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Guitar Strings and Broken Jukeboxes: Applying Feminist Criticism to Classic Country

In Lois Tyson's book *Critical Theory Today* she constructs a chapter explaining the use of feminist criticism in literature. Tyson's explanation of this school of thought inspired the idea of examining country music through a feminist lens. Various questions began to emerge as I listened to the genre, and as I tried to align everything on a timeline, I found myself shackled in mass confusion. I had originally wanted to examine the genre without using an exclusive lens; however, as I worked through years of music I started seeing a trend unfold. The idea of traditional gendered roles and the patriarchy seems to be a common thread throughout the genre; someone is always in support of the societal pressures that gender highlighted, along with someone's disapproval. This allows for feminist criticism to act as an overarching framework for the genre. By using Tyson's theoretical and critical instructions a system can be developed in which we can interpret the classic country text to examine the binary oppositions of artist who encourage traditional gender roles and those who oppose it, along with a brief look at track length will argue that Country music has kept women inside the domestic sphere.

Cecelia Tichi's book *High Lonesome: the American Culture of Country Music* she inserts a question that helps align the perspectives of scholars when engaging with the classic country text:

What does country music have in common with Thomas Jefferson, Walt Whitman, American painters Thomas Cole and Edward Hopper, and twentieth-century writers John Steinbeck and Jack Kerouac? What do these writers and

artists, read in the high school and college classroom and represented on art museum walls in major cities, have in common with country music songs spanning the twentieth century but rooted even in colonial times? They are precisely the questions that can let us see how deeply ingrained country music is in the centuries-long traditions of American thought, art, and literature, extending from the colonial period to the contemporary moment. (Tichi 6)

Tichi is encouraging the links that country music offers to American culture to be fashioned. When analyzing the lyrics of Country music it is crucial to remember that “women are oppressed by patriarchy economically, politically, socially, and psychologically; patriarchal ideology is the primary means by which they are kept so” (Tyson 87). The genre emphasizes an acceptance of oppressing women, spanning the life of Country music; considering the majority of songs in the genre and the overly sexualized female characters that are present. The genre acts as a platform, speaking for working-class southerners, suggesting that these lyrics are the unified voice of the south. Tyson explains that women are “others,” when she says they are “objectified and marginalized, defined only by her difference from male norms and values, defined by what she (allegedly) lacks and that men (allegedly) have” (87). This idea that women are defined by their differences is present throughout the genre especially when considering Tammy Wynette’s song “Stand by your Man” the song expresses that women have to accept their husband’s behavior because men will be men. Tyson uses mythology of monsters to further create a domain for women:

All of Western (Anglo-European) civilization is deeply rooted in patriarchal ideology, as we see, for example, in the numerous patriarchal women and female monsters of Greek and Roman literature and mythology; the patriarchal

interpretation of the biblical Eve as the origin of sin and death in the world; the representation of woman as a nonrational creature by traditional Western philosophy; and the reliance on phallogocentric thinking (thinking that is male oriented in its vocabulary, rules of logic, and criteria for what is considered objective knowledge) by educational, political, legal, and business institutions. (88)

Women as monsters can be found throughout the genre by both male and female artists. In Loretta Lynn's 1974 song "Trouble in Paradise" the narrator concludes that her relationship is in peril because "there's trouble but there won't be long \ cause in the morning it'll all be gone \ long gone, cause Lord I'm gonna love him \ till the devil goes away" (4-7). The devil noted in the narrative is a woman, the narrator makes no qualms about calling out this woman with lyrics such as: "Now I know about those devil women \ They'll set your lovers head to spinning \ And she's a demon she wants control \ but she ain't taken my mans soul" (8-11). Considering the binary opposition of a female Devil forces the role of God to be donned by a man; thus suggesting the perception of the male gender throughout the genre. The mistress is a reappearing character in the narratives, and yet again they are forced to carry the weight of guilt solely, excusing the God-like male behavior. In the 1978 interview with Dolly Parton in *Playboy*, Lawrence Grobel provides an anecdote highlighting the normalcy of the male desire:

The picture I'll always remember was of the father telling his wife to take a shot of him behind Dolly. He had this crazy gleam in his eyes, his tongue popped out of his mouth, and I was sure he was going to cop a feel. But he restrained himself, as most people do around her. Because she is so open and un-paranoid, she manages to tame the wildest instincts of men. (Grobel 82)

Grobel's diction utilizes the social construction of gender to excuse the father's behavior despite his voyeuristic desire to "cop a feel" the father is applauded for having such restraint. The anecdote generates a particular correlation that mimics the notions of gender throughout the genre. Considering Dolly Parton's appearance as the definition of "womanliness" in the genre represents the problematic ideologies that country music presses on both working-class women and the domestic. In Pamela Wilson's article "Mountains of Contradictions: Gender, Class, and Region in the Star Image of Dolly Parton" she writes how the image of Dolly Parton has become the repertoire of the female body for Americans:

Dolly Parton's appearance, notably, the images of her body and especially her breasts, has become the terrain for a discursive struggle in the popular press over the social meaning of the female body and the associated ideologies that compete for control over the meaning of "woman" in our society. Parton has consciously and strategically created a star persona that incorporates and even exploits many of the gender contradictions that currently circulate in society. Her complex encoding of these contested meanings via multiply accentuated signifiers defies any easy or uniform interpretation and categorization – in fact, her image encourages a plurality of conflicting readings, which she seems to relish playfully.

(Wilson 100)

If Parton's outward appearance encourages the exploitation of gender contradictions, then the ideal woman that she has created acts as the parody of the stereotypical woman that her male counterparts have deemed desirable. By understanding both the outward appearances along with the lyrical integrity of the genre the prescribed ideal woman can be fractured allowing the reified woman to emerge.

Country music as a genre has acted as the voice of the working-class dealing with themes such as, family, faith, guilt, poverty, independence, and most recognizable love. The genre can be traced back to 1923 with the first recorded country artist Fiddlin' John Carson, whose lyrics accompanied with his fiddle gave Southerners a voice. Through the progression of the genre, characteristics became iconic and the importance of keeping traditions emerged; however, the traditions that were established were anything but traditional, more appropriately they became evolving trends. The genre maintained a particular attitude that highlighted the ideologies of traditional living (i.e. establishing a household, being religious, "makin' babies," drinking, and hard work). Jimmie Rodgers' song "Kisses Sweeter than Wine," is a narrative of a couple who rely on each other: "Well we worked very hard both me and my wife \ Workin' hand-in-hand to have a good life \ We had corn in the field and wheat in the bin \ and then, whoops oh lord, I was the father of twins" (13-16). However, the idea that a husband could depend on his wife for the success of their home was short lived, with songs like "Jackson" which suggest infidelity and unrequited love: "When I breeze into that city, people gonna stoop and bow \ All them women gonna make me, teach 'em what they don't know how \ I'm goin' to Jackson, you turn-a loose-a my coat \ 'Cos I'm goin' to Jackson" (Twitty 11-14). In Pamela Fox's essay "Recycled "Trash": Gender and Authenticity in Country Music Autobiography," she suggests that country mythology for the protection of marriage has limited the lyrical approach each artist takes:

Traditional country mythology has made the family its centerpiece, envisioning distinctly gendered roles for that institution's maintenance and protection. Recent historical studies of female country performance have pointed to the music's increasing recognition and support of working women, yet lyrics typically focus upon mothers stuck in dead-end jobs, struggling to make ends meet. (244)

Because female artists feel pressure to appeal and speak for working women, the genre is caught in an endless cycle, much like the dead-end jobs the artists are writing about. When the genre grew, so did the repertoires of many contributing artist, the radio became a vehicle to sing about sex, adultery, and alcohol. Eventually the genre stopped speaking to its original audience and started misrepresenting the beloved woman.

The treatment of gender through classic country music introduces females as inferior beings. A general theme throughout the genre trivializes sex, thus encouraging women to surrender their own inhibitions to satisfy the male sexual desire. Conway Twitty masks his overly sexual tone with songs such as, “I’d Love to Lay you Down” and “Hello Darlin,” both romanticize the narrator’s need to satisfy his sexual hunger. Twitty’s lyrics in “I’d Love to Lay you Down” acts as a catalyst to appropriate a place holder inside the private sphere designated for women, along with degrading and simplifying a woman’s intelligence:

There’s so many ways your sweet love \ Made this house into a home \ You’ve got
a way of doing \ Little things that turn me on \ Like standin’ in the kitchen \ In
your faded cotton gown \ With your hair up in curlers \ I’d still love to lay you
down \ Lay you down and softly whisper \ Pretty love words in your ear \ Lay you
down and tell you all the things \ A woman loves to hear. (17-28)

The woman the narrator depicts subscribes to the stereotypical “good woman” role. “I’d Love to Lay you Down” was released in 1985, seventeen years after the height of the women liberation movement, thus suggesting that Twitty is ignoring the progression of traditional gender roles. However, with the emergence of female voices, audiences began to experience the dichotomy of the genre, with both male and female artists conforming to the preconceived traditional gender

roles along with artists who demanded equality. Tammy Wynette, unfortunately, continued her own subscription to maintaining the patriarch with her song “Stand by your Man,” the lyrics excuse the behavior of her male counterpart:

Sometimes it's hard to be a woman \ Giving all your love to just one man \ You'll have bad times, and he'll have good times \ Doin' things that you don't understand \ But if you love him, you'll forgive him \ Even though he's hard to understand \ And if you love him, oh be proud of him \ 'Cause after all he's just a man. (1-8)

The song suggests that men are complicated making them the binary opposition to Twitty's gullible woman. Wynette released this song in 1969 a year after protesters started questioning the objectification of women. This particular song could suggest Wynette's disapproval of breaking traditional gender roles. Both Wynette and Twitty reinforce the misrepresented woman by misrepresenting women through song.

Considering the opposition, Loretta Lynn used the stage as a platform for distorting traditional gender roles providing songs such as, “Where Were You,” and “Two Steps Forward;” both position the female narrator in a role that resolves her guilt, along with empowering the female voice. In “Where Were You,” Lynn alleviates her frustration by questioning her partner and blames him for the relationship's demise, when she sings “The lonely hours were just too much for me \ With only tears to keep me company \ That's what destroyed the love that we once knew \ Stop and Think when it happened \ Where were you?” (8-12) With “Two Steps Forward,” Lynn empowers the narrator by allowing her to leave a no-win relationship: “Well, my clothes are packed and I'm headin for the door \ Don't look for me back cause I won't be

back no more \ Well I might think of ya now and then \ But don't hold your breath cause I don't know when \ Two steps forward and six steps back again." (5-9) Lynn made numerous attempts to dispute the traditions that classic country music had adopted for the appropriation of women, and this allowed other female artists to contribute to the genre from a different perspective, instead of how the male gaze perceived women.

The practitioners of the limbo period reiterate how choosing a side can be a challenge. Looking at Lynn's "One's on the way" (1971) an additional tread is inserted that comments on the Women's liberation movement; however, the narrator appears to demonstrate a neutral mentality, "The girls in New York City they all march for women's lib \ And Better Homes and Gardens shows the modern way to live \ And the pill may change the world tomorrow" (18-20). The narrative depicts a pregnant house-wife in Topeka, Kansas, who is aware of the current battle for equality, but is not able to participate. The character seeks out answers for livelihood through magazines and headlines. She is aware of birth control; however, she seems to lack the appropriate understanding of what the pill can do. The song contains the perfected male that calls from a bar, and upon being asked a favor, he quickly hangs up:

Hello honey what's that you say you're bringin' a few ole buddies home \ You're callin' from a bar get way from there \ No not you honey I was talkin' to the baby wait a minute honey the door bell \ Honey could you stop at the market and hello hello well I'll be. (14-17)

The conversation allows insight into the narrator's hectic frustrations at home. The last line "Oh gee I hope it ain't twins again," provides the most information about the narrator, she is hopeful yet uneducated, the listener can notice this when Lynn continues to comment on the rain,

suggesting that she is only aware of current events of this particular day. She lacks a concrete understanding of her body, along with subscribing to societal notions of patriarchy (21). The chaotic household is perpetuated and despite the mentioning of the pill, the narrator is clueless to how her life could change with contraceptives. In Cecelia Tichi's book *High Lonesome: the American Culture of Country Music* she writes how Dolly Parton's song "Jolene" is the narrative of a wife pleading with her husband's potential paramour to not pursue an affair:

Parton sings the role of a wife or lover making a desperate plea to her rival *not* to steal the man in her life. The minor key heightens the sense of discord, of emotional turbulence, and an instrumental motif of an Oriental bazaar conveys a sense of grim marketplace bargaining for human life. The voice of the woman at risk rises in fear and tension, pleading with the irresistible, ivory-complexioned, emerald-eyed "other woman," Jolene, not to commit emotional grand theft for sport. (Tichi 11)

Parton positions the two female characters in a dialogue that excludes the male desire; adding to Tyson's theory of the villainous woman; however, it also suggests that a man's ideas are unable to be altered by a woman's plea.

A question that arises when considering the role of women through American culture and Classic Country music is: can women ever be portrayed as the equivalent of men? Considering the track lengths for both male and female artists, a more concrete argument can be formed. By comparing the length of various songs one will notice that female artists get less radio time. The themes each narrative contains create a greater impact. Loretta Lynn's "The Pill" (2:37)¹ "proudly exclaims her excitement that she doesn't have to worry about getting pregnant

anymore” (Shipka 9). Conway Twitty’s “Touch the Hand” (3:22) objectifies his wife and suggests that he has made her a woman by her bearing his name along with her virginity being lost by his touch. This is seen when he sings, “Touch the hand of the man that made you a woman \ then tell me you don’t love me anymore” (9-10). There is a 45 second difference in the two songs. Though it can be argued that the length is decided by the artist; however, this is not limited to Twitty and Lynn. Dolly Pardon’s “I will always Love You” (2:55) in comparison to George Jones’ “Bartender’s Blues” (3:45) deals with her ending a relationship, where as “Bartender’s Blues” suggests that having a “honky tonk angel” (wife) is holding him back from being happy. Jones’ contempt is 50 seconds longer than Pardon’s disdain. Another example is Dolly Pardon and Kenny Rogers’ “Island in the Stream” (4:04): the duet that is unevenly distributed, suggests that Pardon is dependent on Rogers, and for Rogers, Pardon is an item or a prize. Only when a female artist is paired with a male can she break the 4 minute mark.

Country music has acted as the voice of working class people for over 90 years, it has been used as a tool to discuss politics, poverty, rural-living, sex and alcohol, grief, faith, and gendered roles. By examining the lyrics, the genre becomes something other than a pleasant sound; it becomes one of the many roots of America. The impact of the women’s liberation movement and their fight for equality can be heard by listening to the genre. Hazel Dickens’ song “A Few Old Memories” can be used as a way to appreciate the path that County music has taken, “Just a few old keep-sakes \ Way back on the shelf \ No, they don’t mean nothin’ \ Well I’m surprised they’re still left \ Just a few old love letters \ With the edges all brown \ And an old faded picture \ I keep turned upside-down.” (8-15) Classic Country is an “old keep-sake” that provides a lens to the patriarchal past.

Notes

1. I used this format to note track length (2:00) because there are no MLA guidelines designated for time.

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