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## Murder She Sang: How Contemporary Country Murder Ballads Alleviate Blame

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Murray State University Honors College

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Murder She Sang: How Contemporary Country Murder Ballads Alleviate Blame

Alyssa Hubbard

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requirements of HON 437

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Dr. Andrew Black, Professor

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Murder She Sang: How Contemporary Country Murder Ballads Alleviate Blame

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the  
Murray State University Honors Diploma

Alyssa Hubbard

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## Murder She Sang: How Contemporary Country Murder Ballads Alleviate Blame

### Introduction

Though some critics of murder ballads write off the form as being cheap, numerous, and worthless in terms of literary value, murder ballads have been used successfully since the medieval period as tools for maintaining social order – typically by warning the audience of the severe consequences that would result from committing a transgression or similarly by demonizing a specific transgressor – or as tools for social reform – usually by pushing back against the unjust institution that had led to a preventable tragedy or by justifying the murderer’s actions. This paper will situate contemporary murder ballads written by women within the modern country music industry in the long, rich tradition of murder ballads to examine how and why they have twisted the form in order to reclaim their power.

There has been a clear shift in the genre norms in that broadside ballads centered on female killers typically portrayed the subject as a cruel, heartless monster while imitating her voice to falsely repent, in order to warn women not only not to become an unnatural, sinful, corrupt wretch like the subject, but also that the crime had not even been worth what power it had given the killer, considering that the killer herself so deeply regretted it. In contrast, contemporary murder ballads typically do the opposite, justifying the female killer’s actions by painting her as an innocent victim who was greatly and irreversibly harmed – usually through abuse or adultery – and therefore allowing the listener to understand that she was acting in a way that either saved or avenged herself or that is for the greater good of society as a whole – which

could very well encourage the listener to act in a similar fashion. Where broadside ballads imitate the voices of real women to exaggerate or falsify feelings of repentance, thereby taking away any agency or power the woman had in her actions, contemporary ballads feature fictional women and stories that allow the artist behind them to explore her own voice and agency.

This paper will look at examples of contemporary – contemporary being defined here as radio era songs starting in the mid to late twentieth century and continuing to today – murder ballads written by women to analyze their methods of alleviating blame from their female subjects. Specifically, we will be looking at songs that justify the murder through the abusive nature of the victim (“Goodbye Earl” by The Chicks, “Gunpowder and Lead” by Miranda Lambert, “Church Bells” by Carrie Underwood, “Blown Away” by Carrie Underwood, and “Independence Day” by Martina McBride), as well as songs which justify the murder through the victim’s adultery (“Two Black Cadillacs” by Carrie Underwood, “No Body, No Crime” by Taylor Swift, and “The Night the Lights Went Out in Georgia” by Vicki Lawrence).

As noted by Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar in their classic study *The Madwoman in the Attic* which uses feminist criticism to examine Victorian literature, women are idealized as “angels in the house” – pure, chaste, silent, obedient – and any shortcomings of this impossible standard lead to the demonization of them as corrupt, wanton, unnatural. Such an extreme dichotomy restricts women because acting outside of the norm or claiming power results in alienation and demonization. This applies as much today as it did four hundred years ago, as industries like the country music industry continue to enforce these classifications on the women within them, viciously attacking those who would dare to challenge tradition, push back against issues such as misogyny, or label themselves as feminists. Straying outside of what is considered

normal and acceptable brings into question their sexuality, femininity, personality, loyalty, religion, patriotism, and as we will discuss later with The Chicks, all it takes is one misstep for their classification to instantly and irrevocably shift from angel to demon, with all the backlash and social repercussions that accompany that change.

Whether these artists attempt to portray themselves as angels or openly push back and accept the negative labels bestowed upon them, a safe place to truly express their feelings and voice is in their music, which can be kept separate from them as artists (at least in the eyes of the listener). Murder ballads allow female artists to reclaim their voices, agency, and power by pushing back against controversial issues like misogyny and toxic masculinity in a way that allows the listener to empathize with a message they might typically disagree with.

Contemporary murder ballads utilize pathos to make the listener empathize with the character of the murderer, which consequently leads to the listener empathizing with the real-world concerns of the artist which are being represented in the ballad. The listener feels the narrator's pain, hurt, betrayal, fear, and as the sense of injustice, vengeance, and self-preservation builds, the listener feels anxious for the narrator to act against the person wronging her and satisfaction and relief when she finally does. When those empathized feelings are consolidated with the bigger picture – women's rights, women taking power, toxic masculinity leading to abuse, the danger and injustice of misogyny – listeners who might have originally disagreed with the message are now more receptive to it.

If the ballads can inspire understanding in those who typically would not, clearly they would also encourage women who already relate to the narrator because of their personal situations to view the ballads as a form of moral instruction, which unlike the chastisement

present in broadside ballads, instead offers encouragement for them to reclaim power and reject oppression. Contemporary murder ballads are influential works and powerful tools for social reform, whether by changing prejudiced minds, inspiring action, or simply allowing a woman the opportunity and a safe space to explore her voice.

## Overview

‘Ballad’ is a term that is used loosely to describe narrative folk songs, a category which stretches to include several centuries of work within the form. Folk, or folklore, is a term that is similarly loosely defined, but nonetheless important as the basis of the ballad tradition. In her research on ballads as an important part of American folklore, Lousie Pound defines folklore as “. . . lore traditional among homogeneous groups, with no limitations on the basis of origins” (364). Ballads are one of many forms (including legends, tales, and superstitions among others) used as a means of communicating lore, yet despite an undeniable popularity, ballads are also a controversial form amongst critics. This bias against the form, which relates to class tension between the working class and the bourgeoisie, permeates even to official definitions of ballads: “In Thomas Dycke’s *A New General English Dictionary*, the association with grimy street people was even clearer: the ballad is termed a “song, but now commonly applied to the meaner sort, that are sung in the streets by the vulgar” (qtd. in Fulford 317). The meanness and vulgarity to which this definition refers relates in part to the type of person who typically sold and sung ballads, and in part to the subject matter of such songs. As noted by Mark Canuel in his research on the connection between ballads and penal laws, ballads were the main genre used to represent

criminality and the punishment of said criminals (Canuel 123), and the commonality of these subjects within the ballad genre led to a more specific classification: the murder ballad.

As Ellen O'Brien explains, murder ballads act as an "astonishing disclosure," appealing to a morbid, shocking aesthetic likely to enthrall and entertain the public. The real life victims described in the ballads have been "transformed into art objects by the inexplicable artistry of an impassioned murderer" (O'Brien 18) – in other words, the more gruesome and tragic the murder, the more artistically pleasing it is. From the sixteenth to the nineteenth century there was an oversaturation of murder ballads, with upwards of several thousand or even millions in circulation (O'Brien 18). No matter what kind of crime occurred within the song, or the details of the specific homicide, murder ballads typically remained concerned with "the proverbial idea that *murder will out*" (Atkinson 1). Though traditional murder ballads were supposedly based on real life occurrences, guilt and justice take shape in a supernatural way, such as with the so-called bleeding corpse motif, in which a murderer's guilt is revealed when their proximity causes the victim's body to begin bleeding again (Atkinson 2).

The origins of many of these works are unknown (Pound 364), and because, as renowned collector of American murder ballads, Olive Woolley Burt explains, many of them were passed down orally rather than written down—or even written down but still lost with time – many ballads have been entirely forgotten ("The Minstrelsy of Murder" 263). Though collections of murder ballads did arise eventually – with one well-known example being F. J. Child's anthology of over 300 ballads, *The English and Scottish Popular Ballads* [Pound 361] – because ballads were often considered of low or no literary value, many ballads were lost that might have otherwise been saved.

Though ballads are a form that have changed considerable in the last few centuries, murder ballads in particular hold a cultural intrigue in their utilization of the public sensation of “True Discovery” (Kane 220). Similar to the popular genre of True Crime today with its morbid and frighteningly real subjects, True Discovery allows the listener to feel as if they are being let in on an astonishing secret. Part of the appeal lies in the assurance that the narratives being portrayed are completely factual occurrences, which inspires the thrilling yet terrifying idea that the murderer could get away with their crimes and the anticipation of punishment and justice (Atkinson 19), as well as a sense of satisfaction when order is restored (Atkinson 4). The popularity of murder ballads also relies on their timely response to the crime/execution, using the public interest in the case to their advantage (McAleer 2-3). However, murder ballads were not purely for entertainment purposes, though they were a “festive form” (Atkinson 4), they also drew conclusions (often moralizing) about the deeper meaning of the crime committed. Because the ballads typically centered on criminals already convicted and sentenced to execution, there wasn’t a question of guilt or innocence, but rather a contemplation of the “aesthetic and legal connotations” (O’Brien 18) of the crime – why the criminal did what they did. In some cases, the interpretation, very much like a short moral tacked on to the end of a story, served to “fend off the persistent complaints of the pious that crime literature of the streets was morally poisonous” (Altick qtd. in O’Brien 20), thus evading censure. On the other hand, the entire purpose of other ballads was to deliver a moralistic message (Burt, *The Minstrelsy of Murder* 263), aiming to instill an aversion to crime in its audience by playing to their fear of punishment (Atkinson 15), both penal – execution – and spiritual – Hell.

Ultimately, murder ballads show what is expected both legally and socially, how those expectations are broken by transgressors, and how those transgressions are dealt with by figures of authority, both human and divine. Whether the purpose of a ballad was to entertain, warn, preach, or reform, they cannot exist impartially or objectively. The view of the crime, the presentation of the criminal and victim, the language used, and the inclusion of a moralizing lesson are all factors that directly play upon the listener's reason and emotions to push them in the direction of a specific interpretation.

### Broadside Murder Ballads

Ballads and murder ballads first emerged into popular culture in Fifteenth-century England and were a well-known and influential part of Elizabethan culture (Bialo 295). These ballads were anonymous and cheap – sold for a penny or half-penny (Canuel 123). The quantity was great, printed on broadside (large sheets of paper printed on one side; also called 'penny sheet' in reference to its low cost), so the ballads were inexpensive and readily available. The beggars who sold broadside ballads to survive relied heavily on performance to catch the attention of passersby and potential customers (Bialo 296-297). Thus ballad peddlers were not only a common sight on the streets of London, but also quite the spectacle, performing ostentatiously to win pennies from their auditors. They were sold near Covent Garden and Seven Dials (Canuel 127), both of which were public spaces near the location where many public executions took place at Tyburn Tree. Executions were "festive occasions" which drew large

crowds, providing ample opportunities for peddlers to perform and sell their wares, utilizing the public intrigue in the particular crime to garner interest (Atkinson 4).

The popularity of the form continued into the Victorian era, providing huge numbers of astonishing disclosures and so-called last-lamentations, or murder ballads from the point of view of the criminal which express regret and repentance (O'Brien 16). Murder ballads continued to be concerned with the aesthetics of crime, specifically favoring themes of sin, such as greed, jealousy, and lust (Canuel 124). In their portrayal of the legal and social transgressions of capital crime, murder ballads provide important insight into the thoughts and feelings of the working class. Despite this, and despite their popularity amongst the class they represented, the ballads were actively hated by Puritans, who believed they encouraged crime (O'Brien 20). They were disliked by the bourgeoisie, who thought they were cheap (O'Brien 17) and who were already wary of the working class as dangerous criminals (Kane 231). They were also written off by scholars who believed them to be literarily "despicable and worthless" (O'Brien 17). Typically, they were seen as being of little value because of the sheer quantity of them in addition to their low commercial value, not to mention the fact that their authors were generally unknown and likely uneducated (O'Brien 17). Art and aesthetics were divided by class, leading members of the upper class to hold the idea that, as Oscar Wilde wrote in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, "crime was to [the working class] what art is to [the upper class], simply a method of procuring extraordinary sensations" (qtd. in O'Brien 17). This idea persisted that the working class were dangerous criminals, yet wholly incapable of representing such criminality in a way that was of literary merit (O'Brien 17). This shows how ballads are representative of the mistrust and crime

anxiety held by the upper class for the laboring and merchant classes (Kane 231), and the incredible amount of crime ballads in circulation seemed to confirm those fears.

### American (Anglo-Scottish) Murder Ballads

Scottish murder ballads followed a tradition very similar to their English cousins, with local crimes of interest being retold as ballads and sold to crowds gathered to witness an execution (Burt, *The Minstrelsy of Murder* 263). As in England, both men and women wrote, sung, and sold ballads (Wollstadt 295), but in the case of Scottish ballads, there was more of a sense that while the power of upper class men was present and accepted, it was not rewarded or celebrated. Scottish ballads belonged more to the revels of society, and their ballads reflected that in the idea that “good things do not happen to the men who rule society” (Wollstadt 313). The women of Scottish ballads were still punished and criminalized for having any kind of power over men, whether through murder or simply the power to deny love, but they also tended to be more manipulative and active participants than their English counterparts (Wollstadt 298). Scottish ballads are known for the “murder and mayhem” contained in them (Burt qtd. in Reichman 60-61), which is clearly seen in their influence on American ballads which also favored gruesome, chaotic tales of homicide (Burt qtd. in Reichman 60-61).

As Anglo-Scottish immigrants settled in America, they continued practicing the customs of their homelands (Burt, *The Minstrelsy of Murder* 263). Balladry was a common and popular practice, and helped to spread the folklore of the settlers across the new world (Burt, *Murder Ballads of Mormonhood* 141). At the same time, new folklore was being created as the events,

crimes, and experiences of life continued to be recorded through new ballads (Burt, *Murder Ballads of Mormonhood* 141).

In both style and the ballads that ended up compiled in anthologies, old-world ballads still held the predominant interest in their longer history and style (Pound 361). Because of the selectiveness of anthologies, the lack of a clear practice for preserving ballads as they were not considered literature, as well as the fact that most ballads were passed down orally and never printed, many American murder ballads (excluding some centered on more famous subjects, usually notorious outlaws like Jesse James) have been lost forever (Burt, *The Minstrelsy of Murder* 263). Because of the way radio has drastically changed the music industry and gradually invalidated the oral tradition, as time goes on more and more ballads will be lost as the last descendants to remember the ballads sung by their parents and grandparents grow old and pass away, taking their memories with them. Some collectors, such as Burt, have done their best to recover as many ballads as they can before they fade out of memory altogether. Disregarding the poetic styles preferred by scholars, they believe every ballad is worth recording, thus preserving multiple generations of tradition.

### Contemporary Murder Ballads

Not only are unrecorded ballads being lost with time, but also the ballad tradition itself has fallen out of practice since the invention of phonographs and the radio, which have “penetrated remote places and . . . cheapened as well as multiplied the output of song” (Pound 365). Today, there is no longer much need for recording events through song, nor for passing

down songs orally, when the internet provides access to an immeasurable amount of information. Thus, the tradition of ballad writing and singing has transformed drastically in the last century, though it has not faded away altogether. If on one side of the tradition there is the “anonymous folk singer, preserved only in a ballet reposing somewhere in a university archive” (Long 227), then on the more contemporary side there is the popular, commercial singer, whose music is widely known and distributed (Long 227). Murder ballads have entered mainstream radio-era music, finding a new home in country music, among other genres.

One example of a contemporary murder ballad, fictional and widely known, is “Folsom Prison Blues” by Johnny Cash. Though the events and narrator of the murder ballad are fictional, the famous line “But I shot a man in Reno just to watch him die/When I hear that whistle blowin’ / I hang my head and cry” exudes a loneliness and sorrowful regret which spoke deeply to his audience: “That contrast between singer and train, between incarceration and freedom, is the ache of the song, evoking loss, alienation, guilt, and longing” (Beck 38). Cash was popular among the incarcerated, but regardless of if his audience was jailed or free, as Cash himself explained, the song remains so relatable because “most of us are living in one little kind of prison or another” (Johnny Cash, qtd. in Beck 39). The intrigue of contemporary murder ballads lies less in the “astonishing disclosure” of the act of murder itself (O’Brien 16), and more in the deeply human emotions which the act is rooted in. Director Quentin Tarantino describes Cash as singing “tales of men trying to escape...But one thing Cash never lets them escape is regret...When a man faces a rope or 99 years in a cage for the choices he made, when he tells the story of those choices, he tells it not with bravado, but an overwhelming sense of regret” (qtd. In Beck 38). In “Folsom Prison Blues,” the overwhelming sense of regret conveyed by the narrator

as they hear the whistle of a train passing by, themselves imprisoned, is less of a moralistic warning against homicide as a broadside ballad might have framed it, and more so an exploration of the hopelessness and guilt of realizing the irreversible consequences of one's own actions. Contemporary murder ballads may be different than their broadside ancestors, but the heart of the tradition remains the same, capturing the intrigue and sympathy – whether for the victim or the murderer – of the listener.

### Murder Ballads as Tools for Maintaining Social Order

Murder ballads hold power in the heightened emotions they inspire and their ability to elicit both sympathy and disgust, as well as in the elimination of traditional hierarchies of power. According to the French philosopher Michel Foucault, murder “posits the relation between power and the people...[prowling] the confines of the law...sometimes against and sometimes with it” (qtd. in O'Brien 22). Allowing such subversion of social order to exist sets a dangerous precedent to working class people, who may decide to act in a similar fashion in order to take power for themselves. The murder ballads which seek to avoid such transgressions function as “moral fable[s]” or cautionary tales in which the consequences of acting in such a way are clearly and brutally laid out for all to see and be warned (O'Brien 19). The ballads had an influential ability to inspire a fear of crime by exploring the punishment faced by criminals (Atkinson 15). Fear of punishment, in this case both execution and an eternity spent in Hell, is one way in which potential criminals are dissuaded. Another way criminality was suppressed and social order maintained was through the demonization of the transgressor and the angelicizing of

the victim. In this way, the ballad elicits the disgust and indignation of the listener, who desires justice to be served. These ballads show a glimpse into “a world characterized by social and moral chaos” (Atkinson 5), which inspires a desire “to see order restored” (Atkinson 4).

A subversive murder, such as a servant killing their master, a lower class person killing an upper class person, or a wife killing her husband, is considered an “attack on legal, sexual, and moral authority” (O’Brien 19) which demands the murderer to be publicly punished and made an example of. However, social order was not just maintained through individual punishment – one criminal made into a scapegoat – but also in portraying the working class as a whole as a dangerous criminal class (O’Brien 15). The working class was thought by some scholars to agree with this portrayal because of their love and celebration of ballads in which such a portrayal exists (O’Brien 15), as well as because of the moral warnings added to the ballads they wrote which warned against potential criminals (O’Brien 19), as if acknowledging that all members of the working class have not only the potential but the natural inclination towards crime such as murder. Thus, a self-policing was perpetuated within the class, which viewed itself as “different, alien and hostile” (O’Brien 15). As a result, when murder ballads included numerous iterations of phrases such as, “‘hanging is too good for such a villain,’ ‘she her deserts will get,’ ‘the blood of the murdered will not cry in vain’” (O’Brien 19), it seemed clear that they approved heartily of the punishments received, going so far as to insist that God himself authorized such punishments (Canuel 126). Thus, even if some small amount of pity is held for the criminal, the listener still “[adopts] a sense of satisfaction with the justice and probative value of those punishments” (Canuel 126). As long as the listener accepts, even in

general terms, that the murder was wrong and the punishment is justified, social order is maintained.

As with the associating of the working class with criminality, women in particular were demonized as being “other” or “unnatural,” with many moralistic ballads being specifically addressed to them and given such sensationalist titles as “A Warning For All Desperate Women” and “The Unnatural Wife” (Kane 219). There was a heavy emphasis and coverage of cases of women killers, specifically women who killed their husbands, with this focus reflected not only in ballads but in the English law itself. When a husband killed his wife, it was considered capital murder, which was punishable by execution. In direct contrast, when a wife killed her husband, it was considered petty treason, meaning that rather than simply killing another human, the wife had committed an act of betrayal against her country (Kane 223). The difference between these two sentences lies in the commodification of women as the legal property of their husbands, meaning that when a wife killed her husband, she directly disrupted the social hierarchy which placed her below him (Kane 224). This type of transgression was too large to remain private – or unresolved – and it became a matter of quickly and very publicly restoring the social order to its state before the transgression occurred (Kane 223-224). One way in which petty treason was dealt with and warned against was through these murder ballads (Kane 226), which demonized women, insisting on their natural inclination towards sin. Women were categorized into two beings: the angel, who is virtuous, pure, and submissive, and the demon/monster, who is unfeminine, corrupt, and ugly (Gilbert and Gubar 17, 28). Not only were women forced into these categories with nothing in between, but the ballads went further to suggest that even angelic women have the potential to become monsters, or even that the monstrous self already

resided within the women, waiting for some trigger or catalyst to be set free (Gilbert and Gubar 29). Thus ballads served as a warning for all women, reminding them of the threat of their own sinful natures, which might easily transform them into something hideous and dangerous if they don't take cautions against it.

For example, in a ballad written for the execution of Katherine Francis in 1629 called "A Warning for Wives," the author, a man named Martin Parker, wrote:

The Story which I now recite,  
expounds your meanings eville.  
Those women yt in blood delight,  
are ruled by the deuill,  
else how can th' wife her husband kill,  
or th' Mother her owne childs blood spill,

*Oh women,*

*Murderous women,*

*Whereon are your minds?*

...

Where she condemned was by Law,  
in Clarkenwell to be burned,  
Unto which place they did her draw,  
where she to ashes turned,  
A death, though cruell, yet too milde  
For one that hath a heart so vilde.

*Oh women, etc*

Let all good wiues a warning take,  
in Country and in city,  
and thinke how they shall at a stake  
be burned without pittie.

If they can haue such barbarous hearts,  
what man or woman will take their parts,

*Oh women, etc* (“A Pepysian Garland” 300-305)

Throughout this ballad, Parker uses words with strong negative connotations to describe the subject, insisting that she is evil, cruel, sadistic, and satanic, and refers to her going against nature in her commitment of petty treason – how could a wife possibly kill her husband unless she is unnatural? He goes on to directly address all wives, warning them to think about the horrible fate Katherine Francis faced for her actions: burning to death at the stake (a punishment which Parker claims is “too milde” for her crimes). There is no pity expressed, but the point of the ballad is not to question Katherine’s motivations, but rather to make an example out of her to prevent any other potential husband killers from following in her footsteps.

Beyond the demonization of women killers, many ballads also imitated their voices, creating a false narrative of regret and repentance (Kane 226). This was meant to prove to all women that not only did the act of murder transform the killers into monsters and result in their execution and eternal damnation – but also that it hadn’t even been worth it. If the women killers themselves felt sorrow and regret at their crimes, then clearly there was no possible reason for other women to follow a similar course of action, as the one thing the act of murder was

supposed to do – give power to women over their oppressors – did not happen. In imitating their voices, these ballads took any agency women killers managed to claim through their actions, as “...as soon as one becomes a subject for literature, one loses the power to interact” (Alkalay-Gut 354). With their voices stolen, it was impossible for them to relate their side of the story, why they did what they did, meaning that the narrative presented in the ballads could never be entirely genuine, instead combining the reality of the case with a politically-driven fiction (Geng 95). The women in these ballads are no longer real women with real desires, fears, and motivations, but rather embody what Gilbert and Gubar call “male dread of women and... male scorn of female creativity” (Gilbert and Gubar 29-30)

There was a persistent anxiety held by men of women who existed outside of the gender ideal, who posed a threat to the social order which placed them on top, and so, as Benjamin Harbert notes in his research on incarcerated women, cases of women killers were labeled a “failure of domestic obligation” (Harbert 128). Equating women who committed murder to women who existed in some fashion outside of what was considered “true womanhood” (Harbert 128) means that any woman who demonstrated ‘unfeminine’ traits such as assertiveness and aggressiveness (Gilbert and Gubar 28), as well as passion, sexual confidence, athleticism, and intelligence (Lombroso and Ferrero qtd. in Harbert 128-129) were automatically assumed to have the potential to commit petty treason. This confirms the necessity of the women killers being represented in the murder ballads to repent of their transgressions and consent to their punishments – thereby consenting to the social and legal social structure she exists within.

## Murder Ballads as Tools for Social Reform

And yet, there existed murder ballads which recognized the “political use of moral disorder” (John Kucich qtd. in O’Brien 21). These murder ballads, which understood and embraced the “aesthetic power of violence” (O’Brien 20), went beyond a superficial interest in sensation to “[voice] insights into the legal and social discourses surrounding criminality, murder, and capital punishment” (O’Brien 22). These ballads looked at “social reality critically, humorously, and from diverse points of view” (O’Brien 19), and any moral warning attached were simply there to get Puritans – who believe ballads to encourage crime – to ease their protestations of the form (O’Brien 20). The moral frame and seeming concern with the punishment of the criminal hid a more pressing concern with determining the source of the crime (O’Brien 18): the economic, social, and political institutions that placed pressure on members of the working class. In acknowledging that crime sometimes occurred because of reasons and pressures beyond the control or means of the criminal, the listener is better able to sympathize with them – perhaps not so much as to entirely justify the murder, but enough to shift some of the blame off of the murderer and onto the institutions that led to the murder occurring (O’Brien 23). As Ellen O’Brien puts it: “...preach to us the sanctity of Victorian moral law, and we will sing to you bodies dripping in gore” (O’Brien 27). That is to say, in their understanding of the social and legal sources of crimes such as murder, it is revealed that the working class does not, in fact, always remain “silent about or acquiescent to ideologies which constructed them as criminal” (O’Brien 34).

Though broadside ballads did not openly justify or encourage murder like some contemporary murder ballads do today, they were still capable of challenging the social order in the sympathy and pity held for the criminals, which politically should have been totally condemned, if not altogether demonized. Cases where “contextual information redirects moral judgment away from the individual criminals and towards social conditions and legal problems” relieve the burden of sole blame from the shoulders of the criminals (O’Brien 20). For example, in a ballad called “Dreadful Murder at Eriswell,” in which two poachers kill a groundskeeper, the blame is attributed to the pressures placed on members of the working class by the Game Laws, which “[have] been the cause,/Of many a life’s blood to be shed” (O’Brien 20), thus taking the focus off of the crime committed and placing it instead on the pressing need to repeal the laws. Outside of social and political institutions, guilt was also absolved through reasoning related to the power and influence of Satan (O’Brien 20), or otherwise attributed to mental illness (O’Brien 33). In some cases, the ballads even showed injustice occurring through incorrect convictions and improper investigations (Atkinson 14), which in turn leads to a mistrust of punishments as final as execution.

In order for women to use murder ballads as a tool for social reform, they first had to reclaim and subsequently dismantle the idea of “the angel in the house” as well as its inevitable counterpart, the monster (Gilbert and Gubar 17). As long as this classification of women exists, so too does a lack of agency, as blaming every action on a natural inclination towards sin and corruption silences the voices of these women and erases their true reasonings and motivations which could serve as justification, or at the very least point an accusatory finger back at whatever institution had ultimately landed them in this position. Women ballad writers, in their attempts to

push back against the genre norms, had to utilize the form and its conventions which already existed, choosing to reinvent them rather than reject them. As Gilbert and Gubar explain in reference to Jane Austen, the use of so called “dreadful figures,” essentially dark doppelgangers, allow a way in which a women writer’s anger and desire to escape could be translated without reflecting directly onto their heroines or themselves (Gilbert and Gubar 79). This applies to murder ballads because in order for women to explore issues of power, they had to separate themselves from the narrator of their ballads. This separation serves as protection against the critiques that would be levelled at them if they directly spoke out about the issues explored in their music. Intentionally playing into the role of the angel also allowed women to reclaim power, since if as nurturers and healers they have the power to bring health and life, the opposite must be true: angels have the power to *deny* life, to bring death (Gilbert and Gubar 26). This once again returns the ability to murder back to a form of power for women, rather than a result of corruption.

Most cases of murder ballads written by women about themselves or a version of themselves were fictional accounts rather than true confessions, but even a symbolic murder could still represent real sentiment (Alkalay-Gut 354), real frustration with and pushback against misogyny and sexism. In reclaiming the form of murder ballads which for so long had been used against them, women were reclaiming their voices and therefore their agency, as the person in control of the narrative is also the person with the power to “define and control reality” (Gilbert and Gubar 142).

Murder ballads serve as an effective form for social reform, as they ““speak the truth without saying the words”” (Holly Near qtd. in Love 77), meaning that they have the ability to

substitute storytelling, a more universal and visceral method, for a rational argument, such as the injustice of sexism and the treatment of women. it. As Judy Kutulas notes in her research on the connection between popular song and expectations for romantic relationships, appealing to the listener's empathy and sense of injustice in this way challenges them to "reconsider what they had always heard and believed" (Kutulas 687). In contemporary murder ballads, women tell detailed stories of abuse, adultery, and betrayal to convince their listeners that their act of murder was entirely justified, and in most cases, the listeners would undoubtedly side with the murderers rather than the victims (Harbert 130). But far from simply being tales of vigilante justice and revenge, the symbolic murders in these songs go deeper to, as musician Graham Nash puts it, "[raise] the bar of how men should treat women and how women should treat themselves" (qtd. in Kutulas 692) by providing a safe place for women to address their fears and sorrow, their desires and needs (Kutulas 699). Not only does this type of murder ballad push back against the traditional social order by addressing the injustice of the treatment of women, but they also directly inspire social change through the young listeners who learn about love, respect, and equality from them, taking those values with them as they age (Kutulas 682).

## Genre Overview

The contemporary country music industry is notable for its embrace of traditional values, including Christianity, patriotism, and conventional family roles, as well as a specific sense of identity which culminates in an us-versus-them mentality that anyone who does not align with these values is an outsider or a traitor. Expectations for male artists and female artists differ

significantly, with men allowed to sing about topics such as sex and alcohol which women would be heavily criticized for. As noted by Stephanie Vander Well, women in the country music industry were marketed heavily on their domestic respectability, posing them as successful wives, mothers, daughters, and homemakers in addition to—or rather, in spite of—the success of their careers (Vander Well 182). The public persona of the Good Christian Southern Belle who always followed her husband or father’s leadership and judgement (Pruitt 92), was a continuation of the idealization of women as pure, chaste, silent angels. Meeting the standard of this measurement of women were held to was an impossible task but a necessary one, as any perceived failure to comply resulted in harsh backlash from both the media and the audience. For the women of the country music industry, there was no middle ground or gray area to exist in, only a clear warning that “if they do not behave like angels they must be monsters” (Gilbert and Gubar 53), substituting “monster” for other vicious titles such as “slut,” “bitch,” or “psycho.” If a female country artist dared to exist outside the angelic standard, such as in owning her body and embracing her sexuality, she would never be able to escape the labels put upon her, and by consequence, her music, even if she attempted to cross back over the bridge and be an angel again, which we will see in the case of The Chicks<sup>1</sup>. Above all else, a woman was not allowed to be angry. Anger is a masculine emotion, and while it may have been acceptable for women to be angry on the behalf of men or in agreement with men’s anger, certainly anger independent of or directed towards men or industries that benefit them is not.

Choosing to exist outside the norm is a dangerous risk to take, holding the possibility of scandal and backlash that neither an apology nor continuing to fight back can fix. Lesley Pruitt

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<sup>1</sup> Throughout the paper, I will refer to the group as the name they changed to, The Chicks, rather than The Dixie Chicks.

explains how in 2003 at a concert in London, the lead singer of The Chicks, Natalie Maines, made a comment concerning how ashamed the group was that President Bush was from their home state of Texas, due to his war on Iraq (Pruitt 89). The group was essentially “cancelled” before cancel culture had become prominent, with news channels and talk shows bashing them and their characters, radio stations boycotting their music, and even mass destruction parties of their CDs (Pruitt 89-90), reminiscent of organized book burnings. The group initially apologized and “repeatedly sought to prove they are patriotic, powerless, and not provocative” (Pruitt 94), but despite this, the group were martyred and made an example of. An example for whom? Not for men, certainly, because male country artist Willie Nelson was praised, or at least respected even by those who disagreed with the sentiment, for making similar anti-war comments during the Vietnam War (Pruitt 96). The Chicks were not awarded the same respect for their opinion—if the group wasn’t being portrayed as being actively malicious, they were written off as being too young or stupid to properly understand the complexities of the political situation (Pruitt 97).

When it became clear that apologizing would not satisfy, The Chicks decided to embrace their anger instead, releasing a song called, “Not Ready to Make Nice,” and taking part in a photoshoot which involved the group posing nude with various buzzwords from articles about them (“Traitors,” “Dixie Sluts,” “Big Mouth,” etc) written on their bodies (Pruitt 90). However, this move resulted in more backlash, with the risqué photoshoot cementing the public opinion of the group as being sluts, and the song, though making it past the radio boycott on some stations (Pruitt 90), adding fuel to the fire as it invalidated the earlier apology. Other female artists in the industry feared similar backlash, including Taylor Swift, who in her 2019 documentary *Miss Americana* admitted her former apolitical stance being a result of her fear of ending up in the

same place as the group. Swift, and many other artists, listened to the advice given to The Chicks by their critics to, “Shut up and sing” (Pruitt 91).

Yet, other female country artists managed to walk the fine line of keeping their public persona separate from the messages contained within their songs. Such a tactic could not work for The Chicks, who because of their failure to “maintain the image of the ‘good country woman’” (Pruitt 95), had their identities intertwined with their music. While the examples below primarily focus on contemporary music, the earlier artists Kitty Wells, who serves as a sort of transitional figure between the oral folk tradition and commercial radio ballads, did manage such a distinction because of their domestic respectability. Wells “appeared devoted to her family” (Vander Well 175), and thus she could get away with playing more sexual or cold characters within her music because her audience was aware that she was playing a role, not expressing her true values. Yet in many ways, Wells was in fact exploiting her angelic public persona to safely explore “the hidden pain and shame” (Vander Well 180) of working-class women, with the complex emotions and desires felt by divorcees and women with unfaithful husbands being investigated among other similarly underrepresented characters. Contemporary murder ballads operate in a similar fashion, allowing pushback against issues like sexism and misogyny while relying on the separation between artist and narrator to keep the listener aware that the artist themselves did not murder anyone and does not actually condone murder. As well as that if the listener does not like the message being pushed, it can be hidden behind the idea that the song is simply for macabre entertainment purposes. Another female country artist who walked the fine line between respectability and power is Dolly Parton. Parton’s public persona is ladylike, feminine, and glamorous, while her music explores topics such as the hardships of growing up in

poverty and the obstacles women face in the workplace (Hamessley 159). Parton herself has spoken about the delicacy of her interactions with men in the industry, how she had to learn “how to diffuse a situation without injuring their pride” (qtd. in Hamessley 158). Even her hypersexualized appearance straddles the line of respectability, because while it irreversibly labeled her as a whore, she found that it protected her from abuse, as hypersexualized women appear rich, and rich women are given more respect than poor women (Hamessley 157). Parton embodies the symbol of the steel magnolia (“Gentle as the sweet magnolia, strong as steel” [from “Eagle When She Flies”]), in that she is able to successfully maintain her femininity without sacrificing her agency.

Even in cases where there is no clear distinction between artist and narrator and the allegory is obvious or directly stated, contemporary murder ballads typically target the listener’s pathos to ensure their support of the narrator over the victim. While broadside ballads either whole-heartedly condemned the murderer or very loosely pushed back against a certain industry while still ultimately showing regret for the need of a sin like murder, contemporary murder ballads tend to justify murder through means such as poisoning the act as a necessary evil for the greater good of society and the safety of others, or going as far as to celebrate the murder as righteous revenge against an unforgivable transgression like abuse or adultery.

## Artist Biographies

In this section I will describe the subjects of my study, providing context necessary to understand them as artists and how their work reflects them.

The Chicks initially formed in 1989 but didn't form their iconic sound until lead singer Natalie Maines joined the group in 1995. In the late nineties and the turn of the century, the band earned success and a large fan base due to their unique sound, instrumentation, and personality with their albums *Wide Open Spaces* (1998) and *Fly* (1999), the latter of which contained the beloved, campy murder ballad, "Goodbye Earl." The backlash the Chicks faced following their 2003 scandal because of a casual comment set a precedent for other artists, especially female artists, to "shut up and sing" or in other words, to keep politics and their music careers completely separate. Following *Taking the Long Way* (2006), which vindicated their struggles by winning the Grammy award for Album of the Year, the group didn't put out another album until *Gaslighter* in 2020, which was also when the band rebranded from Dixie Chicks to The Chicks, due to the connotation of Confederate sympathy to the word "Dixie."

Miranda Lambert released her first professionally recorded album, *Kerosene*, in 2005, immediately associating herself with the role of a feisty, furious scorned woman in the title track "Kerosene." The character Lambert plays embraces the title of "hell-raiser" bestowed on the artist by the media: "Forget your high society / I'm soakin' it in kerosene / Light 'em up and watch them burn/Teach them what they need to learn, ha!" Throughout the song, revealed to be a murder ballad in the bridge, the narrator displays a defiant, rebellious attitude while also lamenting her loss of faith and belief in love due to her lover cheating on her with another woman. Lambert's fury carried on into her next album, *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend* (2007) with the title track "Crazy Ex-Girlfriend" in which a jealous narrator confronts her ex-lover and his new girlfriend by causing a violent scene in a bar, and the murder ballad "Gunpowder and Lead," in which the narrator waits with a shotgun for her abusive lover to return home. Later, in her 2011

album *Four the Record* in the track “Mama’s Broken Heart,” Lambert addresses the suppression of women’s anger and the societal expectation for women to always appear composed and ladylike.

The song centers on a female narrator is chastised by her mother due to her emotional outburst following a breakup, mirroring how her own anger is painted as being unnecessary, out of control, and violent, because anger leads to rebellion, and female rebellion “must be silenced” (Gilbert and Gubar 36). The song begins with the narrator having cut her hair with “rusty kitchen scissors,” abused alcohol, and repeatedly cried the name of her ex-lover, none of which seem to have caught the ire of her mother until their neighbors call the police and others in the community begin gossiping about the situation. At which point, the narrator’s mother bluntly informs her daughter that “it don’t matter how you feel, it only matters how you look,” directly prioritizing public appearance over personal emotions. The narrator’s mother then instructs her to fix her makeup, get control over her feelings and keep them private, and to act “like a lady.” Nevertheless, the narrator isn’t going down without a fight, and as she plans her revenge on her ex-lover, she reflects that her mother comes from a “softer generation” in which saving face takes precedence over emotions, no matter how strong. By dismissing this practice as soft (which is ironic in that it seems much more difficult and disciplined than simply giving in to feeling), the narrator is implying that allowing oneself to feel, even when it hurts, and respond to those feelings with equal abandon is the harder, more painful yet more brave thing to do. The repeated message of the song is that the heartbreak that the narrator is dealing with is her own, not her mother’s (“This ain’t my mama’s broken heart”), implying that not only is it not her mother’s place to tell her how to respond to her own emotions, but also that it’s easy to tell someone to

ignore or stop feeling something that you yourself do not feel. Taking this message out of the song and applying it to Lambert's actual life, she is addressing her critics who demonize her for her anger, clearly firing back at them: *My anger is my own, and you cannot tell me that it is wrong or how to handle it.* The song also deals with the idea of vengeance, just like in her murder ballads, and the narrator admits that one cannot "get revenge and keep a spotless reputation," or in other words, a women cannot take back her power without facing the social ramifications for doing so. Throughout her career, Lambert has separated herself from the idea of the angel, presenting herself as angry and unapologetic about it, but also as a complex human being with an equal softness and tender heart, as demonstrated by tracks like "The House that Built Me" (*Revolution* 2009), a nostalgic, emotionally vulnerable song about returning to her childhood home as a stranger.

Carrie Underwood launched her musical journey by winning the singing competition television show *American Idol* in 2005, building a highly successful career off her subsequent record deal. Unlike The Chicks, who were known for picking fights within the country music industry, and Miranda Lambert, the so-called "hell-raiser," Underwood aligned with the "angel" classification much more closely with her golden, good girl, all-American persona. As a wife, mother, and Christian (going so far as to play a youth pastor in the 2011 film *Soul Surfer*), Underwood fit traditional ideals for country women, yet her powerful voice and choice of subject matter all conflicted with the image of Underwood as soft and delicate. Underwood has several murder ballads and revenge songs under her belt ("Before He Cheats" from *Some Hearts* [2005]; "Blown Away" and "Two Black Cadillacs" from *Blown Away* [2012]; "Church Bells" from *Storyteller* [2015]), as well as several songs that call out men for bad behavior and warn girls

away from them (“Cowboy Casanova” and “Undo It” from *Play On* [2009]; “Good Girl” from *Blown Away*). Part of Underwood’s success lies in her separation of her public persona from the narrator and lyrical content of her music, while an equally important part lies in her almost motherly advice to younger girls, such as in tracks like “Good Girl” in which the narrator speaks from a place of experience and wisdom to a younger, more naive girl, insisting that the man she is interested in is “no good, girl/no good for you.” Even her more emotionally uncontrolled tracks like “Before He Cheats,” in which the narrator destroys the car of her adulterous lover, are presented as ultimately protecting other women from suffering the same negative experiences that she did: “I might have saved a little trouble for the next girl...” As we will see, Underwood masterfully captures her listeners’ empathy by presenting the female subjects of her songs as innocent victims acting righteously in their own defense as well as to the benefit of society as a whole, all while maintaining her own public angelic status.

Martina McBride started her music career with RCA Nashville Records in 1991 by opening for Garth Brooks, releasing her debut album *The Time Has Come* in 1992. While she hasn’t experienced the same level of global fame and success that artists like Carrie Underwood and Taylor Swift have, McBride has established a niche for herself in country music which has earned her multiple Grammy award nominations. One of her most popular songs, “Independence Day” (*The Way That I Am* [1993]), has become a staple of country music, using patriotic ideas of freedom and liberty to insist on the righteousness and necessity of fighting back against abuse.

Taylor Swift began her music career in 2005, releasing her debut album *Taylor Swift* a year later in 2006 at just sixteen years old. Swift had an innocent, good girl persona due to her youth, which allowed her raw, emotional songs not to be considered out of control but rather the

product of a young teenage girl expressing herself and her clumsy, naive experiences with love. Even at such a young age, however, Swift was already being sexualized by the media, with one article referring to the sixteen-year-old as a “blonde bombshell.” As she shifted into adulthood and her fame grew exponentially, Swift was constantly under scrutiny and her good girl persona always under attack. The major source of criticism for Swift which has spanned her entire career and become its own idiom (i.e., dating/breaking up with “...more men than Taylor Swift”) is the idea that Swift has had an excessive amount of relationships. Her highly emotional breakup songs inadvertently led to the media bestowing a new nature to Swift along the lines of Miranda Lambert’s Crazy Ex-Girlfriend persona—a jealous, hysterical woman who ruins the lives of her ex-lovers—to the point that Swift addressed the concept in her hit song “Blank Space.” In the song, Swift parodies the role of a beautiful yet insane playgirl who takes pleasure in emotionally torturing her lovers, exaggerating her own representation of the best and worst sides of her relationships in her music: “So it’s gonna be forever/Or it’s gonna go down in flames.” The symbol of a snake became associated with Swift when she was canceled in 2016, due to an on-going feud with rapper Kanye West among other reasons, with Swift being painted as fake and manipulative. She returned with her 2017 album *Reputation* which, similarly to “Not Ready to Make Nice” by The Chicks, let her embrace a defensive, angry, unapologetic attitude, completely abandoning her good girl persona while also regaining her public favor by expressing her side to the story. By 2019 (with *Lover*) and 2020 (with *Folklore* and *Evermore*), Swift’s music had let go of most of its anger to work towards her own healing and happiness. “No Body, No Crime” (*Evermore*) is Swift’s only murder ballad, but it is only one of many songs in which

Swift has reclaimed her voice following her scandal, using the fictional narrative to express her feelings of the necessity of speaking/acting out against villainy and tapping in to her own power.

Vicki Lawrence is primarily an actress, appearing in shows such as *The Carol Burnett Show* (1967-1978), with her singular hit song being “The Night the Lights Went Out in Georgia” (1972). The song reached number one on the US Billboard Hot 100, and went on to be covered by prominent country music artists such as Reba McEntire (though McEntire’s version only managed to hit number twelve on the charts). It remains one of the most famous examples of contemporary country murder ballads, partly due to the morbid entertainment of its twist ending, and partly as it has come to represent the corruption of the American justice system.

Now that we understand who these artists are, we can take a closer look at their work to examine how they have twisted the murder ballad genre to reclaim their power.

## Corpus

“Goodbye, Earl” was released by The Chicks in 2000, three years before their scandal, and it remains one of the best examples of a murder ballad justifying and celebrating a murder because of the abuse the murderer suffered at the hands of the person who was murdered. The song begins by getting us invested in the relationship of Mary Anne and Wanda, who were “the best of friends/all through their high school days,” establishing them as recent high school graduates, thereby associating their youth with naivety and innocence. Earl’s first appearance, in contrast, is his abuse of Wanda just two weeks after their wedding, which also implies that Earl is a liar or conman who pretended to be nice for a short time to trick Wanda into marrying him. The

abuse continues to be detailed in Wanda's effort to hide its results by wearing "dark glasses or long sleeved blouses/Or make-up to cover a bruise," inspiring the listener's pity for Wanda and a desire for her to escape—and it briefly seems like she might be able to. Wanda attempts to leave in a legally and morally right way, and it is Earl who directly disobeys the law, "[walking] right through that restraining order," this time injuring Wanda so terribly that she ends up in the hospital. Now we are truly disgusted with Earl and want him to pay for his actions. Jail might be a suitable punishment, except that the law has failed once already, so it feels pointless to blindly put trust into it once again. Because of this, when Mary Anne goes out of her way to come support Wanda, rushing in from Atlanta on a "midnight flight", it is easy to empathize with their camaraderie and their conclusion that Earl had to die. From there, the murder seems almost like an elaborate prank intended to give a bully his comeuppance, an inside joke that the listener is privy to, as each step is comedically narrated directly addressing Earl, ironically telling him to "lay down and sleep" and asking him if the tarp he is wrapped in is dark or if he is alright with them stuffing him in the trunk of their car. The listener feels the girls' elation and vindication in their actions vicariously. Any lingering doubts the listener may have had are further assuaged when the police do not suspect foul play, and Wanda and Mary Anne live happily ever after selling jam and ham at a roadside stand, clearly feeling no guilt or shame for their actions because they do not "lose any sleep at night." With their happiness and safety secured, it is revealed Earl was "a missing person who nobody missed at all." In that sense, his murder does not only feel like personal revenge, but also like a vigilante response to a universally hated villain. The girls took the law into their own hands, they were justified, and they suffered no negative consequences, and the listener not only supports them, but also receives their narrative

not as a serious matter but as a tragedy turned into a comedy – and Earl’s death is the butt of the joke. The message of this murder ballad deals with the idea that the justice system continuously fails to protect women from issues like domestic abuse, so women have a right to carry out vigilante justice, protecting themselves while removing a criminal from society.

“Goodbye Earl” recalls the earlier “The Night the Lights Went Out in Georgia” by Vicki Lawrence as they both offer strong critiques of the justice system. However, the latter differs in that it actually holds some regret, though that regret is less for the act of murder, which is still felt to be deserved, and more for accidentally letting an innocent man face the punishment for the narrator’s actions, though the blame is shifted off of herself and onto a corrupt justice system, citing that “the judge in the town's got blood stains on his hands.” The narrative centers on a man who is informed by his best friend Andy that not only had his wife been cheating on him and left town, but also that Andy had slept with her himself. The man goes to Andy’s house with a gun only to discover him already shot and dead on the floor. The police assume the man was the one to kill Andy and he is wrongly sentenced to hang, at which point the narrator reveals to the listener that the man was her brother and that she was actually the one to kill Andy, as well as her brother’s cheating wife. The narrator clearly feels justified in killing the people who had greatly wronged her brother, but rather than accepting the blame for her brother’s death being her fault, she blames the trial and justice system, specifically her brother’s “backwoods, southern” lawyer and the judge, who pushed for a guilty verdict quickly despite a lack of solid evidence. The judge is presented as a disgusting character as he tells the sheriff, “Supper's waitin' at home, and I gotta get to it,” very casually as if he hadn’t just sent an innocent man to his death, as if his dinner were more important than going down all the proper avenues to make sure that such a

severe and irreversible punishment was being given to a deserving criminal. Though the listener cannot entirely forgive the narrator, it is apparent that the court did not do their due diligence in proving the man to be guilty, taking his life very lightly and writing it off. The somewhat comedic nature of the song, similar but much tamer in comparison to “Goodbye Earl,” seems to suggest that it is satirizing small towns, which pride themselves on upholding justice while actively obstructing it in their impatience and out of order priorities.

The role of the narrator being a secondary figure in the setup of the story while a prominent part of the conclusion/twist can also be seen in “No Body, No Crime,” a murder ballad by Taylor Swift which is unique its structure in that it shifts from an outside perspective of an affair to an outside perspective of a murder to an inside perspective of a murder, all without changing narrators. The narrator is the best friend of a woman named Este, who believes her husband is cheating on her due to his strange behavior which “smells like infidelity,” along with red stains on his mouth which she attributes to lipstick rather than wine, and his unexplained purchases of jewelry. Este, as far as the listener knows, does not plan to kill her husband for his assumed adultery. She specifically says, “I think I’m gonna call him out,” which implies that while she does plan on confronting him, it is a verbal confrontation, not a violent one. However, Este winds up going missing. The narrator suspects Este’s husband killed her, gathering clues to support her suspicions: Este confronted him for cheating, didn’t show up for work or dinner, his truck has brand new tires, and immediately after reporting his wife missing, his mistress moves in and sleeps in Este’s bed. The narrator acknowledges the concern and suspicion that the listener feels—it is clear that Este’s husband killed her, but there is no way to prove it to the law (“No body, no crime”), yet the listener feels that he cannot be allowed to get away with his crimes.

The narrator does not directly state that she kills him, but lists several statements that imply such a course of action: 1. She has a boating license, 2. She is adept at cleaning houses, 3. Este's sister will provide an alibi, and 4. The mistress took out a life insurance policy. These facts come together to imply that the narrator avenged Este by killing her husband, thoroughly cleaning the crime scene, dumping his body in a lake, and having an alibi to protect her from police suspicion, which would then turn to the mistress who can now cash out her life insurance. Because of this, justice is served not only to Este's husband, but also to the mistress who is complicit in the offense of adultery if not in Este's murder. The mistress is suspicious of the narrator, but the narrator is safe from negative consequences because of the lack of evidence pinning her to the crime. The listener feels that she has done her part in avenging the wrongful death of her best friend and in making sure a murderer did not escape unpunished, with herself being less of a murderer and more of an avenger or vigilante. This murder ballad could be a pushback against femicide and the incompetence of the police, but considering Taylor Swift's history, it could have a meaning more related to the injustices within the music industry. When the rights to Swift's original six albums were bought behind her back, she felt forced to begin rerecording everything she lost, earning herself back the rights to the masters, but also destroying the value of her old music. In that sense, this ballad could be an allegory for her masters being permanently taken from her (Este's death) and Swift deciding to rerecord her albums, destroying the value of her old masters and therefore the investment of the man who had stolen them from her (the narrator deciding to kill Este's husband). The music industry is notoriously misogynistic, but this pushback is not only for the sake of women being taken advantage of, but for all artists who deserve the rights to their work.

While there is adultery present in “No Body, No Crime”, the predominant reason for the homicide committed is in avenging a murder. Meanwhile, in “Two Black Cadillacs” by Carrie Underwood, the adultery itself is the motive behind the homicide committed. This song takes place after the murder has been committed, at the funeral of the murder victim. The ballad juxtaposes the appalling nature of the man – with his infidelity and lying – to the positive way he is being remembered at the funeral: “the preacher said he was a good man/And his brother said he was a good friend.” It raises the question—can someone still be a good person if they are secretly having an affair, lying not only to his wife but also to the mistress about being single? It seems almost merciful that the women would kill him but leave his reputation intact, allowing his friends and family to remember him as being a good person. The ballad goes back in time to show the discovery of his adultery by his wife and mistress, and their subsequent solidarity in planning and carrying out his murder, as “They decided then/He'd never get away with doing this to them.” Part of the betrayal of his actions comes not from the infidelity but from the sheer amount of time he had been lying to both of them, as a one-time affair, while still wrong, would have felt less cruel and deceptive than the double life the man had been living for “oh so long.” This murder is ultimately a personal revenge, yet the listener still feels as if the murder is at least partially justified in his lying, scheming, and infidelity – who knows what other crimes and secrets he may have been hiding? The listener feels as if the man has tricked everyone around him into trusting him and thinking him to be a good person, while the wife and mistress offer an insight into his true character that nobody else knows. He deserves to be punished for his treachery and this way he will never lie to another woman ever again. The main pushback here is not against the act of adultery, however, but rather the idea that if the women had not acted, the

man would have easily gotten away with his actions, which points to a flawed justice system which can be unfairly navigated and manipulated by men with power.

The heavy focus on reputation in “Two Black Cadillacs” makes an appearance in “Church Bells,” another murder ballad by Carrie Underwood, in the way the reputation of the couple hides the abuse occurring behind the scenes, coupled with the narrator’s need to disguise the signs of her abuse in public. The song follows a girl named Jenny who is “blessed with beauty,” who grew up wild and free in the country until she catches the eye of and marries a wealthy oil man. He provides her a luxurious life which appeared perfect on the outside, with the two of them appearing like “Ken and Barbie” to those around them, but which was rotting on the inside. Barbie is, of course, a doll of unrealistic beauty standards and proportions, and in comparing the narrator to her, it is implied that the people around her see Jenny not as a real human being, but as a trophy, an object of beauty with no flaws – or feelings. Yet, the truth of the matter is that Jenny’s husband is an alcoholic who becomes violent after drinking in excess, and comes home actively intending to hurt her. There are many religious references throughout the song, with one being Jenny’s husband’s appearing in his drunken rage with “the devil living in his eyes.” This associates the husband, or at least his temper and addiction, with Satan, which in turn associates Jenny with God, or perhaps more fittingly, an angel. Jenny’s life of luxury turns to one of fear and hiding her bruises, her face “covered in makeup” and hidden behind dark sunglasses. The act of murder is described vaguely as an untraceable type of poison which Jenny “slipped...in his Tennessee Whiskey,” ensuring that the next time he got drunk would be the very last time. Jenny seems to suffer somewhat from guilt or residual fear, but all the same she manages to find her own absolution in an almost divine epiphany that she is safe and everything

is going to be all right as she sits in a church pew with her hands folded in prayer, a choir singing and bells ringing around her. The song leaves the listener with the haunting but poetically just message that the man “hit a woman for the very last time.” This implies that Jenny could have left him, but instead chose to kill him to protect future women from abuse at his hands. If the listener did not already feel she was justified, this risky sacrifice on her behalf for the sake of women she does not even know proves that Jenny is a good person who did what she had to do to take away the power of a dangerous member of society. Underwood purposefully subverts the listener’s expectations – where we believed Jenny to be innocent and weak, we suddenly and shockingly discover she is capable of murder and cover-ups, but before our perception of her can shift completely, we are once again left reeling by the intermingling of the devastation and sheer relief that Jenny feels as she realizes that she is safe and everything will be fine. Forcing the listener to qualify what is right and what is wrong with what is necessary, this ballad ultimately ends on a feeling of the washing away of sins and a hope for the future.

The sense of divine justice portrayed in “Church Bells” is even more prominent in “Independence Day” by Martina McBride. This ballad is from an outside perspective, rather than the point of view of the killer or victim, yet the murder is still justified. The ballad is from the perspective of a woman retelling an important event in her childhood and her understanding of it. When she was eight years old, her alcoholic father was physically abusing her mother. It seems that her mother had been purposefully ignoring the father’s returning alcoholism for some time but could not any longer because he “left the proof on her cheek,” implying that he had struck her and left a bruise. Everyone in town recognizes that the narrator’s father is “a dangerous man,” yet no one takes action against him or comes to the support of her mother, similar to how

the signs of Jenny's abuse are ignored in "Church Bells," except worse because this time everyone is already aware and simply choose not to act. Her mother is implied to be the one that finally brings an end to his reign of terror. She is described as proud and stubborn but waging a losing war, so it makes sense that if she knew she was going down, she would try to bring him down with her. On "Independence Day," the narrator is at the town fair when her house catches fire and burns down, with her parents inside. The narrator seems to be an adult reflecting on this major, traumatic event from her childhood ("...I was only eight years old that summer"), so she presumably has had many years to form a judgement on her mother setting their house on fire to kill her abusive husband and herself, thereby orphaning a young girl. Yet she admits that she does not know whether her mother's action was right or wrong, but decides that perhaps "it's the only way," meaning that it was an ultimately necessary choice. The narrator relates the act to a revolution, specifically the American Revolution, using phrases like "let freedom ring" to conjure patriotic ideals of liberty from tyranny. The events are also related to the resurrection of Jesus ("Roll the stone away") and judgement day as the narrator declares, "Let the whole world know that today/Is a day of reckoning." This implies that her mother's death was a way to cleanse away sin and her father's death was a delivery of justice, of deserved punishment. As in "Church Bells," this idea that justice should be divine rather than decided on by man contrasts sharply to the justice systems portrayed in "Goodbye Earl" and "The Night the Lights Went Out in Georgia," which are deeply flawed and useless in a way divine justice is not. These ideas clearly show the narrator's support of her mother's actions in that she believes her mother did what she had to do to overthrow evil. By relating the mother's murder of the abusive father to

patriotic and religious themes, the listener cannot condemn her without also condemning those ideas.

The narrator of “Independence Day” being a child, and the subsequent innocence and naivety that accompany that status, is also a feature of “Blown Away,” also by Carrie Underwood. Our narrator is a young girl, who clearly hates and/or fears her father, describing him as “a mean old mister.” Her mother is dead, described as being “an angel in the ground,” which points to both the mother’s goodness and the narrator’s naive understanding of death. Though the ballad does not directly state that her father killed her mother, it is implied through the references to the horrors and sins that the house has seen, including slamming doors and “tear-soaked whiskey [memories],” implying that her father was a violent drunk. The narrator has suffered a traumatic childhood, and though she fears that there is “not enough rain in Oklahoma/To wash the sins out of that house,” she just wants the house – and the past – to be destroyed, razed to the ground by a tornado. When the tornado sirens sound, she leaves her father “passed out on the couch,” presumably after drinking himself into a stupor, and she locks herself in the cellar, implying but not directly concluding that the tornado came and destroyed the house, killing her father. Though she did leave him for dead, describing her actions as “sweet revenge,” she did not directly kill him, and it is easy for the listener to empathize with a young, innocent, abused girl who is terrified of her father and who is acting out against him in the only way she conceivably can. Like the Hebrews hidden behind doors painted with lamb’s blood as the plagues swept through Egypt, the narrator remains safe in the cellar, listening to the “screaming of the wind,” hoping desperately for a fresh start apart from the pain and suffering of her past. Similarly to “Gunpowder & Lead,” we do not know for certain what the outcome of this

narrative will be, and in this moment, neither does the narrator. All she can do is hide alone, wondering if her life will be better when the sun comes out again. If her plan of revenge did not work and her father survives, then technically she never directly tried to kill him. But if it does go as planned, then the death of a cruel, abusive man at the hands of nature seems like divine justice, as if God has given the girl an out and is delivering his righteous judgement.

The dark, stormy feeling of apprehension present in “Blown Away” also makes an appearance in “Gunpowder and Lead,” one of many Miranda Lambert songs that demonstrate her fire and unbreakable spirit in the face of adversity, which is typical for the singer in her constant rejection of the role of the angel. The song begins with a dark feeling of tension, as if a storm is brewing. Rather than building up the reasoning for the murder and the listener’s pity for the narrator, the song immediately jumps to her plan of action: “I’m goin’ home, gonna load my shotgun/Wait by the door, and light a cigarette.” Yet any accusations the listener might pin on the narrator due to the initial lack of context to what is clearly a premeditated murder suddenly shift off of her once the details of her abuse are revealed. Her husband, in slapping her and shaking her “like a rag doll”, is clearly violent and dangerous, and the narrator is not only defending herself by killing him, but also responding to the challenge that he set – he started the fight, but she will finish it. She specifically pushes back against toxic masculinity, sarcastically asking if his violent abuse makes him sound like a “real man.” This narrator seems isolated with no one to support her or help protect her. The listener feels anxious of the coming clash, and her description of herself as a “little girl” makes us fearful on her behalf. But with the comparison of the size of his fists to the size of her gun (“His fist is big, but my gun’s bigger”), not only is Lambert pushing back against the relationship between guns and masculinity, but also the

listener is given a stark reminder that this is a bad man that needs to be stopped, and the narrator's steel resolve and unshakable confidence offers reassurance. Lambert chooses to end the ballad with a feeling apprehensive due to the lack of conclusion to the narrative, leaving the listener ultimately aware only that if someone must die, then it should be the abuser and not the narrator. The narrator's claim that little girls are made of "gunpowder and lead," and her determination to show her abuser who exactly he decided to mess with and just how crazy she can be demonstrates the power that women hold and their ability to fight back fiercely, to act as the hand of Death rather than bow to maltreatment. Women who find themselves in similar situations, who feel like they have no other options but to stand their ground and fight back against their oppressors, can find strength in the message of this murder ballad – that neither fear nor size nor strength are obstacles that cannot be overcome in the face of adversity. Though we do not know the outcome of the narrative, we cannot help but to have faith in the narrator's fierce and unshakable nature.

## Conclusion

By analyzing several contemporary murder ballads written or performed by women which justify murders through the murderer being a victim of abuse or adultery, this thesis has shown how women have twisted genre norms to reclaim their voices and power within a form that was historically used to further alienate and oppress women, and within the country music

industry which demonizes women who exist outside of the traditional, “angelic” ideal. Unlike broadside ballads which tended to portray female killers as cruel, heartless, and corrupt, contemporary murder ballads explore the reasoning behind acts of homicide – the emotions behind and ultimate necessity of the act. Through use of pathos, the listener empathizes with the murderers and feels that they are justified in their actions, whether through self-defense, a vigilante sense of acting for the greater good of society, or simply a quid pro quo sense that an evil person got what they deserved. While broadside ballads often imitated the voice of the female killer to falsify or exaggerate their repentance, thus further removing their agency, contemporary murder ballads allow female artist who might be attacked for their views to address or push back against certain issues in a more universally understandable way, thus creating a safe space for them to explore their voice. While broadside ballads typically discouraged women from committing transgressions by serving as a warning for the legal and spiritual repercussions of challenging the gender power structure, or as a warning against stepping outside the gender norm because of the naturally sinful and easily corrupted nature of women, contemporary murder ballads set a precedent for women to fight back against abuse and betrayal, and to recognize their own power. In the country music industry, where not even twenty years ago The Chicks were insulted, harassed, threatened, and boycotted over a simple expression of a political opinion, murder ballads serve as a tool for safely and effectively challenging the norm, influencing listeners to empathize with the artists’ messages and perhaps even challenge their own prejudices and beliefs.

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