[23] He has to share in his lover's project. And it goes both ways. Swift's substantially revised, modern-day Ophelia starts with allegiance only to herself, but then pledges allegiance to "your hands, your team, your vibes."[24] It's admittedly an up-tempo revision of the bard's tragedy, but sometimes the truth can be written in glitter gel ink. Making your happiness with another person involves fitting together your partner's dreams with your own. This, I think, is the album's most important message. The album's voice wants both showgirl immortality and a driveway with a basketball hoop. And she can have both, because she and her beloved can shape these values together into a shared life.

The result here is a version of love that is less about compromise and more about what the philosopher Ben Bagley calls "improvisation."[25] When a musician improvises, they do not know in advance exactly what notes they are going to play. Instead, they take their earlier notes as offering guidance for how to proceed. You commit to the idea that what you will do next will cohere with what you have been doing so far. When two musicians improvise, each takes what the other is playing as something with which to guide their own future playing. Making up the song is an action they share.

[17] The representation of past relationships as ghosts has been a part of the discography since at least *Speak Now.*

[18] Swift 2022c.

[19] Swift 2024c.

[20] Swift 2020.

[21] I was persuaded of this by Carson, who also argues that "So Long London" is a reprise of "Peace." The speaker in "So Long London" alludes to having offered the death that the speaker in "Peace" had promised. "Peace" anticipates waves of blue, which are remembered in "So Long London." The silence of mutual understanding becomes the quiet of resentment. The speaker first realizes the passing of her youth, and later she resents giving it up for free. The promise of maintaining another's heart gives way to quitting CPR. See Carson 2024.

[22] Swift 2025a.

[23] Swift 2025b.

[24] Swift 2025c.

[25] Bagley 2015.

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Love works the same way.[26] You and your lover can improvise a plan together by adopting an aim that is, at first, indeterminate. You do not know exactly what you are going to do, but you are committed to taking your partner's next move as a part of the plan, and they (in return) will adopt their next move to cohere with whatever you do in reaction to what they last did. Action theorists describe this sort of thing as having intentionally "meshing subplans."[27] It's easier to see the idea with a concrete example. Consider real-life Swift and Travis discussing how they formed a plan to appear together in the Eras tour.

> Swift: We thought we were doing a bit. We thought we were just joking. Cause a lot of what we are saying is inside of a bit, and we are laughing the whole time. And every once in a while one of us will be like, "Are you serious?" "I could be." "Are you serious?"
> Travis: I was serious in a terrifying fashion...
> Swift: I saw that little twinkle in your eye.
> Travis [coyly]: ...You want me to go on stage?
> Swift: He wants to do it.
> Travis [smiling]: ...You want me to go on stage?
> Swift: You were so good.[28]

It all starts off as a bit, Swift says. She does not have a plan worked out in her mind for what they'll do. In fact, she's not even making plans at all—she's just playing on an inside joke. But then one of them wonders if the other might want to take the joke and make it a real plan. And that, in turn, gives the other a clue that maybe the questioner *would* like it to be real. "You want me to go on stage?" Travis asks, playfully. Swift observes with matching, droll playfulness that she knows he wants to, showing that she can see the meaning behind his question. Travis keeps asking, but not yet seriously. Still, asking lets Swift provide more nonverbal evidence that she, too, likes the increasingly real plan emerging from the bit. The whole conversation ends up taking on a kind of musicality of its own, with overlaid speech, backchannel feedback, unspoken questions, and quick assurances.[29]

Improvisation in action, as in music, can quickly get complicated. It might take a lot of unraveling to reconstruct the path leading from an inside joke to Travis Kelce making an actual, surprise appearance with Swift at Wembley Stadium. For now, the important thing is just that we can now see how improvisation works in love.[30] Imagine if Swift had asked Travis if he wanted to appear on the tour, and he shrugged, "I'll do whatever you want. You decide." This gives her no clues, and without the clues, no amount of swearing that he loves her would be enough. On the other hand, there's something really exhilarating about doing something with someone, where neither of you knows exactly what you are up to, but both of you know that you are committed to going along with what emerges from your back-and-forth. Happiness, like opalite, takes making. And love takes making happiness with another person who's making that same happiness.

You cannot *give* someone happiness, but you can *share* it. Psychologists have a measure for this—the "merged mind" index.[31] One question on the index asks to what extent partners

[26] Bagley 2015.
[27] Cf. Bratman 2014.
[28] Kelce and Kelce 2025.
[29] A great book on the ethics of shared conversation is *Talk: The Science of Conversation and the Art of Being Ourselves* (Brooks 2025).
[30] Jordan MacKenzie has written a paper applying to the idea of improvisation in love to Taylor Swift's "Lover." MacKenzie 2025.
[31] Rossignac-Milon et al. 2021.

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feel like their experiences are "more real" when they have them together. They probably did not get that question from a Taylor Swift song, but they could have. When you improvise some values with someone you care about, what you create can seem more novel and more real.[32] You can take your conflicting dreams and reimagine them. You can *make it* and *escape it*; it helps to have someone you trust enough to share in your own reimagining. You may find that you have a better grip on what you really wanted all along, and what were just lies that you can see right through—including lies you told yourself.[33]

Swift reports that in crafting the tight, 12-track album *The Life of a Showgirl*, she employed her famous attention to detail. "Every song is on the album for hundreds of reasons," she reports.[34] In his own reaction to the album, Kelce explained that part of what he loved about it in listening to it, he could glimpse her mind at work. He explains, "It's still so poetic...her melodies and her references and stuff."[35] The Chiefs' chief music critic—as one review calls him—has a real point.[36] Maybe he's been learning something from America's favorite English teacher. Maybe they have been learning something together.

Ryan W. Davis is Associate Professor of Political Science at Brigham Young University. He writes about the value of autonomy and about when and if you can fake something till you make it true.

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[32] See Brainard 2024.

[33] Swift 2019d, 2025d, 2025e.

[34] Kelce and Kelce 2025.

[35] https://www.today.com/popculture/music/travis-kelce-favorite-song-taylor-swift-life-of-a-showgirl-rcna227445.

[36] Willman 2025.

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