Abstract

This thesis examines the complex and multi-dimensional narratives presented in the work of mainstream female country artist Carrie Underwood, and how her blending of musical genres (pop, rock, and country) affects the narratives pertaining to gender and sexuality that are told through her musical texts. I interrogate the relationships between and among the domains of music, lyrics, images, and staging in Underwood’s live performances (Blown Away Tour: Live DVD) and related music videos in order to identify how these gendered narratives relate to genre, and more specifically, where these performances and videos adhere to, expand on, or break from country music tropes and traditions. Adopting an interlocking theoretical approach grounded in genre theory, gender theory, narrative theory in the context of popular music, and happiness theory, I examine how, as a female artist in the country music industry, Underwood uses genre-blending to construct complex gendered narratives in her musical texts. Ultimately, I find that in her Blown Away Tour: Live DVD, Underwood uses diverse narrative strategies, sometimes drawing on country tropes, to engage techniques and stylistic influences of several pop and rock styles, and in doing so explores the gender norms of those genres.
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Table of Contents

ABSTRACT .................................................................................................................................................. II

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS .......................................................................................................................... III

CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION ................................................................................................................... 1
  PREFACE ................................................................................................................................................... 1
  STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM ........................................................................................................... 3
    Genre Classifications and Popularity ................................................................................................. 4
    The Critical Reception of Genre Blending ......................................................................................... 7
    Research Questions: Carrie Underwood and Genre ........................................................................ 11
  CONTEXTS .............................................................................................................................................. 12
    Contexts of Carrie Underwood’s Career ............................................................................................ 12
    Contexts of Country-Pop Divas ......................................................................................................... 15
    Contexts of Country Music: Genre and Gender .............................................................................. 20
    Contexts of Gender in Popular Music .............................................................................................. 23
  THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK ............................................................................................................... 26
    Interlocking Analysis ........................................................................................................................... 26
    Genre Theory ...................................................................................................................................... 27
    Gender theory .................................................................................................................................... 29
    Narrative in Popular Music ............................................................................................................... 33
    Happiness Scripts .............................................................................................................................. 37
    Summary ........................................................................................................................................... 40

ANALYTIC METHODOLOGY .................................................................................................................. 40

CHAPTER ORGANIZATION ..................................................................................................................... 45

CONVENTIONS ADOPTED ...................................................................................................................... 49

CHAPTER 2. “GOOD GIRL”: INTERSECTIONS OF GENRE AND GENDER IN ACT ONE:
STORM WARNING ................................................................................................................................. 52
  CONTEXT ............................................................................................................................................... 53
  ANALYSIS ............................................................................................................................................. 54
    Song .................................................................................................................................................. 54
    Music Video ...................................................................................................................................... 66
    Tour Video ........................................................................................................................................ 73
  CONCLUSION ....................................................................................................................................... 77

CHAPTER 3. “JESUS TAKE THE WHEEL”: RELIGION AND GENDER ROLES IN ACT
TWO: LIGHTNING ................................................................................................................................. 79
  CONTEXT ............................................................................................................................................... 79
  ANALYSIS ............................................................................................................................................. 80
    Genre ................................................................................................................................................ 81
    Gender ............................................................................................................................................. 88
    Tour Video ....................................................................................................................................... 92
  CONCLUSION ....................................................................................................................................... 96

CHAPTER 4. “BEFORE HE CHEATS”: HARD COUNTRY AND HORROR IN ACT FOUR:
TWISTER .................................................................................................................................................. 98
  CONTEXT ............................................................................................................................................... 99
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ANALYSIS</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Genre</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>108</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tour Video</td>
<td>116</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CONCLUSION</td>
<td>117</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

CHAPTER 5. “BLOWN AWAY”: DOMESTIC ABUSE AND THE WIZARD OF OZ IN THE BLOWN AWAY TOUR ENCORE ................................................................. 118

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>CONTEXT</td>
<td>118</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ANALYSIS</td>
<td>120</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Domestic Abuse</td>
<td>120</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Class Mobility</td>
<td>127</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tour Video</td>
<td>137</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CONCLUSION</td>
<td>140</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

CONCLUSION. ................................................................................................................................ 142

BIBLIOGRAPHY .................................................................................................................................. 148
Chapter 1. Introduction

Preface

I first encountered country music studies as a third-year undergraduate student undertaking an independent study project. I compared pop artists’ and country artists’ vocal techniques, in the hopes of learning more about how genre differentiation affects, or is affected by, specific musical practices. This was my first direct exploration of differences between popular music genres, and peaked my interest in the topic. In the following year, I completed an undergraduate thesis focusing on the lyric treatment of women in country music songs before and after the second wave feminist movement of the 1970s. This solidified my interest in the role of gender, feminism, and related fields of intersectional study within the context of popular music in general, and country music specifically.

Little work has been done examining the role of both genre and gender as intersecting axes in popular music. This thesis serves to combine these two areas of study, and to explore how they can work together to enrich our understanding of music and music research in one specific case study of artist Carrie Underwood. I have chosen to study Underwood for several reasons: her unconventional entrance into country music as an American Idol winner is unique in the genre; her immense and continued popularity since this win in 2005 has allowed for considerable development in her musical output and career; and her particular reception as a country-pop artist whose music is pop but whose persona is country. Because of these factors, Underwood occupies a unique space in the country music genre.
Of course, I cannot analyze Underwood’s entire career and musical output. As such, I narrow my focus to look specifically at her 2012 *Blown Away Tour*. Live tours are valuable in part for their presentation of a large quantity of musical material, from all eras of an artist’s career, in a highly choreographed format. The audience is presented with musical material they have heard many times before, but presented in an entirely new format. Concert films produced from these tours open the door for analysts to study staging, in addition to the lyrics, music, and images that can be gathered from music videos. This additional analytic material can both enrich our understanding of an artist’s existing music and present entirely new material for analysis. In the case of her *Blown Away Tour*, Underwood’s most recent completed live tour, the concert video not only presents the opportunity for the analysis of staging, but for the analysis of narrative. The concert and concert film draw on and expand the narrative of the “Blown Away” song and its paratexts, and therefore the concert film is an appropriate analytical focus for its rich analytic opportunities.¹ As such, this thesis focuses on Carrie Underwood’s *Blown Away Tour: Live DVD* and associated songs, music videos, and album materials.

¹ Here I adopt Burns, Woods, and Lafrance’s employment of the term paratext, which they adopt from Lacasse and Genette. They define paratext as the set of materials which complement the (musical) text, including the title, imagery, etc. See:


Statement of the Problem

In the opening minutes of her *Blown Away Tour: Live DVD*, Underwood stands centre-stage with one of her band members, wearing a shining purple and pink gown, high heels, a spiked wristband, and fingerless gloves. Behind them, both the stage lighting and screen flash rainbow colours. None of these features are visually reminiscent of country music traditions, but instead communicate a story of blended genres: the spiked wristband and finger gloves of rock; the bright colours and extravagant dress of pop (Fig. 1.1).

![Image of Carrie Underwood on stage](image)

**Figure 1.1** Carrie Underwood, *Blown Away Tour: Live DVD*, 00:04:21

This may not surprise those who are familiar with the *Blown Away* album. Its critics agree that it cannot claim to be a true country album, going as far as to say that the album “dispens[es] with any pretence that Underwood remains a down-home country girl—the kind who takes carnival rides and sticks a daisy in her hair…Blown Away is an unabashed glossy pop album,
positioning Carrie as the heir to Shania Twain and Faith Hill’s country diva act.”

Despite this and other reviews that position it so firmly in the pop music genre, the album performed strongly in the country field, ranking #5 on Billboard’s Top Country Albums list for 2012 and winning Favorite Country Album at the 2012 American Music Awards. This crossover between genres is suggestive of an “ever-evolving tension between pop and country,” and becomes an intriguing focus for the analysis and interpretation of her music.

Two important issues that arise from this tension are how to contextualize country music in 2012, and how to interpret Underwood’s participation in this field. It is because of Underwood’s particular reception as a crossover artist combined with her immense popularity in the country music genre that I have chosen her work as an object of study.

Genre Classifications and Popularity

Many factors form and illuminate a work’s genre classification; in the case of Carrie Underwood’s Blown Away, the Billboard music charts, music award shows (specifically the Country Music Awards [CMAs], the American Music Awards [AMAs], the Academy of Country Music Awards [ACAs], and the Grammy Awards), as well as music reviews by popular review sites including Rolling Stone and AllMusic.com, are particularly useful. These tools offer the most transparent method of acknowledging the genre classification and popularity of various country music artists in current mainstream music culture. I recognize that by relying upon these sources for

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popular reception, my analysis of the country music field is limited to mainstream country music, especially genres like country-pop, and that I am situating the popularity of country music artists in relation to these formal organizations within the industry. I acknowledge that this is not a full analysis of the country genre as it does not include local or roots country, which has traditionally been important to the genre, but I maintain that, given mainstream country music’s recent alignments with the pop music genre, this will be the most effective way to evaluate the genre classification of current mainstream country music artists.

The Billboard Charts have long been and continue to be an important method of both classifying and ranking popular music, with countless lists that rank artists, songs, and albums of various genres. The service began in 1894 as a weekly publication for billposting and advertising, and launched its website originally called Billboard Online in 1995. While sales and radio airplay are important components of a song’s ranking on the charts, some Billboard charts now also factor in touring, streaming, and “social interactions on Facebook, Twitter, Vevo, Youtube, Spotify and other popular online destinations for music.” Billboard’s Country Albums: Year End chart, however, only takes sales data into account; the top 5 albums on that list in 2012 were as follows: #1 Taylor Swift’s Red, #2 Luke Bryan’s Tailgates and Tanlines, #3 Lionel Richie’s Tuskegee, #4 Lady Antebellum’s Own The Night, #5 Carrie Underwood’s Blown Away.

Award shows, too, are valuable for recognizing the ascendancy of artists, and their recognition in various genre circles. The Country Music Association awards hold particular importance as a site of country music recognition; beginning in 1967, the annual awards show “drew

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national focus to a few significant artists and allowed the music industry to make public its central focus and trends...the CMA had taken a fragmented, scattered set of musical traditions and pulled them together into a mass-marketed, respectable music genre.”8 While the association perhaps sacrificed the recognition of more local or nuanced sub-genres in favour of national recognition, it still aims primarily to preserve and honor its history.9 Among others, its 2012 ceremony honoured Eric Church (for Album of the year, Chief), Miranda Lambert (for Female Vocalist of the Year), and Blake Shelton (for Male Vocalist of the Year), decided by a vote of association members.10

The American Music Awards are also home to several country music-specific awards, which are awarded based on album and digital singles sales, radio airplay, streaming, social activity and touring as tracked by Billboard.11 In 2012, these awards went to Luke Bryan (for Favorite Country Male Artist), Taylor Swift (Favorite Country Female Artist), Lady Antebellum (for Favorite Country Band/Duo/Group), and Carrie Underwood (for Favorite Country Album, Blown Away).12

The GRAMMY Awards are widely recognized as a valuable indicator of an artist’s position in their respective genre, as the awards are decided solely as a vote of the Academy’s voting members, and do not take into account sales or radio performance.13 The Academy voted Taylor Swift for Best

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9 Ibid.
Country Song, “Mean” and Lady Antebellum for Best Country Album, \textit{Own the Night}, in 2012.\textsuperscript{14} While Underwood’s \textit{Blown Away} album was never nominated for Best Country Album at these awards, its title track won both Best Country Solo Performance and Best Country Song in 2013.\textsuperscript{15}

At the 2012 Academy of Country Music Awards, whose winners are determined by a vote by ACM members, subject to approval by the Academy based on digital sales, concert ticket sales, and radio success, Miranda Lambert won both Female Vocalist of the Year and Album of the Year for \textit{Four the Record}.\textsuperscript{16} The Male Vocalist of the Year title was awarded to Blake Shelton, while Lady Antebellum went home with Vocal Group of the Year. Taylor Swift won the coveted Entertainer of the Year award.\textsuperscript{17}

Based on these statistics, we can see several artists emerging as dominant country stars in 2012: particularly Taylor Swift, Luke Bryan, Eric Church, Carrie Underwood, Miranda Lambert, and Lady Antebellum). I seek now to understand how some of these artists locate themselves (and how they are located) within the field of country music, and how their music relates to both country traditions and other genre influences.

\textbf{The Critical Reception of Genre Blending}


\textsuperscript{15} The GRAMMYs, Past Winners Search: “2013 – 56th Annual GRAMMY Awards – Country,”\url{http://www.grammy.com/nominees/search?artist=&field_nominee_work_value=&year=2013&genre=8}.


\textsuperscript{17} Billboard, “AMAs 2012: Full Winners List.”
Genre blending has become an important musical stylistic element in recent country music. Country has a long history of incorporating stylistic effects of other genres into its own repertoire; Jocelyn Neal calls the relationship between country and pop “particularly complex.” The phenomenon of genre-blending has become even more prominent in recent decades, and critics are quick to identify how the aforementioned country stars are expanding this trend. For instance, Steve Erlewine of *AllMusic.com* describes Bryan’s genre fusions in the following way:

Bryan’s bright setting plays as pop—it’s too clean and crisp, too bereft of grit to ever be mistaken as something hardcore—but his foundation is pure country, songs that are sturdy and unfussy, never bothering with sugary pop hooks….he’s not flashy yet he’s not boring, he’s laid-back and assured, a modern guy who knows his roots but is happy to be in the present.19

With this review, Erlewine clearly aligns country music as roots music, while pop is positioned as modern. Further, he positions Bryan firmly within the country genre as a country artist, who seeks outside stylistic influences.

Taylor Swift is another obvious focus for discussion of pop-country crossover. Her 2012 album *Red* was described as “a 16-song geyser of wilful eclecticism that’s only tangentially related to Nashville (much like Swift herself at this point)”20 by *Rolling Stone*. *AllMusic* adds:

*[If Red*] intends to do anything, it’s to prove Taylor is a genuine superstar, the kind who transcends genre…in order to accomplish this transition from country ingénue to pop star, Swift takes her country bona fides for granted, ignoring

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Nashville conventions as she rushes to collaborate with Britney Spears hitmaker Max Martin and Snow Patrol’s Gary Lightbody.\(^{21}\)

In this review, Erlewine claims that a freedom from genre conventions would allow an artist to transcend genre and achieve superstar status, while also claiming that to do this would require an artist to alienate themselves from specific genres altogether. Genre-blending here is painted as extreme; while Bryan’s music is described as honest country with modern flare, Swift’s deviances from country conventions are seen as a strong and purposeful departure in an attempt to gain superstar status.

Carrie Underwood is another artist whose works blend genres. Her 2012 album *Blown Away* has been recognized for its “spectacular crossover songs”\(^{22}\) and “broad range of styles.”\(^{23}\) As discussed above, *AllMusic* describes her album as an “unabashed glossy pop album” and positions Underwood as a “country diva act.”\(^{24}\) These reviews simultaneously acknowledge that Underwood’s music may no longer belong in country, but that Underwood herself remains a country artist (even as a “country diva act”).

Importantly, Underwood herself has acknowledged these influences in her music. She says: “I love all kinds of music […] and I feel like you can listen to my albums and find different influences in different songs—and I really feel proud that you don’t know what you’ll get from one


\(^{24}\) Erlewine, review of Carrie Underwood’s *Blown Away*. 
of my songs.” Still, she describes these external styles simply as ‘influences’, and not as features that define her songs or that would move them outside of the country genre.

I find this apparent misalignment between the country genre’s understanding of Carrie Underwood’s *music* and Carrie Underwood as a *performer* to be of particular interest, especially since critiques of other country artists seem to position their works and personae on equal planes. For this reason, I believe Carrie Underwood’s relationship with country music and country music culture is particularly complex and therefore will be a fruitful object of study.

As we consider how Underwood engages with genre constructs, the concept of persona is significant. Fans of Underwood, and of nearly any other celebrity, rarely get the opportunity to interact directly with the star; instead, they learn and form opinions on an artist’s personality, character, and life events from media such as interviews, news reports, and social media pages. These media are highly subject to regulation by the stars and their management teams, and do not provide a full, accurate account of any celebrity’s day to day life. Several scholars discuss this concept of persona in relation to popular music. Allan Moore asserts that expression in popular song is always mediated, and draws from Frith and Auslander to discuss a singing voice’s levels of persona. Lori Burns likewise differentiates a song’s author, implied author, and narrator, arguing that not doing so dismisses subtle aspects of a song’s narrative. My aim when discussing Carrie Underwood in this project is not to unveil details of her “real” or “authentic” self, but to draw links between the persona

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and the music she has created. Therefore, as I make reference to Carrie Underwood, I am solely interested in and consciously referencing her public, mediated persona rather than making claims about her private self.

Research Questions: Carrie Underwood and Genre

In this context of genre study, I hope to understand and consequently explain how Carrie Underwood’s incorporation of stylistic features from other genres affects the gendered narratives that her works portray. I seek to answer the following analytic questions:

I. How does Underwood incorporate pop and rock trends into her country songs and how are these trends manifest in the domains of music, lyrics and images?

II. How does she present and represent narratives of gender and sexuality through her music, lyrics, and images (knowing that these (re)presentations are also bound up in her (re)presentations of race, class, and ability)? Furthermore, how do these presentations reinforce or conflict with each other?

III. How do Underwood’s performances of gender and sexuality intersect with her performances of pop, rock, and country conventions? Can Underwood’s music help us to refine our understanding of genre codes in relation to gender codes?
Contexts

Contexts of Carrie Underwood’s Career

Carrie Underwood had an unconventional introduction to the country music scene, becoming successful after winning the 2004-2005 season of American Idol. Many country singers before Underwood had broken into or advanced in the genre by winning state fairs and other local competitions, but Underwood was the first to emerge from a large-scale, pop-culture oriented competition, notably one with the mass audience of American Idol. Labeled a country singer from her audition onward, even though “there was nothing specifically country about her sweet, friendly voice,” she easily progressed week to week with Simon Cowell’s accolades and early prediction of her win.28 According to reviewer Stephen Erlewine, Underwood was especially marketable because of her “unthreatening prettiness,” which made her a blank slate for the show’s judges to work with.29 Her girl-next-door persona that subsequently developed on the show endured throughout its taping, and, along with her other qualities highlighted on the show—including her sweetness, naivety, and religiosity—became an important marker of Underwood as a country artist. Despite her success on the show, however, her authority in the country music scene was tenuous; Underwood was considered “a pop star moving into country just to capture an available audience. Yet over the next

29 Ibid.
few years, that perception shifted to the point that some fans considered her the standard by which to judge other singers’ authenticity.”

Underwood’s first album, *Some Hearts*, released in 2005, featured her hits “Jesus Take the Wheel” and “Independence Day” (the latter a cover of Martina McBride’s 1994 song). This album became the best-selling solo female debut album in country music history of all time. Though Neal asserts that her country credibility among fans was questionable, she won CMA Female Vocalist of the Year in 2006. Her second album, *Carnival Ride*, released in 2007, featured the singles “All-American Girl,” “So Small,” “Just a Dream,” “Last Name,” and a cover of Randy Travis’s “I Told You So” (original from 1988). Neal cites this cover as a key turning point in her career, as she transformed “from a pop-star outsider to an accepted part of country tradition.” She was subsequently inducted into the Grand Ole Opry, which is considered to be one of the highest honours for a country artist as it recognizes an artist’s influence on the genre, and aligns their music alongside that of country music’s most foundational musicians.


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32 Carrie Underwood Official, “Bio.”
Underwood’s popularity is clearly demonstrated by her award and ranking statistics. To date, over the course of her career she has earned 6 GRAMMYs, 9 Billboard Music Awards, 8 AMAs, 5 CMA awards, and 11 ACM Awards.\textsuperscript{34} She was named to the Guinness Book of World Records as the female country artist with the most number one hits (totaling 18) on the Billboard Hot Country Songs chart in the US.\textsuperscript{35} Though fans may have initially doubted her, she has clearly established herself in the country genre, being described by music critics as “country music’s reigning queen”\textsuperscript{36} and as “the female vocalist of her generation of any genre.”\textsuperscript{37}

Underwood’s career, however, has involved more than just her albums. To the delight of her country fans, she has hosted the CMA Awards with co-host Brad Paisley annually since 2008.\textsuperscript{38} She has also participated in more mainstream musical endeavors, including a performance as Maria in the NBC’s \textit{Sound of Music Live!} and as the voice of the 2015 Superbowl’s Opening Song. She has endorsed brands including Sketchers, Target, Nintendo, Almay, and Nicole by OPI, and premiered her own line of athletic clothing. These many endeavors have solidified Underwood’s superstar reputation, extending her influence and recognition beyond her country music audience.

Underwood generally avoids discussion of her politics, and other controversial topics in interviews. She claims that she doesn’t want anyone “to vote for anything or anyone because they’re

\textsuperscript{34} Carrie Underwood Official, “Bio.”
\textsuperscript{36} “Carrie Underwood Plays On,” \textit{Billboard Magazine}, cover.
a Carrie Underwood fan. I really want people to do their homework and think for themselves.”

While this may be true, her silence has also ensured that her political views never alienate her fans. In recent years, however, Underwood has critically commented on the status of women in country music. In an interview with the National Post in December 2015, she says “I know there are some extremely talented, hard working female artists in Nashville that, for some reason, just don’t get the support that guys get.” Likewise, in an interview with Cosmopolitan magazine she says, “I try to stand up for women in my genre. The numbers have always been skewed. Even when I was growing up, there was a lot more room for females…Women have to work harder to get half the recognition. I am one of the lucky ones. But there are some extremely talented, gorgeous, smart, strong women in this town.” These comments show that despite her general avoidance of the topic, Underwood is sensitive to gender dynamics and restrictions in the country music industry. Her comments are not proof that these themes would appear in her music, but her public discussion of them certainly leaves this possibility open.

**Contexts of Country-Pop Divas**

Carrie Underwood’s career follows decades of many other female country soloists who blended country and pop styles, frequently referred to as country-pop divas. All who blended these styles had to carefully walk the line between tradition and innovation in order to be accepted as true

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40 Jon Dekel, “People Couldn’t Deny It Anymore.”

country artists; those who were successful often acquired near-superstar status. To name a few, Patsy Cline, Dolly Parton, and Shania Twain were all key to the development of the country-pop diva figure.

Following the arrival of rock ‘n’ roll in the 1950s, country music’s mainstream sound became the “Nashville sound.” The distinguishing feature of this style was its likeness to pop, achieved by the new incorporation of instruments, including piano and drums played with brushes, and the removal of more traditional country instruments like the banjo and fiddle. Patsy Cline was one of the biggest stars of the Nashville sound era of the 1950s and 1960s; one of country music’s earliest female solo stars, she was the first of that group to be inducted into the Country Music Hall of Fame. Her first hit song, “Walkin’ After Midnight” (1957), secured her reputation as a crossover artist when it topped at number two on the country charts and number twelve on the pop charts. Though her next hits “I Fall to Pieces” and “Crazy” would not come until 1961, their Nashville Sound style, characterized by their lilting rhythmic grooves, slip-note piano, and vocal backup of ‘ooh’s and ‘aah’s, reinforced her pop crossover status.

Joli Jensen discusses the social class implications of country-pop crossover. She dichotomizes country and pop as low and high class respectively, and claims that “to ‘cross over’ into the pop charts was also to sell out one’s friends, family, and heritage. It was to abandon class position, to

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assimilate, to try to ‘pass.’” Of course, this crossover proved difficult for country fans to reconcile. The popularity of the Nashville Sound “had turned it, in effect, into pop(ular) music.” By the 1980s, however, stars and fans had embraced Cline’s sound as “traditional” country; to Neal, it was a way of “affirming that country authenticity could exist in a pop guise, and thereby a way of rationalizing and reconciling country music of the 1980s with notions of tradition.” Ultimately, during her career Cline found herself at a crossroads of “rural tradition and urban modernism, local status and national authority, and finally, industrial production and domestic consumption,” so it is unsurprising that her music reflects such a mix.

The late 1970s brought a plethora of cowboy and country images to the mainstream, through the inception of honky-tonk nightclubs and country-focused media, including movies centering on cowboy culture, such as *Rancho Deluxe* (1975), *Heaven’s Gate* (1980), and *Urban Cowboy* (1980). This major rise of country into mainstream culture led to the development of “countrypolitan” music, known for its combination of 1980s pop sounds with country values steeped in American tradition. One of countrypolitan’s most successful practitioners is Dolly Parton.

Parton’s career involved both highly traditional and progressive country endeavors. She remained an important figure for decades through her ability to “transform her music and her

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47 Neal, “Nothing But a Little Ole Pop Song,” 147.
48 Ibid., 151.
51 Ibid., 280.
identity to stay ahead of trends in country music.”  

Perhaps most important to her success was her ability to maintain a “dual identity as a definitively country singer but at the same time a mainstream entertainer.” Her simultaneous homage to the traditional and commitment to originality is obvious in her cover songs, particularly “Muleskinner Blues.” Originally sung by Jimmie Rodgers, the song is “decidedly masculine”; Parton’s lyric alterations (including a new verse at the end of the song) and bold vocal performance of the song’s hollers and yodels are a clear crossing of country music’s gender norms, making the performance both a tribute to an important country song and singer and the mark of an innovative performer. Her reputation in the country genre established and her popularity growing, she used this innovation to develop her music, as she “refused to let the borders of country music constrain her music or her ambition, and conquered both Hollywood and Las Vegas while still maintaining her campy, over-the-top Tennessee working-class country image.” Her ambition and talent make Dolly Parton an unforgettable country music icon.

The 1990s brought a new wave of country-pop crossover artists, including Shania Twain. Neal calls her an “enigma” in country music who “single-handedly transformed a genre that relies on down-home wisdom, age, and hillbilly roots into a youthful, glamorous version of itself.” This new glamorous country style was fun, sexy, and youthful in character, and was “symbolized by Shania Twain’s often bare and very sculpted midriff.” In contrast to the countrypolitan songs of the

52 Ibid., 251.  
53 Ibid., 323.  
54 Ibid., 258.  
57 Ibid., 396.
1980s, this new country-pop style kept more traditional musical indicators of country, including fiddles, two-step and shuffle beats, but combined them with syncopated pop riffs and fuller harmonies.58

In addition to bending the distinctions between country and pop, Twain’s music played with country’s established gender roles; her songs “Honey I’m Home,” “Any Man of Mine,” and “In My Car (I’ll Be the Driver),” to name a few, champion a woman’s right to independence and satisfaction in their relationships with men.59 Beverly Keel calls Twain the “unofficial but undeniable leader of this [women’s] movement [in country] and represents the future of women in country—frank, original, independent, and sexy.”60

Popular culture media also recognizes Twain’s influence on country music. In honour of her 2015 comeback tour, MacLean’s magazine published an article calling Twain country’s “real rebel” who “showed Nashville how to appeal to the mainstream.”61 Citing her influence on newer artists Taylor Swift, Carrie Underwood and Miranda Lambert, the article gives Twain credit for revitalizing a genre that was falling out of the mainstream as a younger generation was turning to rock. While her music simultaneously stunned, excited, and appalled country fans and reviewers, it undeniably affected country’s course.62

58 Ibid., 399 and 383.
59 Ibid., 395.
62 Amongst the criticism of Twain were accusations that she used provocative imagery in her videos to sell her music. See Stephen Thomas Erlewine, “Shania Twain: Biography,” AllMusic, http://www.allmusic.com/artist/shania-twain-mn0000161808/biography.
Patsy Cline, Dolly Parton, and Shania Twain each made their own distinct mark on country music history and its relationship with pop music. By mixing pop and country styles in three distinct ways, these artists set the stage for future country artists, including Carrie Underwood, to continue experimenting with genre boundaries and influences.

**Contexts of Country Music: Genre and Gender**

Issues of genre influence and lineage, social relevance, and cultural messages are central to scholarly discussion of country music. Jocelyn Neal defines country music as “a commercial genre that claims a lineage from early twentieth-century, rural, white, mostly Southern, working-class popular music,” adding that primary themes also include “an imagined rural idealism, a celebration of working-class identity, an iconography drawn from the traditions of the American cowboy, and predominantly Southern, white, Christian, socially conservative and patriotic philosophy.” Bill Malone agrees that personal relationships, home, family, church, patriotism, and private insecurities are central country music themes. Curtis Ellison further adds that country music centrally projects heartbreak, hard times, and personal failure, also proposing the antidotes to these are understood as whisky and beer. Ultimately, country “affirms the possibility of finding better times in the rewards of romantic, familial, or heavenly love.”

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67 Ibid., xix.
Country songwriting is also distinct from other genres, as Neal argues it “relies on storytelling; sympathetic, working-class characters; clear narratives; and relatable experiences from everyday life.”68 Musically, it is associated with Southern vocal accents, verbal interjections, and “particular techniques of playing.”69 Neal also emphasizes the historic importance of artist biographies as a tool of defining the genre.

While these distinct definitions of country music are certainly helpful in genre analysis, it is important to recognize that genre definitions are constantly evolving. Malone proposes that “as a vibrant and dynamic form of American popular culture, the subject matter and personnel of country music change rapidly.”70 Because of this frequent changeover in styles and artists, it is important to undertake an evaluation of current country culture to properly contextualize Underwood’s music.

Neal believes country music has “evolved into a vibrant commercial genre that maintains allegiance to concepts of tradition and rusticity, even as the music continues to reflect the modernization and urbanization of its audience.”71 She maintains that it retains associations with some of its traditional instrumentation, including the use of fiddles, steel guitars, banjos, mandolins, and acoustic six-string guitars.72 Ellison emphasizes the genre’s innovative incorporations of other musical traditions in vocal and in instrumental styles.73 Malone feels differently; arguing that “country music has been inundated with musicians whose sounds suggest neither regional, rustic, nor blue-collar nativity, but are instead rooted in the homogenizing and mass-consumption-oriented

68 Neal, Country Music, xxi.
69 Ibid.
72 Neal, Country Music, xxi.
73 Ellison, Country Music Culture, xviii.
media establishment,” he proposes that country music has lost touch with its roots through its
development.74

Country music’s portrayals of gender issues have also evolved since the genre’s inception. In
the foreword to *A Boy Named Sue*, David Sanjek voices his understanding of country music as
“assigning to the feminine habits of constancy and tradition while the masculine becomes associated
with a predisposition for impatience and innovation.”75 He argues that these gender categories are
pervasive in this music, and calls for the investigation of “how gender operates throughout the whole
constellation of images, attitudes, and operations attendant to country music.”76 McCusker and
Pecknold see class boundaries, cultural tastes, institutional hierarchies, performance styles, and
appropriate roles for audiences as being constructed “partly through the invocation of gender.”77
Essentially, these authors argue that gender is a salient feature and important analytical focus of
country music.

Keel agrees and furthers this argument by performing an important analysis of country music
as related to the feminist movement. She outlines what she views as the “new women’s movement”
in country music; pointing out that female country singers have needed to work within the system to
create change, resulting in more subdued feminism than the feminism of other musical styles like

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75 David Sanjek, “Muddying the Clear Water: The Dubious Transparency of Country Music,” foreword to *A
Boy Named Sue: Gender and Country Music*, ed. Kristine M. McCusker and Diane Pecknold (Jackson: University of
Mississippi Press, 2004), viii.
76 David Sanjek, “Muddying the Clear Water,” xiv.
77 Kristine M. McCusker and Diane Pecknold, *Introduction to A Boy Named Sue: Gender and Country
pop and rock, she argues that this feminist movement “has made its own distinct stand for the importance of equality for women.”

Other authors dismiss the notion of women as oppressed in country and instead focus on their role as important players in its development. Kristine McCusker aims to highlight women’s essential roles in the development of the genre, and to allow these women “to speak for themselves, to introduce their lives and tell their stories because their words have either been erased from country music history or have been claimed as feminist (in other words, odd, rare, not normal) by previous scholars.” Although McCusker receives the gestures of country music feminism as “odd,” nevertheless she prioritizes women’s storytelling narratives.

**Contexts of Gender in Popular Music**

Understandings of gender in popular music overall help shape gender presentations and negotiations in country music specifically, and as such they are key to this study. In her book *Women and Popular Music*, Sheila Whiteley explores the roles of women musicians within music and popular culture. She investigates the ways female artists have confronted issues of sexuality and responded to changing feminist discourse, arguing that despite an increase in women in corporate roles, the popular music industry remains male-dominated. She reads gender identity and sexuality into the musical output of many famous popular music artists, particularly those of the 1960s and

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1970s, finding that women in popular music have often faced constraints or been overlooked due to their gender.

Marion Leonard furthers this discussion in her book *Gender in the Music Industry*. With the aim of examining the importance of gender within the “practice, aesthetics and discourse” of rock music, she understands gender as affecting the “everyday experiences of all rock musicians within the context of the music industry.”

She draws on Butler’s theory of gender as inseparable from the “political and cultural intersections in which it is invariably produced and maintained,” to articulate how a discussion of gender in music must include a discussion of the music industry as well. Ultimately, she argues that the “masculinist character” of rock is the result of continual reproduction and enactment, and that this masculinist discourse maintains models of masculinity as narrative tropes.

Whiteley and Leonard provide valuable context for any study on contemporary women in popular music. Since my own study considers genre-blending in Underwood’s music (discussed in depth in the remainder of this chapter), and therefore touches on several popular music genres, Whiteley’s work looking at gender and popular music as a whole and Leonard’s work studying gender in rock music both help contextualize the role of women in other popular music genres.

This contextual knowledge—specifically, knowledge of the gendered aspects of popular and country music, historical context of the country music genre, and an understanding of the difficulties with genre classification—provides a valuable backdrop for the study of Carrie

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83 Ibid., 1.
84 Ibid., 181.
Underwood’s works. In addition to these contexts, my approach incorporates a consideration of gender in relation to genre, an approach that reflects the links between these concepts that have been historically recognized.
Theoretical Framework

Considering the dynamic nature of musical genres in general and country music in particular, I propose that a combination of genre theory, gender theory, and narrative theory adapted for popular music provides an appropriate framework for analysis of the music, lyrics, and images associated with Carrie Underwood’s musical works.

Interlocking Analysis

Since I understand the concepts of genre, performance, gender, sexuality, etc., to be interrelated, one of my primary objectives will be to show how the different theoretical tools I use in my analysis intersect. In the field of gender studies, and specifically theories of intersectionality, scholars have begun to invoke the methodological practice of an interlocking analysis.85 Because I understand the very object of inquiry to be a discursive exploration of interlocking domains (music, lyrics, images), it is appropriate that my analytic approach would reflect the nature of the material.

An interlocking analysis asserts that the prominence of a single aspect of a person’s identity (e.g. gender, sexuality, race, class) is entirely dependent on each person, setting, and situation and cannot be separated from other aspects, necessitating that the axes of identity be considered in relation to each other instead of in competition with one another; put simply, “interlocking systems

85 See for example:
Sherene H. Razack, *Looking White People In The Eye: Gender, Race, and Culture in Courtrooms and Classrooms* (Toronto: University of Toronto press, 1998);
Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider* (New York: The Crossing Press, 1984); and
need one another.” Patricia Hill Collins encourages a move away from what she calls “additive analyses of oppression” in favor of analyses that “assume race, class and gender are all present in any given setting, even if one aspect appears more visible and salient than the others.” In the case of Carrie Underwood, for example, an interlocking analysis would consider her experience of whiteness, middle-class upbringing, and femininity all contributing to her experience as a country music artist, understanding that the prominence of any specific aspect as a marker of her identity would be different in each situation but that no single aspect can be considered in isolation. Applying this idea to musical texts, we can argue that a song’s lyric content, for example, is, and can only be, considered as it relates to the music and images that accompany it.

In this context, a combination of theories is necessary to adequately study multifaceted texts. I first turn to genre theory, to clarify which genre(s) Underwood operates within so that I can better understand where she complies with and where she departs from the established norms for those genres.

Genre Theory

According to Franco Fabbri, a genre is a “set of musical events…whose course is governed by a definite set of socially accepted rules.” He alleges that these sets are considered in relation to other sets, that is, that genres are frequently defined by what they are not, and certain musical events can belong to two genres at the same time. Fabian Holt similarly sees genre as a “type of category that refers to a particular kind of music within a distinctive cultural web of production, circulation, and

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86 Razack, Looking White People In The Eye, 13.
signification. That is to say, genre is not only ‘in the music,’ but also in the minds and bodies of particular groups of people who share certain conventions.”89 Jason Mittell sees genre as “key ways that our media experiences are classified and organized into categories that have specific links to particular cultural value, assumed audience, and social function,”90 while Stuart Borthwick and Ron Moy simply define genre as incorporating “textual and extra-textual parameters.”91 Clearly the term genre encompasses a wide range of factors, including both musical and non-musical factors.

Holt describes genre culture as “the overall identity of the cultural formations in which genre is constituted,” which he sees as an important part of that genre’s identity that must be considered in its definition.92 Mittell employs the similar term cultural categories, which he sees operating “across the cultural realms of media industries, audiences, policy, critics, and historical contexts.”93 According to Mittell, genres do not emerge from the texts themselves, but rather are cultural tools created to categorize them through discourses of definition, interpretation, and evaluation. In this sense, culture and cultural surroundings are critical elements of genre.

Genre scholars are also careful to consider problematic elements of genre theory. Holt warns against the definition of popular music “merely as a series of genre-specific cultures” and remains cautious of musical categorization, arguing that they are static and create boundaries.94 That is to say that while genre theory can be a helpful tool for describing music and musical culture, the rigid

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90 Jason Mittell, Genre and Television: From Cop Shows to Cartoons in American Culture (New York and London: Routledge, 2004), xii.
92 Holt, Genre in Popular Music, 19.
93 Mittell, Genre and Television, xii.
94 Holt, Genre in Popular Music, 6.
definition of genres can be detrimental to musical study. Holt further proposes that “employing multiple critical models, explor[ing] plural narratives, and develop[ing] ‘small theories’ in relation to particular musical and social realities in a series of individually designed case studies” will use genre theory appropriately and result in productive genre analysis.95

In summary, genre theory is a dynamic and subjective category of analysis. Genre definitions are difficult to create, since both the musical and non-musical elements surrounding a work’s creation are constantly evolving and subject to different interpretations within different circles. Ultimately, genre distinctions can be extremely useful and elucidate elements of the cultural climate surrounding a musical work’s creation, but these distinctions should be kept fluid to allow room for works that mix, cross, or transcend genre boundaries.

Gender theory

The concept of genre culture and its concomitant emphasis on cultural considerations lends itself well to a feminist analysis. Holt’s arguments against general definitions of musical genre in favor of an exploration of plural narratives in specific situations are also appropriate for an interlocking feminist analysis of genre. Concrete links between genre and gender theory exist as well; McCusker and Pecknold state that gender “has been used to establish and defend the stylistic and institutional boundaries separating country music from pop, rock ‘n’ roll, folk, and other genres…gender imagery has been a site for stylistic innovation throughout the course of country music’s development.”96 Gender, then, becomes a key component of culture and its analysis.

95 Holt, Genre in Popular Music, 7-8.
96 McCusker and Pecknold, introduction, xx.
Christine Gledhill develops the relationship between gender and genre even further, asking what happens if “gender and genre are run through each other.”\(^{97}\) Though her focus is on film genre, her ultimate aim to explore “the aesthetic and imaginative power of gender as a tool of genre, and to explore what genre returns to the cultural sphere” can give valuable insight to musical genre.\(^ {98}\) She argues that the deconstruction of both gender and genre and their joint consideration are essential, saying that this offers a “‘constellation’ of cultural, aesthetic, and ideological materials, containing…a more inclusive range of possibilities.”\(^ {99}\) Discussing gender specifically, she further suggests that its deconstruction can reposition it as mutable and diverse, and that often the “aesthetics of gender” are used to create meaning within a text.\(^ {100}\)

Gledhill’s aim of deconstructing both genre and gender implies that both are constructed to begin with. Judith Butler provides a foundational text surrounding the construction of gender, presenting gender as a shifting and contextual phenomenon and arguing that gender “does not denote a substantive being, but a relative point of convergence among culturally and historically specific sets of relations.”\(^ {101}\) She describes gender as a performance, the constraints of which are established by the culture in which we perform. If we deconstruct this performed gender as Gledhill and Butler suggest, the relationship between the constructed gender and its cultural and historical relations is illuminated. Ultimately, just as musical genre is intimately related with cultural contexts, so too is gender.

\(^{99}\) Ibid., 4.
\(^{100}\) Ibid., 11.
Hollows and Moseley further explore the relationship between gender theory and popular culture, arguing:

The idea of feminism and popular culture tends to presume that a ‘real’ and ‘authentic’ feminism exists outside of popular culture, and offers a position from which to judge and measure feminism’s success or failure at making it into the mainstream. Such an approach also assumes that feminism, or the feminist, can tell us about popular culture, but does not examine what popular culture can tell us about feminism.102

These authors therefore discuss feminism in popular culture instead of feminism and popular culture, in order to situationally evaluate how popular culture engages with feminism and feminist messages, instead of simply applying feminist theory to popular culture topics. I take from their insights the idea that feminism in popular culture will inevitably look different than feminism outside of it, and that imposing the same measures of feminism onto popular culture as other cultural works will not result in productive analysis.

The idea that feminism in popular culture manifests differently than feminism in other areas is also why I avoid specifically labeling Underwood, or even her work, as inherently feminist. Hollows and Moseley discuss how many black female rappers historically “embraced many elements of feminism, but refused to identify as ‘feminist’ because they were suspicious of claims of ‘sisterhood’ and the privileging of sexual politics over the politics of ‘race’.”103 That is to say, though artists may present ideas in their work that could be labeled feminist, they may choose not to identify with the movement. As such, in my own analysis of Underwood’s work I claim only that her work communicates feminist values, and never that it or she “is” feminist.

This framing of feminism in popular culture compliments Jill Dolan’s concept of feminist criticism. Dolan argues that “we should look within, as well as outside, the mainstream” for feminist content in theatre, because while works created within established cultural forms “might be less radical [they] work from within established conventions and venues to stretch their capacities.”104 That is to say, again, that feminism within popular culture and conventional forms will manifest in different ways than feminism outside of it. Beverly Keel echoes this sentiment in reference to country music specifically, arguing that acts of feminism in country will inherently look different because of the genre’s traditionalism that has traditionally restricted female singers from making overt feminist statements.105

These subtle statements of feminism that Keel identifies often take the form of liberal feminism, which broadly asserts that women can individually achieve equality by making specific choices. That is, liberal feminist work, including the work of authors Mary Wollstonecraft, John Stuart Mill, and Betty Friedan, emphasizes a woman’s individual situation and choices, while considering social and economic factors related to oppression to a lesser degree.106

This is not to say that all statements of feminism in country music take the form of liberal feminism, or that any feminist analysis of country music must use liberal feminist theory. In fact, I assert that feminism in country music may take many approaches, and that analysis using many different feminist theories would be valuable. I do, however, echo Keel’s claim that country music

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105 Keel, “Between Riot Grrl and Quiet Girl,” 155.
feminism may be subtler than feminism in other musical genres, and therefore requires special 
attention in analysis.

Returning to Dolan, I also aim to execute Dolan’s instructions to feminist critics. She states 
that feminist criticism “strives to consider what theatre and performance might mean, what it might 
do, how it might be used in a world that requires ever more and better conversations about how we 
can imagine who we are and who we might be.”107 In this thesis, I endeavor to consider and 
articulate how Underwood’s works use, create, and give meaning to feminist messages in order to 
reconsider who Underwood is as an artist.

Narrative in Popular Music

The traditionally male-dominated genre of country music has often left little space for 
women’s narratives separate from their relations to men. Jocelyn Neal asserts that “women were 
involved in every aspect of country music from its beginning, but social and economic conditions 
dictated that few of them became commercial stars, and fewer still were acknowledged for their 
roles.”108 For example, of the songs which topped Billboard’s country charts in 1970, only four of 
twenty-three were sung by women.109 Although the percentage of number one hits performed by 
female artists increased to 52% in 1998, those songs were sung by “only a small handful of well-
established artists… [and] almost all of the women fit in the glamorous country-pop style.”110 Keel, 
too, argues that women in county music have had to placate male industry leaders in order to

107 Dolan, The Feminist Spectator as Critic, xxxvii.
109 Ibid., 257.
110 Ibid., 401.
The restrictive power of these “male gatekeepers” as Keel calls them was no more apparent than in 2015, when radio consultant Keith Hill suggested to radio broadcasters that “if you want to make ratings in country radio, take females out,” and then compared country music radio to a salad, calling men the lettuce (that is, the substance) and women the tomatoes (that is, the adornment). Country music, of course, is not exclusively misogynist, and its women are much more than victims of masculine culture, but it is important to acknowledge the traditional challenges that women faced and still face in producing their own narratives within the genre.

Given this context, I argue for the importance of examining Underwood’s narratives from multiple perspectives and considering multiple axes of her persona (including gender, class, race, and sexuality), to understand how her use of narrative solidifies her authority in country music and simultaneously extends her audience to those of other genres.

My analysis of Underwood’s work will thus take a multi-dimensional approach in order to consider how she constructs her stories in and through the domains of lyrics, music, images and film. In their analysis of a country music video by the Dixie Chicks, Lori Burns and Jada Watson find that “musical sound, style, and lyric content all contribute to the narrative of conflict and resolution.” Similarly, Jocelyn Neal proposes that country artists use a combination of text, melody, and form to present a song’s meaning. She further argues that these narrative paradigms are used to “help

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111 Keel, “Between Riot Grrrl and Quiet Girl,” 155.
114 Neal, Country Music, 42.
reinforce country music’s distinct identity.” In her foundational work on music video, Kaplan proposes that themes, motifs, and forms are critical to musical narrative. Burns considers that in any given recording, there are often more narratives present than are immediately perceptible. Allowing for consideration of multiple narratives with varying prominence in a work allows for a richer understanding of the text itself.

Burns extends this exploration of narrative to explore female vocal authority in popular music. In her analysis, she considers “not only the stories and social messages that are conveyed but also how these are communicated through narrative (storytelling) strategies,” arguing that the way musicians write themselves into music changes the music’s meaning and message. Musical narrative, therefore, is not drawn solely from the words an artist sings, but also from the way these words are told to the audience. Burns develops an interpretative framework that considers narrative agency, narrative voice, modes of contact between narrator and narratee, engagement of the listener, and musical expression to comprehensively analyze the projection of narrative in popular song.

Burns and Watson undertake a similarly thorough analysis of narrative in the Dixie Chicks’ “Top Of the World,” including music video in their study. They posit that by “identifying how the image edits relate to the musical gestures, the analyst is rewarded by a more refined understanding of the layers of meaning in this song.” From these studies, we can conclude that word, sound, image, the way they interact and the way they are conveyed all contribute to a song’s narrative.

115 Ibid.
117 Lori Burns, “Vocal Authority and Listener Engagement,” 155.
118 Lori Burns, “Vocal Authority and Listener Engagement,” 156.
Like genres, however, narrative forms are constantly “acquiring, shedding, and adjusting meanings.” Almen presents the importance of acknowledging historical and cultural contexts when interpreting narratives. Further, narrative is considered an important factor in creating genre distinctions. Simon Frith claims that “genre analysis must be, by aesthetic necessity, narrative analysis” which I interpret to mean that narrative is a necessary consideration and element of genre distinction, and vice versa. Considering both country music’s reliance on story telling as a distinguishing generic feature of its songs, as discussed above, and a traditional lack of female narratives in the genre, narrative analysis will be an illuminating point of analysis when considering Underwood’s works.

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Happiness Scripts

In this consideration of narrative in country music, I will rely upon a specific tool to address the overarching metanarratives found in country music that dictate acceptable social behaviors and values. In her book *The Promise of Happiness*, Sara Ahmed engages in a critical analysis of the largely uncontested view that happiness is central to human life, and the subsequent claim that happiness is good. She develops a theory of “happiness scripts” as plans that designate how a life should be lived to maximize happiness. Ahmed’s work is not only important from a theoretical perspective, but also provides a solid basis for a problematized analysis of portrayals of happiness in cultural material. I suggest that these theories can be usefully applied to the study of popular music.

Ahmed critically examines cultural metanarratives with a focus on cultural constructions of happiness and how this happiness is acquired and transmitted. She argues that happiness is associated with some life choices and not others, and that this leads to the creation of “happiness scripts,” which designate how one should live a life that is full of, or leads to, happiness. She further posits that these scripts are gendered, “providing a set of instructions for what women and men must do in order to be happy whereby happiness is what follows being good or natural.” For example, heterosexual love becomes about the “possibility of a happy ending,” whereby women must find happiness “in the happiness of ‘a good man’.” Once this is achieved, they are meant to desire a happy family, in which they raise children who like the right things and form the right habits. This creates a happiness script for one to follow.

123 Ibid., 59.
124 Ibid., 90-91.
125 Ibid., 48.
Drawing from Simone de Beauvoir, Ahmed locates the family home as a site where happiness takes material form, for “within its walls the family is established…and maintains its identity as generations come and go.” Ahmed locates the family home as a site where happiness takes material form, for “within its walls the family is established…and maintains its identity as generations come and go.” The happy family, then, is also inherited, and through it we inherit ways of being affected in the right way by the right things. Education is also key to the happy family, as it has the power to encourage children to follow socially acceptable norms and patterns. Ahmed calls this orientation, the goal of which is to make children follow in the footsteps of their parents. Also contained within these happiness scripts are the consequences for failure to follow them. Deviance from happiness scripts inevitably leads to unhappiness, that is, if a person does not follow the scripts as designated, whether by choice or not, they are expected to feel unhappy.

A key happiness script Ahmed theorizes is the happy family script. Ahmed considers the family as a “happy object,” meaning an object that gathers value as a “social good.” According to Ahmed, the good or happy life “is imagined through the proximity of objects,” including the happy family object. Importantly, happiness to Ahmed involves “a narrative of assimilation in the specific sense of becoming like;” in the context of the happy family, this means the continued reproduction of the happy family form, where the form is a happy heterosexual couple with happy

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127 Ahmed, The Promise of Happiness, 45.
128 Ibid., 91.
129 Ibid., 21.
130 Ibid., 90.
131 Ibid., 112.
children who like and do the right things in the right way.\textsuperscript{132} Rejection of the happy family script, for example, disturbs the norm of the happy family creating happiness by reproducing itself.\textsuperscript{133}

I apply Ahmed’s concept of scripts to the narratives of country music. Although in the field of country musicology, the connection between narrative theory and these scripts of happiness has not been made, I am suggesting this connection as a productive way to think about the cultural meanings that reside in country music narratives and specifically in Carrie Underwood’s work.

Country music culture is based upon a set of values that underpin and mediate its content, and these values are often communicated through narrative strategies. As such, Ahmed’s idea of happiness scripts can be applied to these social and cultural stories that are told through this music. Furthermore, country music often explores the consequences of failing to follow these scripts and reinforces the validity and necessity of the idealized narratives. As Ahmed proposes for happiness scripts in general, these country music scripts are highly inflected cultural tropes, with implications for gender and other important axes of identity (race, class, sexuality, etc.). Ahmed’s interlocking approach to examining values, narrative, and various axes of identity including gender serves as a useful model for my own analysis.

Ahmed’s work is largely theoretical and though it identifies many instances of happiness scripts in popular culture, it does not explicitly differentiate between or name happiness scripts. Rather, Ahmed views happiness scripts as broad messages touching all aspects of our lives that contain specific distinctions between right and wrong. By avoiding naming specific scripts, Ahmed avoids creating dividing lines between the many scripts that intermix in our lives. To facilitate the

\textsuperscript{132} Ibid., 46.
\textsuperscript{133} Ibid., 49.
use of Ahmed’s theory in this thesis, I assign names to some of these scripts. I acknowledge that this may oversimplify the complex web of scripts Ahmed constructs in her work, however, I believe this is the clearest way to communicate this theory to the reader, who may not be intimately familiar with Ahmed’s work.

Summary

I propose that an interlocking approach to analysis of selected Carrie Underwood songs, with emphasis on the interaction of their music, lyrics, and associated images, and with additional theoretical support drawn from genre theory, gender performativity, narrative theory, and Ahmed’s theory of happiness scripts allows for a feminist critical analysis of these works, for the purpose of discovering how Underwood uses genre-blending to construct complex gendered narratives in her musical texts.

Analytic Methodology

I apply the conceptual framework outlined above to Carrie Underwood’s *Blown Away Tour: Live DVD* and associated texts, specifically songs, lyrics, and videos. To analyze this material I use the tools of the theories described above: from genre theory, I apply Holt’s model of “employ[ing] multiple critical narratives, explor[ing] plural narratives, and develop[ing] ‘small theories’ in relation to particular musical and social realities in a series of individually designed case studies;”134 from gender theory I am mindful of how gender is performed in and through genre; from narrative theory I rely upon Neal’s understanding of country metanarratives and I interlock her ideas with Ahmed’s

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scripts of happiness. In brief, I aim to examine how genres are conceptualized, how gender is performed through genre, how musical narratives (specifically metanarratives and multiple narratives) are constructed and portray identity, and how these narratives can be seen to operate within the context of cultural happiness scripts.

In analyzing these materials, I reach for tools to interpret the intersecting domains of music, lyrics and images. The methods of analysis here come from Vernallis (2004 and 2013), Railton & Watson (2011), and Burns & Watson (2009).

Carol Vernallis approaches music video in a unique way by treating it “as a distinct genre, one different from its predecessors…a medium with its own ways of organizing materials, exploring themes, and dealing with time.” Vernallis also discusses gender identity in music video, asserting “images of gender and power (or ethnicity, sexuality, class, and so on) can be inscribed at any structural level – over the first half of a song, a single section, measure, or phrase.” She further encourages an intertextual approach to analyzing music video, arguing, “asking what music and image are saying to one another, how they act as players and performers, can reveal a music video’s pervasiveness or allure,” an approach I will adopt in my analysis.

Railton and Watson problematize current academic treatment of music video, arguing it is infrequent and when it appears in discussion, it is “subsumed under other topics and foci.” They emphasize the “notion of representation and the political implications bound up with the complex

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137 Ibid., 210.
practices of representing within music video,” adopting a feminist theoretical approach that considers the production and reproduction of normative gendered identities and views music video as a site “in which and through which identities are represented in specific and restricted ways – ways which, politically speaking, delimit the real options available for real people being and acting in the world.”

Burns and Watson further examine these views, looking to the “multimedia spectacle” to establish how artists present intimacy, gender, and agency. The authors develop an intertextual analytical model for live concert film to examine lyrics, music, staging, and film mediation through concepts of form and space, gesture, and address. Their discussion of how P!nk “mobilises private themes within the setting of public spectacle” is equally applicable to the country music sphere; Burns and Watson further this claim themselves as they highlight the relationship between country music video, narrative structure, and the feminist movement in country music through the Dixie Chicks’s “Top of the World” video.

An additional problem this project raises is the definitive categorization of specific musical stylistic features as inherent to one specific genre. As I outlined previously, a strict segregation of genre and musical elements is detrimental to musical analysis, and ultimately detracts from the overall purpose of this project. Additionally, musical genres are highly subject to change, and the stylistic features indicative of a certain genre highly fluid; an element considered innovative at one time is, many years later, considered traditional. My intent is not to categorize specific elements of

141 Burns and Watson, “Subjective Perspectives,” 137.
Carrie Underwood’s music as country, rock, or pop; rather, I seek to explore what it means to create music of a specific genre and how musical influences of other genres can assert themselves and affect an audience’s understanding of a work. As such, I will not create lists of stylistic elements to be understood as exclusively country, pop, or rock, but instead will examine these effects on a case-by-case basis in my forthcoming analysis. With this method, I am able to consider the context of each musical element, and can therefore take into account an element’s relationship with lyrics, images, and other musical effects before making any claim to an external genre influence.

Another strategy that assists in clarifying the generic influences present in a specific song is Robert Hatten’s conceptualization of strategic and stylistic intertextuality.¹⁴² Hatten applies the theory of intertextuality from literary theory to musicology, and aims to distinguish between style and strategy in intertextuality. Spicer applies Hatten’s methodology to popular music, defining stylistic intertextuality as occurring “when a composer adopts distinctive features of a pre-existing style without reference to any specific work in that style,” and strategic intertextuality as occurring “when a composer makes a deliberate reference to a particular earlier work or works.”¹⁴³ In this thesis I will identify intertextual links, both stylistic and strategic, in the songs that I analyze in order to link these songs with other musical works.

These tools are particularly relevant to the analysis of Carrie Underwood’s live tour. Ultimately, through the analysis of the lyrics, music, video, and spectacle of the Blown Away tour, I understand the tour to ground itself in relation to several of country music’s happiness scripts, and

then to communicate ideas about genre and gender through at times supporting and at times subverting these scripts.
Chapter Organization

With this introduction, my aim has been to establish the contexts of this research, present the research questions, establish a theoretical framework, and establish the analytic methodology. The following chapters of my thesis will address the *Blown Away Tour: Live DVD* and other related texts in the order in which the tour frames them: that is, by dedicating a chapter to four of the each ‘acts’ outlined on the Tour DVD, and focusing my analysis on a single song from each act.\(^{144}\) This way, the narrative presented by the Live Tour DVD is represented through the narrative of my thesis, highlighting the overarching themes of the performance while retaining the ability to perform deeper analysis within that context. This organization supports my adoption of Holt’s method of executing individual case studies while keeping an eye to the plural narratives that can be seen overarching the larger structure, and allows for a proper consideration of genre and gender, which an interlocking analysis perspective suggests should not be separated so rigidly as by chapters.

**Chapter 1. Introduction**

This first chapter serves as an introduction to the relevant literature and theory pertinent to this project. I contextualize Carrie Underwood and her career in relation to both current and historical country music. I also summarize academic literature pertaining to gender in country music specifically, and popular music more broadly. I then present a theoretical framework, composed of

\(^{144}\) I do not explore Act Three, “Calm,” in this thesis. The in-depth exploration of five acts instead of four would have added unnecessary length to this thesis. I chose to omit Act Three because it features Underwood’s most country-aligned songs, the act did not lend itself to an examination of genre-blending as well as the other acts. See Figure 1.2 for the full setlist from the *Blown Away: Live Tour DVD.*
genre theory, gender theory, narrative theory, and happiness scripts. Finally, I summarize my methodological approach to my study.

Chapter 2. “Good Girl”: Intersections of Genre and Gender in Act One: Storm Warning

Chapter 2 offers an analysis of the opening song of the Blown Away Tour: Live DVD, “Good Girl,” first analyzing the song (including music and lyrics), the music video, and finally the tour video. I combine the theories presented in my theoretical framework to offer a comprehensive analysis of the genre, gender, narrative, and happiness scripts throughout my analysis. Given the complex relationship between gender presentation (specifically female masculinity) and musical genre in this song, I found this the most effective way to organize the chapter. I demonstrate how Underwood carefully manipulates narrative to uniquely incorporate genre influences and gender performances in the music, lyrics, images, and staging of “Good Girl” in her Blown Away Tour, exploring different presentations of genre, namely rock strategies, and gender, showcasing both her ‘good’ and ‘bad’ personas but ultimately prioritizing femininity.

Chapter 3. “Jesus Take the Wheel”: Religion and Gender Roles in Act Two: Lightning

In Chapter 3, I examine the medley of “Jesus Take the Wheel” and “How Great Thou Art” as performed by Underwood in Act Two of her Blown Away Tour: Live DVD. I first analyze genre, then gender/happiness scripts in the song and music video of “Jesus Take the Wheel,” and finally look at how these are reflected in the tour video and affected by the incorporation of “How Great Thou Art.” I have separated this chapter by theory primarily because the relationship between
religion and country music is historically complex, and requires focused attention without the added intricacy of additional theories. I bring all my theoretical observations together in my conclusion to this chapter. Ultimately, I find Underwood uses stylistic and strategic intertextuality to highlight the song’s generic identity, and adheres to traditional happiness scripts, aligning her song within a lineage of other country songs with religious themes.

Chapter 4. “Before He Cheats”: Hard Country and Horror in Act Four: Twister

Chapter 4 of this thesis looks to the Blown Away Tour: Live DVD’s last song before the encore, “Before He Cheats.” I look first at the song and video’s alignment with country music norms, and in particular the hard country sub-genre. I then look at the song and video’s feminist implications as expressed through happiness scripts and through references to Stephen King’s Carrie. Finally, I examine how these are expressed within the Blown Away Tour: Live DVD. Similar to Chapter 3, I organize this chapter by theory. I conclude that Underwood uses specific narrative strategies to construct the song’s genre identity and to manipulate her own gender identity in “Before He Cheats,” reinforcing an understanding of her Blown Away Tour as subversive and feminist within the country genre.

Chapter 5. “Blown Away”: Domestic Abuse and the Wizard of Oz in the Blown Away Tour Encore

look to the narrative of class mobility presented alongside the domestic abuse narrative, with an eye
to the same theoretical implications. I organize this chapter in this way because these two narratives
are individually complex and each deserves separate consideration. I therefore incorporate all
elements of my theoretical framework throughout my analysis of both. Ultimately, I find that by
blending pop and country, Underwood highlights class difference, and by heavily altering the second
female vocal line creates a narrative of class movement, presenting the possibility of female freedom,
autonomy, and success in the face of domestic abuse; this alternate narrative, not just of escape but
of achievement, also means a break from traditional gendered country happiness scripts, where rural,
family life is highly valued and prioritized.

Conclusion.

The conclusion summarizes the goals, framework, and methodology of this thesis. I offer
answers to my research questions presented in the introduction and further insight gained in my
analysis. I end by pointing to the need for further research highlighted by this study.
Conventions Adopted

All material in this thesis, including all notes, bibliography, and figures have been produced in accordance with the *Chicago Manual of Style 16th Edition* (referred to herein as CMS), notes and bibliography format. Whenever possible, I have additionally formatted this thesis to best facilitate coherence, continuity, and the reader’s understanding. In this section I outline the specific conventions I have adopted in this regard.

I have included an appendix at the end of each chapter containing all figures referenced in that chapter. In compliance with the *CMS* Chapter 3.5, all images and musical examples are labeled with the term “figure.” In compliance with CMS Chapter 3.7, the figure label appears below each image. Captions of all images taken from any video material, including *The Blown Away Tour: Live DVD* and any music videos, include a time code referencing the specific moment the image was taken.

All references to the *Blown Away Tour* mimic the terminology used by *The Blown Away Tour: Live DVD* packaging. This includes references to specific tour Acts, which are referred to as “Act One” and not “Act 1” or any other format (Fig. 1.2).
All YouTube videos are cited in CMS format. In some footnotes I have included direct links to specific time codes in videos, for ease of listening for the reader, and so links appearing in footnotes and in the bibliography may differ.

All lyrics referenced in this thesis are taken from the official Carrie Underwood Sheet Music Anthology: Updated Edition. Lyrics are cited in the same format as quotations from print sources.
Musical examples herein are treated as figures. The captions for musical examples include the name of the work, artist, and measure number. These examples stem from various sources and are cited in the bibliography as outlined in the CMS guidelines for published scores, Chapter 14.269.
Chapter 2. “Good Girl”: Intersections of Genre and Gender in Act One: Storm Warning

Carrie Underwood’s *Blown Away Tour: Live* concert video opens with clips from the “Blown Away” music video projected onto the stage’s main screen, accompanied by haunting, improvisatory and gradually building guitar and percussion. In these sepia-coloured clips, Underwood’s character takes notice of an approaching storm and begins running down a dirt road towards a yellow house (Fig. 2.1); as she takes shelter, a tornado forms and envelops the house. The tour video cuts briefly to images of the band members’ silhouettes. When it returns to the screen behind the band, the clip shows the aforementioned yellow house falling from above and landing under a bright blue sky. A strategically camouflaged stage door opens and Carrie Underwood appears to emerge from the yellow house’s door, singing the first track on the *Blown Away* album, “Good Girl” (Fig. 2.2).

![Carrie Underwood, Blown Away Tour: Live DVD, 00:00:38](image)

**Figure 2.1.** Carrie Underwood, *Blown Away Tour: Live* DVD, 00:00:38
Act I (Storm Warning) of the *Blown Away Tour: Live* opens with “Good Girl,” followed by songs “Undo It,” “Wasted,” “I Told You So,” and “Two Black Cadillacs.” This chapter offers an analytic study of the first song on the concert setlist, “Good Girl.” Due to the song’s position as the concert opener and the first track on the *Blown Away* album, “Good Girl” holds substantial narrative influence; this song sets the stage for the remainder of the tour video.

**Context**

“Good Girl” was released February 23, 2012 as the lead single for the *Blown Away* album. Peaking at Number 1 on the Billboard Hot Country charts, it was arguably the best-received track on Underwood’s album. The song is one of seven from the *Blown Away* album that features Underwood as a writer. Her co-writers for “Good Girl,” Chris DeStefano and Ashley Gorley, also
feature prominently as co-writers elsewhere in Underwood’s career.\(^1\) The song has no overt plot, only a descriptive narrative of a stereotypically naïve good girl, a bad boy, and their relationship. The lyrics warn the girl that the boy she’s with is “no good” for her and will leave her heartbroken, so she should “get out while [she] can.”\(^2\)

The video for “Good Girl,” directed by Theresa Wingert, was released 12 March 2012, two and a half weeks after the song premiered.\(^3\) The video’s success mirrored that of the song when it won CMT Video of the Year in 2012. Like the lyrics, the video has no explicit plot, instead featuring clips of Underwood in various outfits, most of which seem to represent either a ‘good girl’ or a ‘bad girl’ persona. Eventually, these personas meet, and a new Underwood, who combines the clothing styles and attitudes of both earlier personas, is introduced to sing the final a cappella outro.

Analysis

Song

I turn now to an analysis of this song, relying upon the theoretical framework and methodology that I outlined in Chapter 1. With my analytic methodology in mind, I seek to examine how the genre influences, gender performances, and narrative techniques intersect in the music, lyrics, images, and staging of this piece in order to examine how Underwood effectively

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\(^3\) Theresa Wingert also directed Underwood’s 2009 video for “Cowboy Casanova,” but otherwise primarily directs commercials.
negotiates these factors as a female country artist. I look to the rock influence in “Good Girl,” examining how Underwood is compared to important female rock artists and how Underwood’s presentations of gender can be understood in relation to these other artists’. Specifically, I explore the concepts of female masculinity, performative masculinity, and femininity as a tool. Using Burns’ model of narrative analysis, I establish how various narrative agents in “Good Girl” communicate specific gendered values and ideologies.

A survey of several online reviews reveals that critics were highly responsive to the generic interchange in “Good Girl.” A Separate State of Mind calls its country-rock sound “a very welcome change for Underwood…the most rocking [sic] she has been in a song before.”4 Specifically, the rock-influenced guitar gets substantial attention in reviews, with several critics comment on the “killer guitar riff”5 and “delicious guitar solo;”6 Taste of Country even likens the guitar sound to “Joan Jett guitars.”7 Underwood’s vocals are described as a “growl,”8 “raw and gritty,”9 and as showing off her extreme “vocal versatility;”10 Kevin John Coyne goes so far as to call Underwood’s vocal stylings as “a ferocious rock vocal that would make Janis proud,”11 clearly referring to 1960s psychedelic rock icon Janis Joplin. From these reviews, it is clear that the rock influences present in “Good Girl,” including the strong guitar, rough vocals with reverb, and even the powerful drums

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5 Ibid.
7 Ibid.
8 A Separate State of Mind, review of Carrie Underwood’s “Good Girl.”
9 Billy Dukes, review of Carrie Underwood’s “Good Girl.”
10 A Separate State of Mind, review of Carrie Underwood’s “Good Girl.”
11 Billy Dukes, review of Carrie Underwood’s “Good Girl.”
and avoidance of a standard three-verse storyline, leaving a distinct impression on critics, leading the song to be called “an absolutely exhilarating record” that is “relentlessly creative.”

While it is no surprise that critics picked up on several rock signifiers in “Good Girl,” the multiple direct references to historically significant women in rock in their reviews deserves additional attention. To this end, I ask: why is Underwood being compared to these specific rock artists? How can her strategic employment of rock influences in this song be contextualized in the study of women in rock music? To answer these questions, I briefly examine the careers, performances, and personas of the artists to whom Underwood is compared, and then consider these contexts in relation to Underwood’s situation. I begin with Joan Jett, in response to the reference in Taste of Country to the “Joan Jett guitars” in “Good Girl.”

The instrumental texture in “Good Girl” certainly bears resemblance to Joan Jett’s music, specifically the Joan Jett and the Blackhearts song “I Love Rock ‘N Roll.” The songs present similar introductory material, both including a strong, stable guitar riff emphasizing beat 1, hand claps on beats 2 and 4, and simple percussion emphasizing the song’s 4/4 meter. Additionally, vocal strategies used in “I Love Rock ‘N Roll,” including heavy vocal reverb and the use of a rough vocal tone, are taken up by Carrie Underwood in strategic moments during “Good Girl;” specifically, the second iteration of “good girl” at the beginning of each verse is heavily treated with reverb, effectively making it sound like an echo of the first, and vocal roughness is most consistently applied on the

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12 A Separate State of Mind, review of Carrie Underwood’s “Good Girl.”
14 A complete summary of each artist’s career is outside the scope of this project, but I believe a brief review can bring forth the reasons a music critic would see similarities between Underwood and these other artists.
15 Billy Dukes, review of Carrie Underwood’s “Good Girl.”
minor tenth jumps in the pre-chorus, emphasizing the song’s highest note. Visually, Jett’s nearly uninterrupted eye contact in her song’s music video is mimicked by the ‘bad girl’ in Underwood’s video. Considering the musical and visual similarities here, I turn to Jett’s career in the hopes of further contextualizing these influences.

Joan Jett is a punk rock artist whose career peaked in the 1980s, receiving most notoriety during her time with her band Joan Jett and the Blackhearts. Their most popular songs include “I Love Rock ’N Roll,” “Bad Reputation,” and “Do You Wanna Touch Me.” Jett has been called the ‘queen of rock and roll’ and the ‘godmother of punk’, and was inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame in 2015.16 Kathleen Kennedy claims it was “her endurance, as well as her refusal to compromise her commitment to three chord rock, [that] has earned Jett a hard-won respect among rock’s elite.”17 Certainly, Jett was a forceful character in 1980s punk rock.

Given her presence in a musical genre previously reserved almost exclusively for male artists, I feel it is important to acknowledge her status as a woman and the effect this had on her career and perception.18 Jett’s position as a female artist had a significant impact on her reception throughout her career. Her music and persona challenged social conventions and created a space for female performance outside the accepted gender binary; her performances “oscillated between the new rock


18 Here I avoid using the all-encompassing term ‘women in rock,’ as some scholars have argued it “works to peculiarise the presence of women rock performs” (see Leonard, Gender in the Music Industry, 32). Others have argued that the “discussion of woman artists—particularly why they are significant within the terrain of popular music—is important” (see Whiteley, Women and Popular Music, 5). With both these views in mind, I endeavor to discuss the influence of individual female rock musicians, not to peculiarise them but to highlight their significance in their field and their impact on future generations of musicians.
'n' roll girl who seeks access to rock music and its cultural excesses and a transgressive sexual subject who challenges the sexual and gender binaries of middle-class culture.” In the context of the hard rock and punk genres, a woman presenting uninhibited sexual content with drawling, low-range vocals and a forceful and direct gaze stands out as a challenge to conventions.

Feminist theorists such as Kennedy, Halberstam, and Jean Bobby Noble interpret this style of non-conformance to a gender binary as a type of “female masculinity,” defined by Kennedy as “a distinct gender identity that exists in between middle-class definitions of appropriate masculinity and femininity.” Through this type of performance, Jett created a new gendered space for rock artists moving forward by building on the innovations of female rock artists who came before her.

One such artist is Janis Joplin. Gaining popularity in the 1960s, Joplin primarily sang psychedelic rock in her famously bluesy and frequently coarse voice. While her career was cut tragically short by a heroin overdose in 1970, she still managed to make a lasting impression on the rock world. Sheila Whiteley describes Joplin’s performance style as one with “a particular trajectory into excess, raw emotion, and most significantly, a sense of power that was unique at the time.”

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19 Kennedy, “Results of a Misspent Youth,” 91.
20 See Judith Halberstam, Female Masculinity (Durham: Duke University Press, 1998); Kennedy, “Results of a Misspent Youth”;
Additionally, see Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, “Gosh, Boy George, You Must Be Awfully Secure In Your Masculinity!” in Constructing Masculinity, ed. Maurice Berger, Brian Wallis, and Simon Watson, 11-19 (New York and London: Routledge, 1995);
Though she does not specifically use the term ‘female masculinity,’ Eve Sedgwick’s article is often cited as a foundational text for this concept for its assertion that sometimes masculinity has nothing to do with men.
21 Kennedy, “Results of a Misspent Youth,” 91.
which made Joplin stand apart from her contemporaries and served as her contribution to rock music.\textsuperscript{22} Joplin was posthumously inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame in 1995.\textsuperscript{23}

Like Jett, Joplin’s gender did not escape notice in the rock world. Marion Leonard describes the double standards Joplin faced when she was “presented both as ‘one of the boys’ and also judged against accepted codes of feminine behavior.”\textsuperscript{24} Leonard claims that Joplin’s persona and “physicality in performance has been understood as a performative masculinity, an enacting of male codes of behavior.”\textsuperscript{25}

Both artists presented above and many other female artists have had to negotiate their identities and personas as women performers in a masculinist rock world. As mentioned above, several scholars have described their performances as masculine, frequently employing the terms ‘performative masculinity’ or ‘female masculinity’. These masculine attributes are often described manifesting physically, whether in vocal performance, stage performance, and/or dress. Since Susan Bordo describes the body, including “what we eat, how we dress, the daily rituals through which we attend to the body” as “a medium of culture,” I assign these performances of masculinity additional attention in order to understand how they relate to musical genre, and whether they could relate to Underwood’s performance of gender (another primary focus of my study) in her music.\textsuperscript{26}

\textsuperscript{23} Jaan Uhelszki, “Joan Jett & The Blackhearts Biography.”
\textsuperscript{25} Leonard, \textit{Gender in the Music Industry}, 37.
It is clear that authors who discuss these rock women’s performances of masculinity see them as an attempt to both negotiate their place in a male-dominated industry and to gain access to the social privilege associated with the masculine. While a full review of masculinity and its social power is beyond the scope of this project, it is important to note that according to many feminist scholars, most notably Judith Butler, masculinity is performative. As such, masculinity is not inherent to or restricted to the male body. Despite masculinity’s apparent fluidity and lack of inherent association with specific bodies, heterosexual male masculinity specifically “has traditionally been structured as the normative gender… and is mediated by other social factors, including race, sexuality, nationality, and class.” Several scholars discuss the impacts of this structuring on societal perceptions of other forms of masculinity.

Halberstam thoroughly explores the concept of female masculinity, arguing that “masculinity in this society inevitably conjures up notions of power and legitimacy and privilege; it often symbolically refers to the power and the state and to uneven distributions of wealth.” Halberstam further argues that female masculinity is often vilified as an unnatural representation of maladjustment. Kathleen Kennedy applies this concept of female masculinity to Joan Jett; importantly, she clarifies that for Jett, female masculinity “does not imply ‘macho posturing’ but

27 See, for example:
30 Halberstam, *Female Masculinity*, 2.
31 Ibid., 9.
rather, a contradictory construction—a male subject position performed in a feminine voice.”32

Ultimately, the masculine performances of Jett, Joplin, and countless other female rock stars have been interpreted as both revolutionary in rock music and crucially important to their careers.

Despite its obvious musical borrowings from rock music and specific references to individual rock songs, a closer look at “Good Girl” suggests that the song presents a drastically different gendered performance than songs by the aforementioned rock artists. An in-depth analysis of the lyrics and video can inform an interpretation of the song’s gendered narrative.

I draw on the interpretative model for distinction of narrative voice drawn from Seymour Chatman and developed by Burns to interpret the lyric narrative in “Good Girl.”33 Burns argues that interpreting music solely as a reflection of an artist’s personal experience can both overlook subtle methods of narrative expression and dismiss an artist’s narrative authority.34 A careful interpretation of musical narrative instead allows for the emergence of “multiple agents within the narrative structure,”35 described by Seymour Chatman as the real author, implied author, narrator, narratee, implied reader, and real reader.36 Burns further develops this interpretive model to consider “(1) narrative agency; (2) narrative voice; (3) the modes of contact between narrator and narratee; and (4) the engagement of the listener” through the analysis of vocal quality, vocal space, vocal articulation,

32 Kennedy, “Results of a Misspent Youth,” 99.
33 Burns, “Vocal Authority and Listener Engagement,” 155.
34 Ibid., 155.
35 Ibid., 161.
36 Seymour Benjamin Chatman, Story and Discourse: Narrative Structure in Fiction and Film (New York: Cornell University Press, 1980), 151.
Applying this model, I find the lyrics of “Good Girl” to communicate a multilayered narrative that I will discuss presently.

Figure 2.3. Lori Burns, Interpretive Model for Interpretation of Voice

*Agency (Implied author).* When discussing her *Blown Away* album, Carrie Underwood emphasizes the diversity of songs, saying there is “a little bit of everything [on the album]. There’s definitely more personal real life, you know, stories, and then there are some that are just fun. You create characters, you know, they’re like mini movies in music form and you just make stuff up.” These categories are apparently not mutually exclusive, as she says “Good Girl” “was just all about having fun… I got to kinda play these two characters” but then relates this fun story to personal experience, saying “I definitely feel like I’ve been both girls.” By simultaneously calling the song an act in which she got to play characters and relating it to personal experience, Underwood mediates

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37 Burns, “Vocal Authority and Listener Engagement,” 160.
38 Ibid., 161.
the distance between *real author* and *implied author*—as a result, the story is ‘true’ and believable, but the audience understands that it is not totally autobiographical. The *implied author* remains extremely important; while the *real author* could be speaking of a specific personal experience, the *implied author* clearly speaks on a broader social level, warning *all* listeners about the dangers of naïve love. As a result of this broad social warning, the listener can easily infer the *implied author’s* values.

*Narrative Voice (Narrator).* The narrator of “Good Girl” speaks in the first-person, but is not telling her own story and therefore is not the protagonist. The lyrics of “Good Girl” do not convey a distinct plot, but rather a warning from one girl to another; the narrator, therefore, focuses her attention on another girl’s story. As such, she maintains an outsider perspective of the story, and appears to the audience as a wise, honest storyteller and is granted a high degree of *narrative authority*, meaning the audience can see her wisdom as widely socially applicable. Since the *narrator* appears authoritative and somewhat removed from the story itself, there is little obvious difference between the *implied author* and *narrator*, and the values/ideologies assigned to the narrator are easily passed on to the *implied author*.

*Modes of Contact (Narratee).* Because an “*I*/you” relationship between the narrator and narratee is expressed in “Good Girl,” the *communication* of “Good Girl” can be considered to be direct. Since the narratee is never named and is only addressed as “good girl,” the address can be considered private or public by assuming the narrator is speaking to a specific girl or to *all* good girls. That is, because the ‘*you*’ of “Good Girl” is anonymous, an audience member could imagine any person as the narratee, giving the song a wide social reach.
Listener Engagement (Implied Reader). In “Good Girl,” though the narrator is engaged in the story, she maintains distance by disagreeing with the protagonist’s actions and holding a different world-view. Listener engagement is instead maintained by a consonant temporality; the narrator speaks in the present tense and maintains a consistent perspective throughout the song.

Overall Interpretative Summary. By peeling apart the multiple narrative agents presented in “Good Girl,” a complex narrative strategy emerges. Carrie Underwood maintains listener engagement in the song by presenting a first-person, present-tense, emotionally charged narrative, enhanced by the urgency, insistence, and forcefulness of the accompanying musical track, but maintains an authoritative narrative stance by opening up to the song to public address and making the narrator seem wise, mature, and knowledgeable. Since the narrator maintains distance from the protagonist, her values and ideologies are easily interpreted as the values and ideologies of the implied author.

The values and ideologies in “Good Girl” are overtly presented. The lyrics plainly tell the listener what a good girl is and what she should avoid. According to the lyrics, a good girl has “a heart of gold,” wants “a white wedding and a hand [she] can hold,” and “a fairytale ending, somebody to love.” Allegedly, the boy she desires only pretends to want those things, but will instead “leave her in the dust, ‘cause when he says forever, well it don’t mean much.” The narrator advises that the good girl leave before her heart is broken.

This general narrative of a good girl being naively lured by a boy’s charms recurs throughout Underwood’s career in songs such as “Before He Cheats” (2005), “Last Name” (2008), and “Undo

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41 AZLyrics, “Carrie Underwood Lyrics – Good Girl.”
42 Ibid.
It” (2009). Unique to “Good Girl,” however, is the lyrical emphasis on the good girl’s preservation of goodness. This goodness can also be read as cisgender heteronormative white femininity. The girl’s desire for a white (or rather, virginal) wedding and monogamous heterosexual relationship are in line with white, Christian, southern values; her own naivety, while frustrating for the narrator, is not a flaw but a component of her goodness and femininity.

It is pertinent here to recall Sara Ahmed’s happiness script theory, and in particular her assertion that these scripts are gendered. In particular, these scripts instruct women to find happiness through romantic fulfillment with a man, and subsequently through the reproduction of the family form. The desire for a monogamous heterosexual marriage, as presented by the good girl in Underwood’s song, reflects a desire to live this appropriate, acceptable life path outlined by Ahmed.

I do not assert that femininity is a negative trait or wish to dismiss its performance as negative. I recognize that expressions of femininity have often been wrongly used to discredit those who express it as weak, frivolous, and unintelligent. Rather, I echo the assertion of several scholars that the acceptable expression of femininity is a tool accessible to some (but not all) women that allows them access to higher social acceptance. Nicole E.R. Landry calls femininity “powerful social capital for girls,” and draws from Lyn Mikel Brown to assert that for women “there is only one acceptable avenue to power: be nice, stay pure, look beautiful, act white, be chosen.” Susan Bordo calls femininity an “ever-changing, homogenizing, elusive ideal” that submits feminine bodies to

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external regulation. Ahmed’s happiness script theory again becomes useful in a study of femininity; like life scripts, scripts of feminine performance are presented as achievable, desirable, and appropriate enactments of persona. Those that can achieve this standard of femininity are rewarded with social acceptance and capital, while its rejection is viewed as a “pathological sign of misidentification and maladjustment.”

This analysis of femininity becomes pertinent when contextualized in a study of musical genres. Where female masculinity grew to mainstream acceptance in rock music, country music generally maintains a strict adherence to traditional gender roles, stemming from its “predominantly Southern, white, Christian, socially conservative and patriotic philosophy.” With this comes a dichotomizing of behaviour: the good to be revered, and the bad to be avoided. Whiteley purports this binary is rooted in a more fundamental opposition, alleging

The binary relationships between pure/impure, active/passive, earthy/spiritual are deeply embedded in religious dichotomies... The opposition between pure/impure, controllable/uncontrollable is also present in the fundamental binary, active/passive. The passive woman is the ‘natural’ woman, controllable; the active woman is uncontrollable and, as such, lies outside the dominant symbolic order.

This active/passive binary is certainly present in the music video for “Good Girl.”

Music Video

The video for “Good Girl” mimics the lyrics’ valuation on conventional white femininity. The video features two personas, both played by Underwood. Underwood denies they are a

45 Halberstam, Female Masculinity, 9.
47 Whiteley, Women and Popular Music, 53.
good/bad dichotomy, saying, “I don’t want to call them good girl [and] bad girl because she wasn’t a bad girl, like she was just very knowledgeable. She knew, and she was just trying to talk to this sweet, innocent girl and let her know what was going on.” While I agree this appropriately describes the lyrics, which focus only on goodness and don’t describe any bad girl qualities, I find the video does, in fact, project both a good and bad girl persona that are meant to be understood by the audience as such. Through these personas, specific good and bad qualities become evident. As such, I find figurative methodology a useful tool in the analysis of these characters.

Imogen Tyler developed a system of figurative methodology to “describe the ways in which at different historical and cultural moments specific ‘social types’ become over determined and are publicly imagined (are figured) in excessive, distorted, and caricatured ways. It is my contention that the emergence of these figures is always expressive of an underlying social crisis of anxiety.” Lori Burns and Marc Lafrance skillfully apply figurative methodology to popular music video to study female violence against men. Using Tyler’s theory as a guide and Burns and Lafrance’s article as a model, I apply the concept of figures to Underwood’s “Good Girl” video to describe the good girl and bad girl present in the video.

The good girl figure embodies attributes of passivity and complacency both through her physical appearance and actions. Dressed in shades of white and pink, she sits politely, smiles gently, avoids eye contact, and speaks infrequently (Fig. 2.4). The bad girl figure instead embodies a...

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48 WZTV Fox 17, “RAW NEWS: Carrie Underwood Interview.”
forceful, active nature. Dressed in black, she often stands and leans towards the camera, making
direct eye contact. Further, it is the bad girl figure who sings the louder sections of the song, and she
often uses a rough vocal tone to do so (Fig. 2.5). These figures are presented in “excessive, distorted,
and caricatured ways” with the help of several visual strategies. By compiling short, zoomed in video
clips often less than a second long, the video only shows the audience sections (often just excluding
the head from the image) of Underwood's body. Without the humanizing effect of the human face,
the viewer can more easily reduce the image (and associated body) into a good or bad category,
reinforcing the concept of the figure.
Figure 2.4. Carrie Underwood, “Good Girl” music video, 00:08 and 00:13
Relating this concept of figures back to my earlier discussion of female masculinity in rock, it is possible to read the bad girl figure in Underwood’s video as a representation of this female rock persona. While the bad girl figure may embody certain aspects crucial to the personas of some rock women, including the forceful eye contact and vocal loudness and roughness, in “Good Girl” this figure is always conventionally attractive, sexually appealing, and not consistent enough in her
forceful attitude to become threatening. There is no place in this video for an actual enactment of or homage to strong female rock personas—only a feminized imitation.

The bad girl and good girl figures become even more interesting if we consider both as two sides of one person. Since Underwood plays both characters, this possibility is especially convincing. One reviewer identifies this prospect as she describes the video’s content, saying, “the sultry black-dressed Underwood sings the first couple of verses, and it seems as if she is singing to the more innocent Underwood. She warns the good girl in her to stay away from the bad boy” [emphasis added].51 Another reviewer comments on this duality by simply asking, “is Carrie Underwood a good girl or a bad girl?”52 The video presents hints of an answer to this question.

The end of the video dramatically introduces a new Underwood character. Dressed in a light beige dress with a black belt, her hair gently pulled off her lightly made-up face, this new Underwood pushes her way through double doors to strut confidently towards the camera (but without making eye contact with it). This new character gets the song’s final word; she sings the a cappella outro with a calm confidence, making frequent eye contact with the camera before turning

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and walking away from it (Fig. 2.6).

The new character does not appear to fully embody either persona, defying the easy categorization of the earlier “good” and “bad” characters. Her entry could be read as a detachment from these limiting categories, or as a combination of the two. I argue that this figure instead embodies the characteristics of the song’s narrator. The lyric narrator of “Good Girl” is obviously not a good girl herself, since she is not so naïve to believe the boy in the narrative acts with good intentions. She is not a bad girl either, since she tries to orient the good girl towards good things (specifically purity, and the happiness of a good man instead of a bad one). This persona neatly aligns with Underwood’s own persona in 2012; nearing 30 and quickly outgrowing the simple, naïve country girl image she had built her career on, the adoption of a motherly, caring figure that still prioritizes “good” qualities without having to fully embody them allowed her to continue catering to traditional country fans.

**Figure 2.6.** Carrie Underwood, “Good Girl” music video, 02:20.
Tour Video

Now that I have examined the music, lyrics, and video in “Good Girl”, I turn to an interpretation of staging in the Blown Away Tour video. As the opening song, “Good Girl” holds a significant narrative position in the tour. This role is enhanced through the introductory material of the tour itself; as the opening song, “Good Girl” becomes intimately tied into the opening video material and therefore the Blown Away theme. To fully understand the song’s narrative role in the tour, I first study the opening video material of the Blown Away Tour.

This opening material bears striking resemblance to The Wizard of Oz. The approaching tornado followed by Underwood’s long run back to the house where she takes shelter recalls the scene in The Wizard of Oz where Dorothy does the same. The house’s consequent seizure by the tornado and fall into a new, brightly-coloured land occurs in both the Blown Away Tour video imagery and in The Wizard of Oz. While the video clips from the Blown Away Tour intro are mostly taken from the “Blown Away” video, they are reorganized to better mimic the narrative from The Wizard of Oz; the video’s references to the film are therefore accentuated and purposefully brought into the tour narrative.

Following the video opening, a stage door (disguised to look like the house’s door) opens and Underwood steps out on stage. Though her first song is not “Blown Away” and she is not dressed like the character in the “Blown Away” video, her entrance onto the stage directly implicates her in the tour story; so her actions have exactly copied Dorothy’s from The Wizard of Oz, including her entrance into the magical Land of Oz. Visual references to the film also appear during the tour’s opening song; the rainbow colours projected on screen throughout the song recall both the film’s
song “Somewhere Over the Rainbow” and its abrupt transition into Technicolor as Dorothy enters Oz.

The choice of “Good Girl” as the opening song to the tour intensifies the tour’s connection to the film’s narrative and Underwood’s position within it. The lyric subject matter of “Good Girl,” with its focus on a naïve girl who dreams of a perfect world being fooled by a boy, can be directly compared to Dorothy’s story in the opening of the film. In Dorothy’s first and perhaps most recognizable song of the movie, “Somewhere Over the Rainbow,” she imagines a perfect world where dreams come true. After she runs away from home, she encounters and is tricked by a fortuneteller named Professor Marvel. Both Dorothy and the character in “Good Girl” dream of happy endings and dreams coming true, but instead are fooled by men, emphasizing their naivety.

My earlier analysis of the “Good Girl” music video is also pertinent here. The video’s emphasis on femininity as a positive attribute is not only reminiscent of Dorothy’s naivety, but also the appearance of Glinda, the Witch of the North. As a good witch, Glinda wears a soft pink, sparkling, enormous gown and uses a soft, high-pitched speaking voice. She smiles constantly, giggles effortlessly, stands with good posture and waves her arms smoothly and gently (Fig 2.7). At Dorothy’s suggestion that witches are old and ugly, she proclaims, “only bad witches are ugly.”53 With this statement, Glinda asserts that physical beauty (defined here, according to Glinda’s appearance, as compliance with cisgender heteronormative feminine ideals) indicates one’s goodness, and therefore worth.54 Here, femininity is prioritized in the same way as in the “Good Girl” video.

54 Though she does not speak directly to worth, her celebration over the death of the Wicked Witch of the East certainly implies that bad witches are worth less than good witches.
Figure 2.7. Glinda the Good Witch, *The Wizard of Oz* (1939), 00:21:34

Glinda’s talk of good and bad witches also mimics the “Good Girl” video’s binary of good and bad. After Dorothy enters Oz, Glinda asks, “are you a good witch or a bad witch?”, indicating these are the only options available to her. In contrast to Glinda’s softness and femininity, the bad witch in *The Wizard of Oz* (the Wicked Witch of the West) has green skin, simple black robes, a hunched stature and an abrasive cackling voice (Fig. 2.8).
The three main characters in this scene of *The Wizard of Oz* (Dorothy, Glinda the Good Witch, and the Wicked Witch of the West) hold similar roles to the three main characters in the “Good Girl” video (the good girl, the bad girl, and the final ‘narrator’ Underwood). The Wicked Witch of the West obviously clearly embodies the bad girl figure. While Dorothy and Glinda the Good Witch are both inherently good, only Dorothy is naïve and easily tricked like the good girl figure. Glinda wisely guides Dorothy on her journey, and therefore occupies the role of the wise narrator.

Ultimately, the lyric focus on naivety, visual emphasis on femininity, and dichotomizing of good and bad characteristics in “Good Girl” reference similar statements made in the opening of *The Wizard of Oz* and therefore make it a perfect opening song for the film-inspired *Blown Away Tour*. Furthermore, Dorothy’s roots in rural Kansas and subsequent explorations of other lands make *The Wizard of Oz* a perfect inspiration for the *Blown Away Tour*, as this allows Underwood
to explore ‘new lands’ in genre and gender, while still seeming rooted in rural country domesticity.

The beginning of the *Blown Away Tour* with a song focused on naivety and immaturity leaves room for exploration, maturation, and growth throughout the remainder of the tour, giving more narrative meaning to her songs focused on those themes.

**Conclusion**

Underwood’s use of genre blending, thematic employment of gender ideals, and narrative intertext with *The Wizard of Oz* not only work together, but also impact each other and the song’s overall effect. Specifically, Underwood uses *The Wizard of Oz*, its characters, and its narrative to frame her tour and musical experience as one grounded in rural domesticity, but which allows for exploration outside this rural sphere. This play into country ideals is emphasized by the lyric focus on heteronormative white femininity as a model for girls in “Good Girl.” Further, Underwood’s own play into this version of femininity in the “Good Girl” video allows her access to social privilege that she uses to incorporate external stylistic influences into her songs; by reinforcing country ideals lyrically and, to an extent, visually, she can incorporate external stylistic influences into the song without threatening her country superstar status.

Ultimately, Underwood carefully manipulates narrative to uniquely incorporate genre influences and gender performances in the music, lyrics, images, and staging of “Good Girl” in her *Blown Away Tour*, all effectively tying the Blown Away theme back to the 1939 film classic *The Wizard of Oz*. The strategic use of this particular film, which is widely known and recognizable, allows her to explore different presentations of genre, namely rock strategies, and gender, showcasing
both her ‘good’ and ‘bad’ personas, but finally sheds these constricting roles. Her use of rock musical influences emphasize that she’s “not in Kansas anymore” (or any other rural landscape), but is instead exploring new lands as Dorothy did.\textsuperscript{55} Her draw upon goodness and naivety as primary lyric themes serve to liken her to Dorothy; her ambivalent presentation of good and bad in the music video mirror Dorothy’s conflicted state in the opening of \textit{The Wizard of Oz}, both loving home and craving adventure. Ultimately, in the \textit{Blown Away Tour}, “Good Girl” serves as a perfect opening song that ties the tour in with intertextual references, establishes a strong narrative theme and corresponding values, and still allows for the growth of maturation of the tour’s character and theme.

\textsuperscript{55} Quote by Dorothy Gale (Judy Garland), \textit{The Wizard of Oz}, directed by Victor Fleming.
Chapter 3. "Jesus Take the Wheel": Religion and Gender Roles in Act Two: Lightning

Act One of Carrie Underwood's Blown Away Tour transitions seamlessly into Act Two by adding an extended musical outro to “Two Black Cadillacs,” the last song of Act One, and showing video clips of Underwood on the large screens on stage while the real Underwood changes her costume off-stage. Underwood returns to the stage singing “Last Name” a song in which the protagonist drunkenly gets married in Las Vegas, from her 2007 album Carnival Ride. She follows with “Temporary Home,” a slow, faith-centered song from her 2009 album Play On; a medley of “Jesus Take the Wheel,” a song about a woman’s religious awakening from her 2005 album Some Hearts, and the hymn “How Great Thou Art”; and finally “Cowboy Casanova,” an uptempo song warning women of a deceptive man, also from Play On. This chapter focuses on Underwood’s performance of “Jesus Take the Wheel/How Great Thou Art.” As the first single from Underwood’s first full album, the song “Jesus Take the Wheel” has played an important role in her career development. Its performance together with the Christian hymn “How Great Thou Art” reveals an apparently purposeful intent to intensify the religious message of the song; as such I will examine how these two pieces are performed together in the Blown Away Tour.

Context

Underwood’s song “Jesus Take the Wheel” was the first single from her first full album, Some Hearts. Written by Brett James, Hillary Lindsey and Gordie Sampson, the song achieved
notable success, spending six consecutive weeks at number one on the Billboard Hot Country charts after its release October 3, 2005. It was subsequently well received at awards shows, winning two Grammy’s for Best Female Country Vocal Performance and Best Country Song, and Single of the Year at the American Country Music Awards. The music video for the song, released several months after the single, was also well received, winning two awards at the 2006 CMT Music Awards, Female Video of the Year and Breakthrough Video of the Year.

The lyrics of “Jesus Take the Wheel” narrate the story of a woman driving home for Christmas when her car spins out of control. She reaches out to Jesus to ask him to take control of the situation and, purportedly, the rest of her life. The narrative of the video, instead of reflecting the song’s lyrical narrative, follows three separate stories of struggle: a single woman trying to calm her crying baby; a couple arguing about finances; and an elderly couple in which the wife’s health appears to be failing. “Jesus Take the Wheel” remains a cornerstone of Underwood’s career even ten years later, as it established her publicly as a religious country singer and paved the way for her later faith-based songs, including “Temporary Home” (2009) and “Something In the Water” (2014).

**Analysis**

I look to the use of stylistic and strategic intertextuality in “Jesus Take the Wheel,” specifically examining how the song fits in a lineage of other country songs with religious (specifically evangelical Christian) themes, and how it draws musical material from Martina McBride’s “Concrete Angel.” I then examine how its happiness script, presented in part through its religious message, prioritizes traditional heterosexual family forms. Finally I look at the song’s
context within the *Blown Away Tour*, and particularly its performance contexts with the hymn “How Great Thou Art” to establish how this pairing emphasizes the religious message of “Jesus Take the Wheel” and Underwood’s position as a country artist.

**Genre**

The concept of generic markers is integral to an analysis of “Jesus, Take the Wheel.” Mark Spicer’s work on strategic and stylistic intertextuality offers tools for examining the ways in which Underwood uses these two types of intertextuality to situate her song within country music traditions.¹

“Jesus Take the Wheel” first uses stylistic intertextual references to align itself with other country music songs. Many of its characteristics are typical of country ballads. Ballads, which are often slow-tempo songs with an emphasis on narrative, have a long history in country music.² Much country music originated from traditional folk ballads, and early country musicians in the 1920s added to this repertory by composing their own ballads based on true life events.³ Contemporary country artists continue in this tradition, as many country songs still focus on narrative elements, use slow tempi, and draw on traditional instrumentation.

“Jesus Take the Wheel” is one such song that draws on country music ballad tradition. Its instrumentation reflects traditional instrumentation of a country ballad, using slide guitar, strings,

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and bass. Its form (a classic 3-verse with chorus structure, focusing on a narrative story), slow tempo (77bpm), and 4/4 time signature align it with country ballad tradition and other country music ballads with similar tempi and rhythmic feels, including Willie Nelson’s “Always On My Mind” (1982), LeeAnn Rimes’s “I Need You” (2000), and Blake Shelton’s “God Gave Me You” (2011).

The lyrics, too, fit with country music traditionalism by conforming to evangelical Christian values, common in the southern states where country music originated, which promote a devoted belief in Jesus and his redemptive powers. Don Cusic maintains that “religion—specifically Christianity—is deeply embedded in country music, and during the past 30 years a number of songs mentioning ‘God,’ ‘Jesus,’ ‘Lord,’ ‘prayer,’ and ‘Heaven’ or with an underlying Christian message have been on the country music charts.”4 “Jesus Take the Wheel” is one such song, with its deference to Christian values emerging not only in the narrative but also in the very title of the song.

To further illustrate how Underwood’s song complies with country music’s method of invoking religion, I briefly look to several songs released between 2000 and 2009 that have God, Jesus, or religion as their primary lyric focus, to determine how these songs treat their message.5 Most of these songs can be considered country ballads, are in a major key with a slow to medium tempo, and use traditional country instrumentation. Their lyrics discuss human failings that are placed in juxtaposition with God’s powers of redemption, which Curtis Ellison finds is a persistent

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To enhance the theme of reverence towards God’s grace, the songs are texturally expansive while maintaining focus on the singer’s vocal delivery; this strategy first supports the song’s lyric message by texturally building up the space around it, then enhances the audience’s connection to the message by emphasizing the vocal line delivering the lyrics. These factors work together to augment the expressive power of the song and its religious message. “Jesus Take the Wheel,” like other songs released in the same decade, uses these techniques to glorify God.

Country music scholars agree that religion is an important component of country music. Don Cusic argues that Christianity is “deeply embedded” in country, while Curtis Ellison finds that “direct references to the saving power of Jesus are prolific across all forms of country music,” and are even expressed by secular artists. Few, however, have explored the specific narrative techniques with which country music typically discusses Christian themes. Maxine Grossman takes up this challenge and explores the specific ways in which “the dynamic of salvific love, as expressed in the discourse of contemporary country music, is grounded in several basic assumptions.” I explore the religious content of “Jesus Take the Wheel” using Grossman’s three assumptions as a guide.

Grossman’s first assumption, which is consistent with the dominant Protestant tradition in which so much of the music has been written, is that the human condition is one of imperfection. Humans are sinful, and on account of their sins and imperfections, they suffer. Sometimes this suffering is innocent…and sometimes it arises from a person’s own actions.

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8 Ellison, *Country Music Culture*, 111.
10 Ibid., 88.
This imperfection is highlighted in the lyrics of “Jesus Take the Wheel,” as they show the protagonist’s sins and poor decisions both explicitly and implicitly. Explicitly, the lyrics describe the protagonist as “low on faith,” and as she was driving she “had a lot on her mind and she didn’t pay attention, she was going way too fast.” These specific lines reveal the woman’s failings: she failed to pay attention while driving, and more seriously, to keep faith during hard times in her life.

Identifying a second assumption of religious discourse in country music, Grossman suggests that

the only solution to the sufferings of the human condition comes through a personal transformation. Such a change of state may be effected as a one-time radical break from past transgression, as when the love of God (or Mama or a good woman [or man]) allows one to ‘see the light’ and mend one’s ways, to be ‘baptized’ by the spirit—of God, or love, or God as love.  

Again, “Jesus Take the Wheel” can be understood to engage with this underlying assumption. As the protagonist’s car spins out of control, she calls for Jesus to take the wheel and asks for him to “give me one more change/save me from this road I’m on.” She and her child exit the crash unscathed, and so the audience is to assume that she has been saved by the grace of God. The lyrics then show her to be apologizing for her transgressions, as she communicates directly to Jesus, saying “I’m sorry for the way I’ve been living my life/I know I’ve got to change,” before she again calls Jesus to take the wheel (this time clearly referring to her life’s path). The shift from her past lack of faith to embracing Jesus as her saviour presents a personal transformation, and as Grossman suggests, this

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transformation follows a presentation of God’s love “that allows one to ‘see the light’ and mend one’s ways.”12

The third and final assumption Grossman identifies is that “the salvific transformation occurs only when a connection is made…The connection may be entirely internal, taking the form of a sort of ‘aha!’ moment, in which an individual realizes that in fact he or she is loved or that his or her place in the world does matter—to God or mama, if to no one else.”13 Additionally, “connection is not enough to account for the transformative quality of this religious experience. In addition, the connection must involve some element of sacrifice.”14 In order to be transformed, therefore, one must experience a moment in which they discover their purpose, and accept the sacrifices required to assume that purpose. I argue that “Jesus Take the Wheel” implicitly suggests that the protagonist’s turn towards religion includes a realization that her place in the world does matter. In the first verse, the woman acts careless and endangers her life by speeding. At the end of the song, she asks Jesus to “save me from this road I’m on”; this shift suggests the woman has come out of her encounter with Jesus feeling that her life path is important and needs direction. Her place in the world, therefore, matters. Additionally, I argue that this move involves a sacrifice by the woman. By asking Jesus to “take the wheel” and by “letting go,” she allows him to choose her life’s path, and therefore yields her control over her own life to his greater power.

12 Ibid., 89.
13 Ibid.
Though she does not include it as one of her basic assumptions of religion in country music, Grossman additionally finds that country songs with a religious theme often adhere to a simple three-verse structure. She asserts:

Many verse-chorus country songs fit a commonplace three-verse structure, in which a first verse sets the scene, a second verse expands or extends the narrative, and a third verse offers a reinterpretation of the narrative or a transformation of its basic message. In this model the convention of the third-verse transformation provides the content for exactly the sort of religious message we would expect to find in a country song: one in which emotional or spiritual connections, often combined with an element of sacrifice, provide for an individual change of state or identity.15

In other words, the common three-verse structure of many popular songs is here repurposed to communicate a religious message. The first verse serves to set up the story, the second verse expands on it, and the third offers the religious significance.

“Jesus Take the Wheel” follows the three-verse narrative structure that Grossman describes. The first verse “sets the scene” by describing both what the protagonist is doing (driving home for the holidays) and how she is feeling (low on faith). The second verse “extends the narrative” by introducing new action; the audience learns that the car has spun out of control. The third and final verse describes the woman’s personal transformation, as she begins to pray. It also offers a “reinterpretation of the narrative” by highlighting the double meaning in the song’s chorus. The first iteration of the chorus comes after the second verse, which describes the car spinning out of control. As such, the lines “Jesus take the wheel [...] save me from this road I’m on” can be understood as referring both to the literal car wheel and the road the car is on. In the third verse, however, the car stops and the woman is safe. When she prays, she tells Jesus “I’m sorry for the way I’ve been living

15 Ibid., 93.
my life;” in the following chorus, then, the same lines, “Jesus take the wheel [...] save me from this road I’m on,” refer not to literal wheels and roads, but instead to the direction of the woman’s life.

“Jesus Take the Wheel” therefore follows these patterns Grossman finds in religious country songs. By following traditional patterns for how country songs discuss religion, Underwood uses stylistic intertextuality to align “Jesus Take the Wheel” with other religious country songs and position it as a successful country song. I now turn to the song’s use of strategic intertextuality, that is, its intertextual references to specific works.

The song bears striking resemblance to Martina McBride’s “Concrete Angel.” This influence is unsurprising, as Underwood had been very public about her admiration for McBride during her time on American Idol, covering her song “Independence Day” twice on the show. Underwood’s cover was also released in June 2005 as the B-side to her single “Inside Your Heaven.” Her connection to McBride’s music was therefore already established before her work on “Jesus Take the Wheel.” McBride has released several songs told from a third-person narrative standpoint, all of which showcase her powerful voice and discuss hardship followed by redemption through religion.16 Underwood’s “Jesus Take the Wheel” connects strongly to these characteristics of McBride’s work.

The link between “Jesus Take the Wheel” and McBride’s “Concrete Angel” is especially convincing. One reviewer claims that Underwood’s song “borrows so heavily in terms of melody and structure from Martina McBride’s ‘Concrete Angel’ that it might as well be a cover.”17 The similarities are immediately apparent: both songs are slow ballads, approximately 77bpm, in a major key and a 4/4 time signature, from the perspective of a 3rd person narrator. Both songs also invoke

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16 Examples include “A Broken Wing” (1997) and “Concrete Angel” (2002).
the power of religion to save people from unfortunate situations. Both songs feature similar instrumentation as they both use piano and strings as the primary melodic instruments, with a soft bass to fill the register. The kit in both songs is light during the verses and emphasizes the backbeat in the chorus using a steady and uncomplicated rhythm. Most concretely, both songs feature a descending 4-3-2-1 melodic line in the verses.¹⁸

Underwood’s use of both stylistic and strategic intertextuality in her song “Jesus Take the Wheel” establishes her firmly within the country genre. Her use of instrumentation, narrative structuring of a religious theme, and strategic references to musical material from Martina McBride’s “Concrete Angel” show Underwood’s adherence to country music traditions and position her work as an important contribution to country music.

Gender

Ahmed argues that happiness is associated with some life choices and not others, and that this leads to the creation of “happiness scripts,” which designate how one should live a life that is full of, or leads to, happiness.¹⁹ She further finds that these scripts are gendered, “providing a set of instructions for what women and men must do in order to be happy whereby happiness is what follows being good or natural.”²⁰ A good and natural woman, for example, desires romantic heterosexual love. Once this is achieved, they are meant to desire a happy family, in which they raise


²⁰ Ibid., 59.
children who like the right things and form the right habits.\textsuperscript{21} This creates a happiness script for one to follow. Also contained within these scripts are the consequences for failure to follow them. If a person does not follow the scripts as designated, whether by choice or not, they are expected to feel unhappy.\textsuperscript{22} An examination of happiness scripts in “Jesus Take the Wheel” finds that many happiness indicators are presented to the audience. The following discussion explores how Ahmed’s happiness script is pertinent to a reading of the song lyrics.

The first verse serves to give the audience background information about the main character and contextualize the rest of the song. The audience is also left to extrapolate some information that is not explicitly stated: namely, we assume that she is a single mother because she is alone with her baby going to see her parents for the holidays; and we assume that she has a working-class status and is undergoing financial hardship because she is low on gasoline and it had been a “long hard year.”

Ahmed’s happiness theory is relevant here, and in particular her theory of the happy family. Ahmed considers the family as a “happy object,” meaning an object that gathers value as a “social good.”\textsuperscript{23} According to Ahmed, the good or happy life “is imagined through the proximity of objects,” including the happy family object.\textsuperscript{24} Importantly, happiness to Ahmed involves “a narrative of assimilation in the specific sense of becoming like;”\textsuperscript{25} in the context of the happy family, this means the continued reproduction of the happy family form, where the form is a happy heterosexual couple with happy children who like and do the right things in the right way.\textsuperscript{26} It is clear from the

\textsuperscript{21} Ibid., 48.
\textsuperscript{22} Ibid., 91.
\textsuperscript{23} Ahmed, \textit{The Promise of Happiness}, 21.
\textsuperscript{24} Ibid., 90.
\textsuperscript{25} Ibid., 112.
\textsuperscript{26} Ibid., 46.
first verse that this woman has failed to reproduce the happy family as expected; though both her parents are present in her life, she did not inherit their “ways of being affected in the right way by the right things,” but instead deviates from this script.\textsuperscript{27}

The second verse sees the distracted woman driving too fast and her car consequently spinning out of control. In the chorus, she calls upon Jesus for help; her plea to “save me from this road I’m on” both recalls the road she is driving on and the ‘path’ or ‘script’ to happiness from which she has deviated and desires to get back. Though she has deviated from proper happiness scripts, she recognizes the errors in her ways and repents. Her deviance, then, still upholds the validity of the promise of happiness because her departure from the proper life scripts makes her unhappy.

The woman’s plea to Jesus follows a previous lack of faith, described in verse 1 where she is “low on faith” and in verse 3 where “for the first time in a long time she bowed her head to pray.” Here, her return to Jesus is what enables her redirection to the proper happiness script, as she accepts Jesus as a guiding figure who will decide her life’s direction. In a traditional happy family script, the patriarchal father figure is the guiding figure. Since the woman’s primary deviance from the happy family script is the absence of a patriarchal figure for herself and her child, her adoption of this figure, in this case Jesus, allows her to redirect her life. In this way, she redeems herself and redirects her life’s script back towards happiness by first accepting her inability to live without this figure (shown through the chorus line “I can’t do this on my own”), and then by “finding happiness in the

\textsuperscript{27} Ibid., 45.
happiness of a good man,” as Ahmed suggests. In the end, because the woman found a good man, the happiness script is restored and the woman’s happiness becomes possible once again.

According to Grossman, “the tendency in country music is to emphasize the human aspects of Jesus, focusing on his role as a man, whose actions might be emulated and whose sufferings might be familiar to an average person.” As such, viewing Jesus here as a participating family member (a father figure), and not solely as a God-like figure, fits within typical country music treatment. His fulfilment of a patriarchal role in “Jesus Take the Wheel” is not misplaced, but follows the country music tradition of emphasizing his human characteristics and roles.

This happy family script, according to Ahmed, is also exclusively heterosexual. According to Grossman, heterosexuality is a key narrative component of religious country music songs, as she says “one set of intimate relationships has been shown to be ‘outside the true’ of country music religion. Country lyrics make no place for gay or lesbian sexuality [...] it does not exist.” This conjecture of heterosexuality as good or right too is reflected in “Jesus Take the Wheel.” While as in most country songs there is no explicit condemnation of homosexuality, the storyline is assumed to take place in the context of a heterosexual relationship and family. This is confirmed when the female protagonist affirms her faith and starts a new, ‘right’ life path when she gives her life to Jesus, or rather “find[s] happiness in the happiness of a good man.”

“Jesus Take the Wheel” affirms heterosexual happy family life scripts that restrict people, and especially women, to finding happiness in specific heterosexual family constructions. Like many

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29 Ibid., 90.
30 Ibid., 88-89.
religious country songs, “Jesus Take the Wheel” offers a hopeful message of salvation and new beginnings, but does so to a restricted audience. The exclusion of alternative family forms like single parents and same-sex couples from these types of narratives excludes them from the possibility of happiness, and thereby classifies their lives as unhappy or wrong. When “a number of more ‘threatening’ categories (including race, sexuality, and non-Christian religion) are left strictly to the imagination of the listener […] what results is […] [an] ultimately hegemonically Christian—religious message.”33 In this case, the promotion of a Christian message is also the promotion of a single ‘right’ way of life that is a white, heterosexual, happy family.

Tour Video

Act Two of the Blown Away Tour, titled “Lightning,” contains Underwood’s most overtly religious songs.34 Like the good girl figure in the “Good Girl” video discussed in the previous chapter, in this act Underwood wears an off-white and gold dress, which recalls themes of goodness and purity. These themes are reinforced by the specific staging and filming treatment of “Jesus Take the Wheel.” A large church interior with stained glass windows is displayed on the main screens on stage; the pairing of the pure and angelic-looking Underwood with the religious imagery of a church give visual representation to the song’s religious message (Fig. 3.1). The close-up images of Underwood’s face as she stands centre-stage also create the performance effect of an intimate level of contact that seems appropriate for the religious subject matter. Further, the redemptive power of

33 Ibid., 84-85.
34 Underwood’s original songs which not only mention God, but whose messages focus on religious redemption and power at the time were “Jesus Take the Wheel” (2005) and “Temporary Home” (2009), both of which are performed in this set.
Jesus is emphasized visually in the tour. Each time Underwood sings the chorus, in which the song’s protagonist asks Jesus for help, beams of sunlight fill the church interior projected on the stage’s main screen (Fig. 3.2). This filling of the church with light, exactly at the moment when Jesus is called upon, can be understood as a metaphor for Jesus filling the lives of his followers with joy and hope.

Figure 3.1. Carrie Underwood, *Blown Away Tour: Live DVD*, “Jesus Take the Wheel” (Verse) 00:36:49
Religion is further emphasized as “Jesus Take the Wheel” is paired with the hymn “How Great Thou Art” in the tour. After the second iteration of the chorus in “Jesus Take the Wheel,” instead of repeating it one last time to end the song, Underwood fairly abruptly begins singing the refrain of “How Great Thou Art.” She sings the refrain only once, and the medley is over.

“How Great Thou Art” is a Christian hymn proclaiming the greatness of God, based on the Swedish hymn “O store Gud,” which was composed by Reverend Carl Robert. The English language version of the hymn, translated by Stuart K. Hine, was first popularized by the Billy Graham Crusades, which were large televised evangelical services featuring Billy Graham’s sermons and many sung hymns, beginning in 1947. The hymn became a standard in Graham’s crusades following its rendition by singer George Beverly Shea in 1957, and has since become standard throughout Christianity’s many denominations. Its refrain simply proclaims “then sings my soul, my saviour, God, to thee/How great thou art, how great thou art.” “How Great Thou Art” became an important song in Underwood’s repertoire after her performance of it with Vince Gill at ABC’s Girl’s Night Out live program, celebrating women in country music. Though she had previously recorded the song for a Grand Ole Opry gospel favourites album, it was this live performance that

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37 Cusic, The Sound of Light, 185.
brought attention to it.\textsuperscript{39} The live performance was extremely well received and a recording of it was subsequently released on Underwood’s 2014 \textit{Greatest Hits: Decade #1} album.

Studwell asserts that despite their apparent incompatibility, “there are points in which hymns and popular culture coincide in harmony.”\textsuperscript{40} This combination of Underwood’s own religious song and an important religious hymn is one such merging of the two worlds. This particular union of popular culture song and traditional hymn serves to align the two texts; combining the two texts highlights their similarities, in particular their religious content, and subsequently positions “Jesus Take the Wheel” as a serious and meaningful religious text. The use of “How Great Thou Art” in particular also serves to update “Jesus Take the Wheel,” an aging song in Underwood’s repertoire, by relating it to a more recent moment in Underwood’s career (her performance with Vince Gill and release of that recording on her \textit{Greatest Hits: Decade #1} album).

In the live concert tour, “How Great Thou Art” creates a fitting narrative extension of “Jesus Take the Wheel.” In the performance of the latter song, the lyric content is kept entirely intact; with the exception of the last repetition of the chorus being removed, the song’s musical content remains the same. The narrative of a woman rediscovering her faith, therefore, is presented in the tour in the same way as the song on the album, that is, the woman begins the song with no faith and ends committing her life to Jesus. The refrain of “How Great Thou Art,” which praises God, placed after the chorus of “Jesus Take the Wheel” in which the woman promises to let Jesus decide her life’s path, is a fitting continuation of that narrative. The similar Christian messages of the songs tie them


\textsuperscript{40} Studwell, “The Curious Interface of Hymns and American Popular Culture,” 70.
effectively. The songs are also linked musically; both are slow ballads (approximately 77bpm) in a major key with a 4/4 time signature. The religious emphasis and similar overall song structure, therefore, both successfully tie the two songs together, aligning “Jesus Take the Wheel” with the important religious hymn “How Great Thou Art.”

This emphasis of the religious content in “Jesus Take the Wheel” through its pairing with “How Great Thou Art” also reinforces its generic link to other religious country music songs. The potent religious content and context of “How Great Thou Art” emphasizes the religious content of “Jesus Take the Wheel.” As Cusic notes, religious themes are deeply embedded in country music, as evident by the number of country artists recording religiously themed music in the 2000s. Underwood’s adoption of this religious topic links to a long tradition of country artists praising God. The emphasis of religion in “Jesus Take the Wheel,” then, also emphasizes Underwood’s link to this musical lineage and the artists within it.

Conclusion

Underwood’s “Jesus Take the Wheel” presents complex genre, gender, and narrative techniques, which intersect to emphasize the song’s religious content. Underwood uses stylistic and strategic intertextuality in her work, modeling her song after other religious country music and drawing specific musical material from Martina McBride’s “Concrete Angel.” The song’s happiness scripts, presented in part through its religious message, prioritize traditional heterosexual family forms. Lastly, the song’s context within the Blown Away Tour, and particularly its combination with

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41 Of course, the tempo varies slightly with each performance, but most versions of the English hymn are sung slowly. In the Blown Away Tour, Underwood sings the hymn at 77bpm.
the hymn “How Great Thou Art,” emphasizes the religious message of “Jesus Take the Wheel” and Underwood’s position as a country artist. Through this intertext and adherence to traditional country music values, Underwood aligns her song within a lineage of other country songs with religious themes, and thereby aligns herself with other powerful country artists.
Act Four of the *Blown Away Tour* opens with “Leave Love Alone,” followed by “Flat on the Floor,” “See You Again,” “Cupid’s Got a Shotgun,” and finally “Before He Cheats.” Underwood wears tight, bright blue pants, black stiletto heels, and a structured silver top that somewhat resembles a modernized and fashionable armoured breastplate (Fig. 4.1). Visually, this is Underwood’s most defiant outfit of the tour, accompanied by some of her most rebellious music, fitting with the apparent musical theme in this act of frustration following lost love.

Figure 4.1. Carrie Underwood, *Blown Away Tour: Live DVD*, 01:23:26

This chapter concentrates on Underwood’s anthemic song of rebellion, “Before He Cheats.” As ostensibly the closing song in the tour, placed before the predictable encore, “Before He Cheats”
occupies an important and strong narrative position in the *Blown Away Tour*. The song also remains one of the most successful songs of Underwood’s career nearly ten years after its release, and as such is a crucially important text in an analysis of her career.

**Context**

The fifth release from her first full-length album *Some Hearts*, “Before He Cheats” (released August 19, 2006) enjoyed record-breaking popularity, winning two Grammy awards (Country Song of the Year and Best Female Country Vocal Performance), two CMT Awards (Video of the Year and Female Video of the Year), and an AMA Award (Music Video of the Year). It topped the Billboard Hot Country Charts for 5 consecutive weeks and was a huge crossover success as well, peaking at number 8 on the Billboard Hot 100.¹ The song lyrics describe a girlfriend’s destruction of her partner’s truck as a reaction to his infidelity. Its accompanying music video does not disappoint, providing satisfying imagery of the truck’s beating and Underwood’s rebellious, confident march through city streets to finally catch her partner with another woman and bid him farewell.

The song’s content came as a shock to those familiar with Underwood’s previous musical output as it was a stark contrast to her sweet, religious image solidified by “Jesus, Take the Wheel.” The critical reception of “Before He Cheats” is perhaps best summarized by Carissa Rosenberg in *Seventeen* magazine, who asks:

> Werent you kind of shocked when you saw Carrie Underwood key her boyfriend’s car in her video for “Before He Cheats”? Until that very moment, she’d been America’s Sweetheart. Every time she performed onstage or when she went up to collect her two Grammys, she was always smiling and always perfectly made-up. She seemed super-sweet (but admit it, maybe a little too sweet). Then she totally stunned us with that

video and got everyone’s attention! So who’s the real Carrie Underwood? A total girly girl or a hard-edged chick? The truth is neither. She’s real.²

Clearly, the sweet and religious image Carrie Underwood so perfectly constructed with “Jesus, Take the Wheel” needed a counterweight to make the artist appear more personable and authentic to her fans. Underwood’s rendition of “Before He Cheats” provided that opposing persona in an appropriately feisty yet amusing fashion. The song offers an account of a popularly universalized female experience complete with a revenge fantasy that, according to Rolling Stone, has led it to be “fearlessly unleashed from the lungs of any woman ever done wrong…because letting go and moving on never feels as good as property damage.”³ Though Underwood’s fans may not have expected her next release such a wild and even criminal storyline, the song’s cathartic effect on its listeners made it immensely popular.

Analysis

Genre

Underwood’s adoption of this new rebellious image is convincing in part because of her negotiation of musical genre. Rolling Stone confirmed that “Before He Cheats” solidified her genre-specific status, saying “the smash ‘Before He Cheats’ proved her heart was all the way country; the way she sang about a rival singing ‘some white-trash version of Shania karaoke’ was perfect.”⁴ This


review begs the question: how precisely did Underwood employ genre in “Before He Cheats” in a way that solidified her status as a respected country artist? To answer this question, literature on the hard country and outlaw country subgenres offers a valuable perspective.

In her book devoted to the subject, Barbara Ching defines hard country as “a position rather than a well-defined identity.”

She offers perhaps the most concise academic description of the style, saying:

It sings about the pains and pleasures of losing the American dream in a style that demands both devotion and alienation from its audience and dares the rest of the world to be disgusted. It complains in a punning, wailing, whining, twanging, thumping, grandiosely emotive style. Like hard luck, hard work, hard feelings, hard knocks, and hard times, the emotions that hard country evokes are ambivalent, a blend of anger, regret, sadness, and other dark feelings lightened sometimes by survivor’s pride. Like hard words and hard science, though, hard country also conveys a certain daunting disputatiousness. Like hard rock, hard porn, and hard drugs, hard country seeks its most extreme, objectionable, and definitive form.

In summary, hard country is often a grandiosely emotive, disputatious, extreme, and controversial expression of American life. Ching also adds that hard country is purposefully unfashionable, contrasting it with crossover country.

“Before He Cheats” is sung by a well-known country-pop artist and achieved significant crossover success, traits which do not fit within the tradition of hard country. That said, Underwood displays many other characteristics of hard country in the lyrics, music, and images accompanying “Before He Cheats.” Her performance is certainly “grandiosely emotive,” with the over-the-top reaction to a partner’s infidelity outlined in the lyrics convincingly reflected in Underwood’s impassioned vocal delivery and acting in the song, music video, and tour video. To say that

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Underwood’s character in “Before He Cheats” is “disputatious” would be an understatement; to say that the song represents emotion in “its most extreme, objectionable, and definitive form” is entirely appropriate. In short, several aspects of Underwood’s performance of “Before He Cheats” fit within the hard country style of Ching’s definition; these hard country strategies lead the audience to link the song with the subgenre.

While Ching does not identify any specific musical indicators of hard country, centering her definition around emotive and thematic markers, musical indicators can certainly contribute to the emotional understanding and hard country classification of a song. The emphasized, near-relentless use of instrumental slides, particularly by the electric guitar, steel guitar, and the imperfection of the barroom piano-style keys throughout, give the song a sense of emotional instability; the forefronted drum kit and in particular the forceful bass drum emphasizing the downbeat gives the song a powerful and energetic, yet dark texture. Combined with Underwood’s vocal force and roughness, these features undoubtedly play a major role in casting the song’s “wailing, whining, twanging, thumping, grandiosely emotive style.” These features of the original song recording are highlighted in Underwood’s Blown Away Tour performance by her increased vocal maturity, added ornaments, and overdone acting on stage; her statement “I’d better hear some rowdy voices on this one – ladies sing it like you mean it!” during the song’s instrumental introduction indicates that years later, she still maintains her connection to the song’s original emotive style.

Other academics have drawn specific links between “Before He Cheats” and hard country. Alena Horn finds that country singer Gretchen Wilson maintains a balance between a rebellion and tradition that accounts for her popularity in the genre, and then directly compares Underwood’s hit
(though she misnames the title) to Wilson’s hard country style, saying “like Wilson, Underwood employs a combative tone towards her cheating partner and his lover. This example of Wilson’s influence may be a sign that her boundary-pushing song lyrics and persona are being embraced by the industry.”

Nadine Hubbs also draws links between Carrie Underwood’s “Before He Cheats” and Gretchen Wilson’s music in her article on Wilson’s redneck musical identity. She reviews Carrie Underwood’s “Before He Cheats” in her discussion of what she calls “Virile Females” in country music, categorizing it as a “revenge song” that portrays an “unflinching delivery of a verbal and vehicular thrashing.” This Virile Female category, as Hubbs defines it, is a gender-crossed persona that has been traditionally linked with working-class women, positioning them at a distance from traditional femininity. She claims that this persona is “more normative among female country artists,” and as such, asserts that Underwood’s “downscale and belligerent” persona in this song bolsters her country credibility despite her previously-established stylish crossover image that established her as “an icon of wholesome and glamorous femininity.”

It appears that Underwood’s adoption of a harder country persona did not conflict with her earlier established wholesome religious image, but instead complimented it by proving that she can hold her own in what is seen as a truly authentic country subgenre. This clearly remains an

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Horn refers to Underwood’s song as “When He Cheats,” though she is obviously referring to “Before He Cheats”
8 Ibid., 60.
9 Ibid.
10 Ibid.
important part of her country persona even nearly a decade later; her use of “Before He Cheats” as the closing song of her tour demonstrates her continued devotion to her image as a true country artist that can indeed convincingly sing a hard country song.

Hubbs also mentions the song’s lyric line in which the protagonist guesses that her partner’s mistress is likely singing “some white trash version of Shania karaoke” that Rolling Stone called “perfect.” While the rest of the song’s lyrics are fairly simple, with the entire chorus describing the destruction of the truck, this specific line deserves special attention for its mention of another prominent female country artist and invocation of the term “white trash.” How do we reconcile the above authors’ alignment of the styles of Carrie Underwood with Gretchen Wilson’s, whose song “Redneck Woman” is a statement of pride in her essentially white trash lifestyle, while taking into account Underwood’s use of the term “white trash” as a derogatory description of her partner’s other woman? How also does Underwood incorporate a reference to Shania Twain, a pop-country icon, in a hard country song?

This lyric line serves to both insult the other woman and to position Underwood as a better choice of partner. I argue that the inclusion of white trash, Shania Twain, and karaoke in this lyric all serve that purpose. The term white trash “refers to actually existing white people living in (often rural) poverty, while at the same time it designates a set of stereotypes and myths related to the social behaviors, intelligence, prejudices, and gender roles of poor whites.”11 The use of this term therefore invokes these stereotypes, positioning the other woman as low class, unintelligent, and unsophisticated.

Despite country’s traditional association with low class whiteness, the term succeeds in alienating and further ‘othering’ this other woman from the country audience, an act potentially explained by Barbara Ching. She states that “country music is capable of performing the rural role in such a way as to underline its construction and social purpose rather than its presumed natural essence, innocence, and/or bad taste… It refuses, except as camp, to be an expression of other people’s unacculturation and unsophistication.”12 In this way, by performing a social role that elevates its own status beyond unsophisticated and uneducated music, country music and its listeners gain the ability to themselves judge the sophistication of others, particularly in terms that have been closely associated with the genre itself, such as white trash.

The lyrics additionally point to the other woman’s singing of “Shania karaoke,” clearly serving to insult the other woman’s musical engagement and knowledge. The reference to Shania Twain, undoubtedly a high-class pop-country icon, initially seems out of place given the hard country style of “Before He Cheats,” but in fact serves to emphasize the other woman’s low class status. The assertion that she is singing Shania karaoke implies that she is trying to imitate Shania and is failing (as it turns out to be a “white trash version”); because Shania Twain is so rich, famous, and unabashedly pop-country, the idea of a ‘white trash’ version of her music creates a distance between the true version and the imitation version that wouldn’t be as pronounced had Underwood invoked a different artist.13 Underwood’s claim that this woman is a cheap, imperfect imitation of something great also extends to her character’s relationship; in the same way that this woman is

13 For example, the aforementioned Gretchen Wilson, whose redneck (and therefore low class) identity is a source of pride in her music.
presenting as a knock-off and inferior version of Shania, she is presenting as a knock-off and inferior version of Carrie’s character in her relationship with the cheating lover. Essentially, saying that this woman is singing a “white trash version of Shania karaoke” implies that she is both trying to attain a class status that is clearly out of her reach and trying but failing to imitate the fame, beauty, and status of both Shania Twain and Carrie Underwood. In this way, Underwood both aligns herself with Shania’s fame and positions herself above the other woman in quality and class.

“Before He Cheats” additionally aligns itself as a country song through its narrative focus on female revenge. While the theme of revenge is not unique to country music, “one particular arc that seems to recur with a certain degree of frequency in country lyrics is the act of betrayal—usually sexual betrayal—followed by revenge.” In particular, the theme of revenge exacted by women in response to unfaithful lovers seems to run through country music history, spanning from songs such as Loretta Lynn’s “Fist City” (1968) and “You Ain’t Woman Enough to Take My Man” (1966), to more recent iterations including Reba McEntire’s “Does He Love You” (1993), Shania Twain’s “Whose Beds Have Your Boots Been Under” (1995), and Miranda Lambert’s “Kerosene” (2005), “Crazy Ex-Girlfriend” (2007), and “White Liar” (2009).

This female-focused revenge narrative has roots in what Keel calls the new women’s movement in country music. She argues that despite its outward conservatism, country music has indeed made feminist progress since the release of K.T. Oslin’s 80s Ladies. Keel asserts that “the most noticeable change in songs has been [women’s] attitude toward men’s leaving…these women are holding the door for the men to walk through, as if to say, ‘Don’t let the door hit you on your

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way out.” Keel also identifies Shania Twain as “the unofficial but undeniable leader of this movement and...the future of women in country—frank, independent, and sexy. She loves her man, but she loves herself more.” She also compares Twain to female rock icons Courtney Love and Alanis Morissette, arguing that “Twain’s lyrics assumed the feminist attitudes of these rock stars, but she lacked their anger and cloaked her themes of equality in a physical package most men found extremely pleasing.”

Given this context, one can easily see the influence of feminism and the resulting female revenge motif on Underwood’s “Before He Cheats.” In fact, I continue Keel’s argument to assert that “Before He Cheats” shows more feminist progress. Keel states that Twain and other country women couldn’t adopt the anger of 90s female rock stars without backlash, but in “Before He Cheats” Underwood is undeniably furious. Even Josh Kear, one of the song’s co-writers, recognizes that the song’s expression of anger was progressive. He acknowledges that in writing the song, “We thought, let’s actually let her get pissed! [...] It’s a lot of stuff that most people would say you can’t put in a song, but we did it anyway.” Despite this intentional inclusion of anger in the song, even the song’s writers were shocked by Underwood’s irate persona; Josh Kear recalls, “When we were writing it, we were actually trying to keep it humorous [...] but when Carrie got hold of it, she just did it so well and really made it her own. We expected it would be a little more lighthearted [...] but

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16 Ibid., 165.
17 Keel, “Between Riot Grrrl and Quiet Girl,” 166.
when we heard it, we thought, wow, she really drove it home!”¹⁹ Perhaps this relatively new allowance for female anger is emblematic of a decade of feminist progress in country music since Keel’s article was written.

**Gender**

The feminist implications of “Before He Cheats” and Underwood’s rebellious and angry image in it can also be examined using Ahmed’s happiness theory. Ahmed finds heterosexual love to be a key component of many happiness scripts. She argues that “heterosexual love becomes about the possibility of a happy ending; about what life is aimed toward, as being what gives life direction or purpose, or as what drives a story. It is difficult to separate out narrative as such from the reproduction of happy heterosexuality.”²⁰ In “Before He Cheats,” heterosexual love certainly drives the story. In this story like many others, in country music or otherwise, in which a woman is cheated on, happiness is located in heterosexual monogamy; when she is cheated on, the “possibility of a happy ending” is taken away and happiness is destroyed.²¹

While it is possible to understand Underwood’s anger here as stemming from the loss of a possible happy ending, I argue for a different interpretation. When happiness is removed from a situation, the expected result is unhappiness. Fitting with this expectation, Keel says of the conservative women-led movement in country music in the 1970s, “in the world of country music, it seemed that women were either crying because they had been dumped or were singing with glee to

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¹⁹Ibid.
²¹Ibid.
be back in baby’s arms.” Even in the 1990s, which Keel argues marked a new women’s movement in country music, she finds that women still “cloaked [their] themes of equality” and lacked the anger of female rock stars like Courtney Love and Alanis Morissette. How, then, is Underwood’s reaction to her partner’s cheating not unhappiness, but anger and revenge? “Before He Cheats” shares important narrative characteristics with traditional murder ballads that have played an important part in country music history, and that these similarities allow us to understand the song as a modified, modernized and gender-flipped murder ballad of its own.

Ballads, as discussed previously in Chapter 3, are traditional songs with an emphasis on narrative that originated hundreds of years ago, particularly in agriculturally based communities. These ballads influenced the development of country music starting in the 1920s. According to Olive Burt, themes of murder and mayhem are common themes in both Scottish and American ballads. Outlaws, vigilantes, and the like were exciting material for ballads, and led to the writing of many highly moralistic tales of murder.

Lydia Hamessley claims that murder ballads, and in particular ‘murdered sweetheart’ ballads, follow a particular formula:

a young woman is lured away from home by her lover to a secluded spot on the pretext of marriage or discussing marriage; presumably, she is pregnant. Once they go away together he kills her either to solve the problem of the pregnancy or to punish her for her sexual excesses. Sometimes he announces his murderous intentions to her, and we hear her pleas for mercy. After stabbing, shooting, or beating her to death he disposes of her body in a shallow grave or a river. Finally, he admits his crime and

22 Keel, “Between Riot Grrrl and Quiet Girl,” 160.
23 Ibid., 166.
pays for it with his life, either through a legal proceeding that culminates in execution or through a confrontation with the devil.26

In Hamessley’s analysis, a man’s murder of his lover will eventually be punished.

Olive Burt discusses murders of a slightly different type of murder ballad, finding that murders by jealous lovers of their rivals are given “an air of nobility” by balladeers, who find this presents “an intensity of love that is truly admirable.”27 Still, he finds that “some murders are more abhorrent than others,” the most offensive of which is the murder activated by lust with a wholly innocent victim.28

Susan Cook argues that murder ballads encode “values and behaviour for its tellers and hearers.”29 She finds that balladry has traditionally privileged male voices while silencing the community’s women.30 Specifically in what she calls “murdered-girl” ballads, Cook finds women are given few options: “if passive, we may be murdered by our sweethearts; if we act, we can be held accountable for the subsequent actions of others.”31 She finds that even when women sang ballads themselves, they adopted a male perspective, cursing the actions and placing blame on other women.32

Many artists associated with hard country have recorded murder ballads that specifically center on the murders of women who have been unfaithful to their partners, including Merle Haggard’s “Life In Prison,” Johnny Cash’s “Delia’s Gone,” Waylon Jennings’s “Cedartown,

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28 Ibid., 55.
29 Cook, “Cursed Was She,” 203.
30 Ibid., 205.
31 Ibid., 216.
32 Ibid., 217.
Georgia,” and Willie Nelson’s “Red Headed Stranger.” These songs reinforced the hard country image of these singers, as they fit with the dark, masculinist aesthetic of hard country that “dares the world to be disgusted.” I earlier established that Underwood’s performance of “Before He Cheats” is influenced by a hard country style; a link to a murder ballad, therefore, would only reinforce her position as a performer in this country subgenre. So, how exactly can one read “Before He Cheats” as a murder ballad?

I suggest that the graphic violence against the truck in “Before He Cheats” follows in the tradition of graphic violence in murder ballads. Physical violence is a relatively uncommon occurrence in women’s country songs; as Keel describes, even women’s anger was a long held taboo country theme. Yet the chorus of “Before He Cheats” is entirely devoted to a detailed description of Underwood’s destruction of her partner’s truck. While there is no human murder in “Before He Cheats,” the violent chorus, which describes the protagonist taking a baseball bat to the truck and slashing the tires, serves as a graphic representation of destruction similar to the graphic detail found in murder ballads. For example, “Delia’s Gone,” recorded most famously by Johnny Cash, describes in detail how the protagonist ties a woman to a chair and shoots her multiple times. Well-known murder ballad “Knoxville Girl” also describes a woman’s death in disturbing detail.

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33 This list includes both hard country artists and outlaw country artists as identified by Barbara Ching in *Wrong’s What I do Best* Chapter 5: Dying Hard. Ching aligns outlaw country with hard country as a more modern style that carries similar hard themes, and therefore I consider these artists as aligned with hard country.
35 Keel, “Between Riot Grrrl and Quiet Girl”; though by 2006, some women had released arguably violent songs (e.g. Miranda Lambert’s “Independence Day”), the type of violence expressed was mostly passive (e.g. lighting a match to start a fire in McBride’s “Independence Day”), whereas Underwood’s violence in “Before He Cheats” is very active (smashing a truck with a baseball bat).
recounting the killer beating her until she bled, then dragging her by the hair to throw her body into
a nearby river.38 This graphic representation of violence is a common feature of murder ballads, and
therefore despite its lack of a human victim, “Before He Cheats” aligns with this tradition through
its use of violent imagery.

Unlike these earlier murder ballads, however, in Underwood’s “Before He Cheats” it’s a
woman who takes on the murderous action. Recalling Susan Cook’s argument that traditional
ballads often silence women and force them into passivity, Underwood’s song presents an opposing
standpoint. The female protagonist in “Before He Cheats” takes an active and outspoken role; she is
the one that executes the graphic violence, and then recounts it.

Taking into account the likeness of the imagery in “Before He Cheats” to traditional murder
ballads, as well as the difference in perspective it offers (recounted by a female protagonist), I find the
song’s overarching happiness narrative more complex than simply a reiteration of the happy family
script. Its subversion of the traditional murder ballad narrative to focus on a cheating male partner
(instead of a female one), who is attacked by a woman (instead of a man) serves to reject the
misogynist leanings of traditional balladry as outlined by Susan Cook. When taking this history into
account, the song’s overall message becomes less about heteronormative ideals and more a
progressive expansion of women’s roles in country music.

Another aspect of the song that becomes important to the murder ballad interpretation is its
reference to Stephen King’s Carrie. In King’s novel, a high school senior Carrie White does indeed
go on a murderous rampage and kill many of her classmates. Despite an absence of formal

38 AZLyrics, “Nick Cave & The Bad Seeds Lyrics – Knoxville Girl,” accessed June 17, 2015,
acknowledgement from Underwood or her team about the influence of Stephen King’s novel *Carrie* and its 2002 movie adaptation on this song, the incorporation of specific references and general themes, including the destructive force of female anger, from these texts is undeniable. Underwood both proclaimed her love of Stephen King and disclosed his influence on her works in a behind the scenes video for “Two Black Cadillacs,” in which she takes credit for conceptualizing that music video as a spin-off of King’s *Christine*.³⁹

Her interest in incorporating Stephen King into her music videos appeared much earlier, as “Before He Cheats” incorporates narrative influences from the Stephen King novel *Carrie*. In addition to the obvious fact that the protagonists hold the same name, the “Before He Cheats” music video scene in which Underwood walks down an empty street while electrical poles, signs, and other electric items around her falter and throw sparks can be easily compared to a passage from *Carrie*, in which the protagonist uses her telekinetic powers to destroy her town:

> And power transformers atop lightpoles bloomed into nacreous purple light spitting Catherine-wheel sparks. High-tension wires fell into the streets in the pick-up-sticks tangles and some of them ran, and that was bad for them because now the whole street was littered with wires and the stink began, the burning began.⁴⁰

The 2002 film adaptation of *Carrie* affirms this intertextual link. Both scenes begin with a head-on shot of the women walking down the middle of a street towards the camera, while electrical objects around them explode. The camera angle then switches to a side shot; the camera remains still while each respective Carrie moves from the right to the left of the frame. We see that the buildings in the background are destroyed as she walks through. While the film obviously depicts a darker, more

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macabre scene in which Carrie is covered in blood, the similarity of the images is unmistakable (Fig. 4.2).

![Images of Carrie and Carrie Underwood](image)

**Figure 4.2.** Top: Stephen King’s *Carrie* (2002 film adaptation), 01:57:14 and 01:57:22
Bottom: Carrie Underwood, “Before He Cheats” music video, 02:40 and 02:48

This intertext is both important and relevant because it affects the interpretation of the song’s projected happiness script. “Before He Cheats” and *Carrie* both center on women who have been rejected and humiliated in some way; the protagonist of “Before He Cheats” is cheated on, while Carrie White of *Carrie* is drenched in pig’s blood after being elected prom queen. Both women, instead of passively accepting their circumstances, act out in violence. While “Before He Cheats” can be interpreted as a celebration of female independence, where the protagonist simply
“evens the score” by destroying her ex-lover’s truck, the novel *Carrie* has a much darker conclusion. After Carrie White kills many of her classmates using her telekinetic powers, she returns home where her mother stabs her in the shoulder; she eventually dies from her wound. Interestingly, however, the 2002 film version of *Carrie* provides an alternate narrative ending; Carrie White does not die, but instead survives the attack from her mother and leaves town with the help of another classmate. This distinction is incredibly important, as while the novel firmly establishes that female anger is a death sentence for women, the 2002 film at least leaves room for the possibility of survival and acceptance away from antagonizers.

While there are obvious similarities between the texts, the way these influences have been incorporated into “Before He Cheats” is significant. Instead of a tortured walk down the empty street like Carrie White’s, Underwood’s walk is triumphant and powerful; the imagery may be the same but its function within its respective narrative is different. That said, the overt implication of the imagery is still there. The lone Carrie(s) walking down the street wreak havoc on their surroundings, and therefore independent women can be seen as a negative destructive force, but our interpretation of the imagery – particularly from the perspective of the happiness script – is markedly different. Carrie White remains a terrifying figure, and serves as a warning to the audience to avoid her fate (that is, to remain passive). Carrie Underwood instead becomes a heroic and model figure, and a strong woman whose actions were justified by the infidelity of her lover. In creating a universalizing female experience, the song encourages women to become like her, and therefore does not project the same warnings as does *Carrie*. Underwood uses specific narrative strategies to construct the song’s genre identity and to manipulate her own gender identity in “Before He
Cheats.” These themes, found in the music, lyrics, and images of the “Before He Cheats” music
video, are also present in the Blown Away Tour video.

Tour Video

The most obvious reference to the “Before He Cheats” music video during Underwood’s
performance of the song in the Blown Away Tour is the background projected on the main screen.
The same empty street from the video is shown on the screen for the entire song performance,
effectively recreating that scene from the music video (and the 2002 film Carrie which it was
modeled after) as Underwood stands alone in the spotlight on the stage. This expansion of that
music video scene to occupy the entire duration of the song effectively highlights the importance of
that scene and the intertextual reference to King’s Carrie.

Underwood’s physical appearance in this tour also recalls her appearance in the “Before He
Cheats” video. In the music video, she wears jeans, black stilettos, and a leather jacket, which she
sheds to reveal a black halter top and bright red bra straps; the tight, bright blue pants, black stiletto
heels, and structured silver top resembling an armoured breastplate that she wears during Act Four of
the Blown Away Tour video is similarly fierce, and is a notable departure from the feminine gowns
she wears earlier in the tour.

Though “Before He Cheats” does not feature on Underwood’s 2012 Blown Away album, it
remains an important part of her brand and plays an important narrative role in her tour. As
previously mentioned, “Before He Cheats” is the last song of the tour before the encore. While I did
not observe any overt references to The Wizard of Oz in the live performance of the song,
Underwood’s destruction of the car in “Before He Cheats” serves a similar narrative function as
Dorothy’s killing of the witch in the film. Both Underwood’s song and Dorothy’s act serve as narrative climaxes in the respective works: Dorothy’s killing of the witch marks a resolution of the film’s main point of conflict; and “Before He Cheats” serves as an emotional point of closure and is placed as the last song of the official setlist, followed by Underwood’s departure from the stage.

**Conclusion**

Carrie Underwood uses specific narrative strategies to construct the song’s genre identity and to manipulate her own gender identity in “Before He Cheats.” Her adoption of a hard country image is evident by her impassioned delivery that fits with Barbara Ching’s definition of the style and her narrative focus on female revenge. Because of her adoption of this style, we can understand the song as a modernized murder ballad that fits within the tradition of hard country. By reading “Before He Cheats” and its major textual influence, Stephen King’s *Carrie*, using Ahmed’s happiness script theory, we understand that the traditional heterosexual love script is a dominant driving force of the narrative, but that it becomes slightly subverted by Underwood’s positioning as a heroic and model figure through the universalizing of female experience. Additionally, the song’s narrative placement within the *Blown Away Tour* reinforces the tour’s link with *The Wizard of Oz* narrative, and gives a sense of satisfaction and closure before the encore. Ultimately, Underwood’s manipulation of genre and gender in “Before He Cheats” reinforces an understanding of her *Blown Away Tour* as subversive and feminist within the country genre.
Chapter 5. "Blown Away": Domestic Abuse and the Wizard of Oz in the Blown Away Tour Encore

The encore set of the Blown Away Tour opens with a series of video clips played on the main screen. Most of these images are taken directly from the “Blown Away” music video, but also incorporate visuals previously used in the video backdrop for “Undo It,” specifically images of a flickering light bulb and glass shattering in slow motion. Following this video montage of dark, foreboding images, attention turns back to the stage. Underwood wears a bejeweled gray gown and sits on a small bed covered with a patchwork quilt. Two screens just behind her are made to look like the inside of a house, with dimly lit yellowed walls and unidentified photos in frames haphazardly hung on the walls. Underwood first sings “I Know You Won’t,” followed by the final song of the tour, and the focus of this chapter, “Blown Away.”

Context

The song “Blown Away” is the second single off the Blown Away album, written by Chris Tompkins and Josh Kear who previously co-wrote her famous single “Before He Cheats.” The lyrics, told in the third person, are a narrator’s description of a girl seeking to escape her abusive household. As a storm approaches, she decides to leave her father passed out on the couch while she locks herself in the cellar.

The video, falling on the heels of the album’s first single and video “Good Girl,” was directed by Randee St. Nicholas and was released July 2012 to primarily positive reviews. The cinematic focus of the video is emphasized from the outset as it opens with a musically
unaccompanied 45-second scene showing a girl (Underwood) and her father. When the scene begins, the father and girl sit at a small, round kitchen table. The kitchen is simple and rustic with outdated appliances, suggesting it is a lower income household, while the black-and-white tone of the video suggests a drab, dismal atmosphere. As the girl sits down to do homework at the kitchen table, we see the father pouring a dark liquid from a bottle into his coffee mug, suggesting he struggles with alcohol abuse. He offers to help with her homework, but she refuses; he gets angry and grabs her, but she pulls away and leaves. The tense relationship between the father and daughter suggests physical abuse, made evident in their stressed interactions and by the way in which she pulls away from his offer to help. The rest of the video shows the father’s escalating anger paired with the intensifying storm brewing outside and ensuing tornado. The father eventually passes out on the couch and is blown away with the house as his daughter takes shelter in the cellar. In the end, the daughter climbs out into a bright, sunny new day.

Drawing on the work of music theorists Peter Doyle, Lori Burns and Jada Watson, and cultural theorists Sara Ahmed and Alissa Burger, this chapter will focus on “Blown Away,” the song which Underwood herself has identified as central to Blown Away album and tour narrative. I look at external genre influences in “Blown Away” to argue that Underwood’s incorporation of pop music styles within the context of a strong country trope, assists in the creation of narrative possibilities unavailable to other country stars in a purely country context. In particular, the work of Ahmed will enable me to demonstrate how the singer expands the definition of country music to provide new, positive, narrative endings to a key country music trope by simultaneously maintaining her authority as a female country star and integrating pop music influences into her songs.
Analysis

Domestic Abuse

The “Blown Away” song and video clearly take part in the well-known country trope of domestic abuse, both through their overt creation of a father-daughter abuse narrative and through subtler references to iconic country songs telling stories of domestic violence. Lyrically, “Blown Away” is quick to establish the father’s abusive patterns, labeling him a “mean old mister.” We also learn from the lyrics that the young girl’s mother is permanently absent, as Underwood sings about her being “an angel in the ground.” The pre-chorus emphasizes the irreversibility of the abusive situation by stating there’s “not enough rain in Oklahoma to wash the sins out of that house.” The only solution to the abuse, then, is to “shatter every window ‘til it’s all blown away.” The house here is positioned not only as a location of sin and suffering, but as a physical object that holds sin and suffering within it. Escaping the father is not sufficient to escape the abuse; the protagonist must also somehow escape the house. Ahmed’s happiness theory views the home as an embodiment of the happy family, in which the family home as a location where happiness takes material form, for “within its walls the family is established…and maintains its identity as generations come and go.”¹ The rejection of the home, therefore, is by extension a rejection of the family itself. Since the family is unhappy, the house, too, becomes unhappy, and must be rejected.

This destruction of the family home is a pervasive representation in country domestic abuse narratives. Perhaps most famously, Martina McBride’s “Independence Day” tells the story of a woman who lights her house on fire, with herself inside, to escape her abuser. A slightly subtler image from Garth Brooks’s “The Thunder Rolls” shows a tree branch breaking through a window at the exact moment a woman shoots her abusive husband (Fig 5.1). Underwood’s emphasis on the family home, then, as an embodiment of family, is not accidental but directly references other important country music representations of domestic abuse. Comparing “Blown Away” with these aforementioned songs also highlights other similarities. Both “Blown Away” and McBride’s “Independence Day” tell the story of a child from an abusive household, whose home is destroyed and who ultimately escapes the abusive situation. Though the children in these two videos are of varying ages (Underwood’s character appears teenaged while the child in McBride’s video is prepubescent), the draw upon the universal abusive father figure serves to link both stories. Additionally, the opening musical material in both songs presents a strong 4 beat in similar tempi, and both songs use the tonic A, with Blown Away in A minor and Independence Day in A major. The destruction of the family home in “Blown Away,” also manifests in a very similar way to “The Thunder Rolls,” with pervasive storm imagery and, more specifically, a breaking window, shot from a similar camera angle (Fig 5.2). While again, the child in “The Thunder Rolls” is much younger than Underwood’s character in “Blown Away,” the stories are united through the presentation of a feared father figure. Both songs also contain a similar lyric line that compares the song’s female protagonists to the storm itself – Underwood’s “those storm clouds gather in her eyes” is undoubtedly similar to Brooks’s “the lightning flashes in her eyes.” In all three videos, the female
protagonists take control over their situations and end their abuse by ultimately killing their abusers (even if they must also sacrifice themselves by doing so).

Figure 5.1. Left: Martina McBride’s “Independence Day” (1994), 02:27 and 03:02
                    Right: Garth Brooks’ “The Thunder Rolls” (1991), 03:32 and 03:35
The general theme of a female character confronting an abusive situation is, of course, not limited to these three songs. Several scholars have addressed the concept of domestic violence in country music and specifically country music videos. Perhaps most notable to popular musicology is Lori Burns and Jada Watson’s discussion of the Dixie Chicks’ “Top of the World,” which examines the cycle of abuse, including its origins and consequences. Burns and Watson conclude that the video’s metanarrative, composed of multiple subject perspectives and conveyed visually, lyrically, and musically, is positive and forward-looking, as it presents the youngest familial generation breaking
the cycle of abuse. Burns and Watson, drawing from the work of Beverly Keel, also helpfully compile a list of country videos presenting domestic abuse narratives, including The Dixie Chicks’ “Goodbye Earl,” Martina McBride’s “A Broken Wing,” Reba McEntire and Kelly Clarkson’s “Because of You,” among others.

Other scholars have also discussed country’s representations of domestic violence. Sheila Simon succinctly describes the progression of these representations, stating, “Domestic violence in country music has evolved. It started with a male perspective, acknowledging lethal violence, along with a bit of regret. Later the same topic is reviewed from a female perspective, recognizing the horror of the violence and the challenge of escaping it. Most recently, the songs, still from a female voice, reflect women killing their abusers.” Robert Kurzban, too, identifies this idea of revenge as central to country music narratives. Delia Poey explains the significance of these domestic abuse narratives. She identifies the struggles of women seeking to navigate the structures of a patriarchal, conservative music industry, “having to conform to at least some of the gender-based conventions of the genre…but women performers have managed to also, in limited ways, contest those structures.”

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music can and should be understood as misogynist, this imagery can also illuminate the realities and brutality of such violence, subsequently critiquing it.\textsuperscript{7} Sheila Simon calls the country revenge narrative “a reflection of a developmental stage. The victims realize that they must protect themselves because nobody else can protect them from the abuser.”\textsuperscript{8}

This research demonstrates how certain narratives addressing domestic abuse (those in which the brutality of domestic violence is critiqued, and where women exact revenge on their abusers) can be considered progressive or even feminist within the country music field because they condemn oppressive acts of violence and show strong women acting self-sufficiently. Ahmed’s theory supports a reading of these narratives as feminist, as she states “the history of feminism is thus a history of making trouble…by refusing to follow other people’s goods, or by refusing to make others happy.”\textsuperscript{9}

When these kinds of domestic abuse narratives are presented, the patriarchal structure of traditionally conservative households is challenged, creating space for alternative ways of being. Ultimately, by taking part in this visual representation of such a widely recognized and important country trope, and by decisively referencing the work of other country artists, Underwood positions herself and the song “Blown Away” as important contributors to the country domestic abuse narrative, and consequently, to the field of country music overall. Further, by engaging with this trope in a way that allows for a feminist narrative in a traditionally conservative genre, she subtly challenges traditionally accepted ways of being presented in country music.


\textsuperscript{8} Simon, “Greatest Hits: Domestic Violence in American Country Music,” 1123.

Underwood’s use of country themes in “Blown Away” extends beyond the domestic abuse trope. The video sets a classic country scene, through its presentation of a small, isolated country home with modest furnishings. The specific reference to Oklahoma in the pre-chorus lyrically reinforces the rural scene by recalling Oklahoma’s reputation as a traditionally agricultural state (Fig. 5.3). The presence of a tornado in the video further calls our attention to the rural landscape, characterized by vast, empty fields and a lone dirt road leading up to the only house within sight. This low to middle class rural environment is a frequent setting for country songs. Undeniably, however, “Blown Away” also incorporates stylistic elements highly reflective of pop. I suggest that these pop elements help to establish a convincing narrative of upwards class mobility, presenting a new possible narrative ending for country domestic abuse videos.
Class Mobility

In the opening of the “Blown Away” video, we see Underwood’s character doing her homework, rejecting her father’s offer of help. Using Ahmed’s idea of orientation, we can read this as her refusal to be oriented towards her father’s way of life, which includes his abusive tendencies, but
also perhaps his lower class, rural life. Pursuing education outside of family influence, as Underwood’s character does, disturbs the family transmission of happiness scripts and presents a way of achieving a higher class standing.

This narrative is made more evident in part by the video’s direct visual references to MGM’s 1939 movie *The Wizard of Oz*. Underwood speaks directly to these references, identifying the plaid shirt, red shoes, and yellow path in the video as purposeful allusions to the iconic movie.\(^\text{10}\) The draw to honor this pop culture giant is understandable, as the work’s cultural impact is undeniable. Its “quintessentially American story” has been retold numerous times, and its Academy Award-winning music has been reinvented through covers spanning multiple genres and eras.\(^\text{11}\) Alissa Burger identifies the *The Wizard of Oz* narrative as a fertile space for struggling with [many social] issues, serving as an indicator of the conflicts preoccupying American culture at each sociohistorical moment...a close examination of the recurring themes and their representations in [several] versions of the *Wizard of Oz* provides significant insight into the negotiation of these issues and their corresponding moments in American culture.\(^\text{12}\)

The *Wizard of Oz* narrative becomes a sort of trope in itself, through which identity and societal issues can be constantly renegotiated. “Blown Away” can be considered one such negotiation.

The narrative presented in the “Blown Away” video can be directly compared to that of *The Wizard of Oz*. Both works center around female protagonists who emerge from a rural home setting, seeking to run away from it. The endings, however, are drastically different. While Dorothy finds her adventures to the world of Oz enlightening, their overall effect is to give her a new appreciation

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\(^{12}\) Ibid., 1-2.
for her old life, to which she happily returns. Even Dorothy’s initial desire to run away is impulsive and short-lived, so much so that her entire journey in Oz centers on returning home. Ultimately, she wakes up in Kansas with a renewed admiration of rural family life, since “there’s no place like home.” Underwood’s character in “Blown Away” is initially similar to Dorothy, clearly desiring to leave behind her unhappiness (and therefore her rural home), but the narratives eventually diverge. While Dorothy happily returns home, Underwood’s character only achieves satisfaction through escaping hers.

This narrative difference is visually obvious in both works’ use of colour (Fig. 5.4). In The Wizard of Oz, colour is associated with place, with a visual dichotomy of “the drab sepia tones of Kansas [and] the vibrant Technicolor of Oz.” When Dorothy returns to Kansas, the film returns to its sepia colouring, solidifying the transition out of the new, tempting, and fascinating Oz and back to traditional, rural home life. This visual narrative framing (sepia-Technicolor-sepia) reinforces the rural home as the natural, stable state. The use of colour in “Blown Away” provides an alternative narrative reading. The video also presents home life with a darker sepia-toned tint (albeit a much more technologically advanced version than what is found in The Wizard of Oz), and a move away from it to life in full colour. In contrast to The Wizard of Oz, however, the colour scheme in “Blown Away” never returns to the sepia of home life, because Underwood’s character never returns there. The protagonist finds life in colour positive and freeing; in place of Dorothy’s homesickness, she feels relief. This embrace of newness and rejection of her rural life contradicts Dorothy’s need for stability in The Wizard of Oz.

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14 Some home life scenes are also presented in black and white, but this colouring is used to represent flashbacks and so I have not included it in this analysis.
Dorothy and the protagonist in “Blown Away” exhibit oppositional relationships with their rural homes, and therefore with happiness scripts. Dorothy’s willingness to follow the yellow brick road that leads her back to a rural, family-centric existence becomes her own embrace of the happy family script, where inheritance of the family form equals happiness. Underwood’s character, to the contrary, refuses to do so; through the destruction of the family home and a family member, she firmly establishes that her path will be of her own making. Ultimately, “Blown Away” first establishes its similarities to the *Wizard of Oz* story, then offers a powerful alternative narrative.

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15 Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness*, 45
ending, where instead of satisfyingly declaring “there’s no place like home,” the female heroine dares to disturb her surroundings and “shatter every window ‘til it’s all blown away.”

We can also see a narrative of class ascent present itself musically in “Blown Away” through Underwood’s use of stylistic influences external to country. First I would like to clarify that of course genres are highly flexible and mobile, and so are their stylistic influences. I do not mean to imply that any one style is exclusive to any one genre, but instead I suggest that some stylistic choices can reference, be traced back to, or are more frequently used in one genre than others.

The heavy reverb and echo in “Blown Away” can be considered a rock strategy. Peter Doyle traces back the “extravagant use of echo and reverberation…effects” to the first wave of rock and roll recordings in the mid to late 1950s. He suggests that “producers of classical recording were quick to take advantage of the new capability for aural ‘largeness’…” ‘Low’ popular music, on the other hand, lacked the same ‘automatic’ territorial rights, and the technicians who made such recordings in the main simply continued to seek the ‘dry’, ‘zero degree’ production standard of radio broadcasting.” This rock influence is an unsurprising find in Underwood’s music, as she is known to cover bands including Guns N’ Roses, Aerosmith, and Skid Row in concert, embracing her love of 80s rock. She links the prominent echo effect on the Blown Away album to this influence, stating “that was a big thing with Def Leppard, all of that hollow vocal sound. And I liked it. So [producer Mark Bright] would…throw a little bit in [songs on the album]. And I’d be like, ‘I love that!’.”

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17 Ibid., 34.
can certainly see this prominent echo effect in “Blown Away,” particularly applied to the vocal line in the song’s choruses; the voice is panned left and right and heavily echoed, producing the hollow sound Underwood clearly cares for. In this way, “Blown Away” nods to rock ‘n’ roll’s rich history of effects production.

Although its rock roots are undeniable, the echo effects in “Blown Away” are not entirely of a rock style. The presence of a stylistic influence in a song is only meaningful if we fully explore the way in which that influence is used. In “Blown Away,” this wholly rock influence is used in a remarkably country way. The relationship between music, place, and space is an important consideration of this heavy echo effect. Peter Doyle purports that the big production sounds of 1950s rock ‘n’ roll was “effected in such a way as to allow (and promote) disordered, non-pictorial sound spatialities” and that these spaces were “excised from temporal trajectories.” While pre-1950s hillbilly and race music could, like later rock music, work to deterritorialize the recorded space, it could also become “a subtle negotiating of music and place.” Ultimately, these early styles of country music “[were] to be key in the later emergence of fully spatialized popular music.”

Country music’s strong allegiance to physical place and space since then support Doyle’s interpretations of these early styles. This emphasis on pictorial space, instead of on disordered sound, is what gives the echo effect in “Blown Away” a country feel and allows for its effective use within a country song.

http://content.usatoday.com/communities/idolchatter/post/2012/05/carrie-underwoods-blown-away-a-track-by-track-review/1#.VRsyiJPF8mc.

19 Doyle, “From ‘My Blue Heaven’ to ‘Race with the Devil’,” 31.
21 Ibid., 230.
22 Ibid., 93.
The echo and reverb effects in “Blown Away” give Underwood’s voice a wide, expansive sound. This effect is mirrored visually in the “Blown Away” video, with shots of wide, empty rural spaces; Underwood is consequently seen running through or singing in these spaces. The sound the audience hears matches what they see visually; while the landscape and house are deteriorating, Underwood’s voice, too, is being ‘blown away’. The video’s audio is additionally accompanied by sounds of strong wind and thunder, deepening the track’s relationship with natural rural space.

Instead of distancing “Blown Away” from country, then, the song’s cinematic effects work to strengthen the song’s ties to the rural Oklahoma presented in the lyrics. The subtleties of these effects and treatment project additional narratives. The pre-choruses and choruses, which describe the destruction of the house and, resultantly, the destruction of traditional country happiness scripts, are treated with much more noticeable echo and reverb. The song’s verses, which describe the rural setting and overall narrative, center the voice with comparatively little treatment. This treatment hints towards a narrative of class ascent.

In the first pre-chorus, Underwood sings about her desire to wash away the sin and rip the nails out of the past contained in the family home. Two other vocal lines sing with her: one male voice an octave below, and another, Underwood’s voice again, an octave above. This pairing of voices creates a sense that the music is being pulled in two directions. If we consider each vocal line a specific character, the main vocal line can be fairly confidently assigned as the voice of the daughter, since Underwood plays her character. Considering the lone male character featured in the video and storyline, I understand the lower male voice representing the father figure. He is the one ‘pulling his daughter down’, per se, narratively through the abuse and trying to control her education, and
musically by singing an octave below her. The upper female voice becomes a point of interest, since both characters in the video are accounted for musically. This upper voice comes back in every prechorus and chorus, its role growing with each iteration.

While additional vocal parts do not always represent a specific character, in certain instances such vocal lines can play an important part in affecting or reflecting subjectivities of a song’s narrative. “Blown Away” offers a strong example of this type of narrative stance. The upper vocal line introduced in the first prechorus develops. In becomes heavily produced: panned instead of centered, and heavily treated with extreme echo and reverb. It sounds surreal and storm-like, as if it is a part of the atmospheric setting. I suggest that this ‘other’ Underwood voice represents the daughter’s other non-rural side, presenting her desire for a new and different life. In this way, this other voice, which I will now call the ‘storm voice’, presents another side of the same daughter character.

This double persona for the main character is not new for Underwood; the video for “Good Girl,” released just four months before the video for “Blown Away,” features a ‘bad’ Underwood warning a ‘good’ Underwood not to be naïve in love. I understand the two Underwood voices in “Blown Away” simply as a musical manifestation of what was presented visually in “Good Girl”: two sides of one character, adding complexity to the song’s narrative (Fig. 5.5). Throughout “Blown Away”, the storm voice discourages the main vocal line from settling on the tonic and instead pulls it upwards. At the end of the first chorus, for example, the last ‘Blown Away’ from the main vocal line ends on the tonic A, but the storm voice sings the line again, ending on B, scale degree 2. Instead of settling on the tonic, this storm voice encourages the destabilization of the vocal line, insisting that
the story is not over yet. Not accidentally, this occurs at the moment we visually see Underwood deciding whether or not to leave her father passed out in the house with the storm growing and the tornado approaching. After the storm voice’s line, she does.

![Image](image.jpg)

**Figure 5.5.** Carrie Underwood, “Good Girl” music video, 03:17

The tag at the end of the song affirms the influence of this storm voice. It soars above the main vocal line in the background, while the main voice repeats the line Blown Away. Finally, it reaches an E5, the highest note for the main line so far, and blends with the storm voice – this reaching of potential for the main voice finally allows the last iteration of ‘Blown Away’ to land and stay on the tonic, resolving, and concluding the song.

Ultimately, this heavy pop production of the second female vocal line allows another narrative perspective to emerge – one of class transcendence and escape. While the ending of the video does not ultimately show this change in class, I suggest we can find this transition in the album’s paratexts (Fig 5.6). Underwood herself suggests that the album cover and video should be
considered together, stating “We kind of brought some of those elements [from the album packaging] into the video as well. We wanted them to all be cohesive and all make sense, and now I feel like when people see the video they’ll notice more things about the cover and vice versa.”23 As such, we can understand the album cover as the final narrative statement of the “Blown Away” video – one where the main character has finally achieved autonomy and a higher class despite her rural setting. Perhaps the album cover also makes a pertinent statement about Underwood’s own place in the music industry: as an elegant, high class pop star who stands confidently in her rural, country setting.

Figure 5.6. Left: Carrie Underwood, Blown Away album cover
Right: Carrie Underwood, “Blown Away” music video, 00:55, 01:26, and 01:37

23 Underwood, “Carrie Underwood – Behind the Scenes of Blown Away.”
Tour Video

The staging and execution of “Blown Away” in Underwood’s Blown Away Live Tour also draws on several of the themes mentioned above. As described in the introduction of this chapter, the tour setting for “Blown Away,” created entirely on two intersecting screens, is inside a dark, drab and unsophisticated-looking house. This set is presumably the inside of the yellow house that appears both in the “Blown Away” music video and throughout the Blown Away Tour. Underwood, meanwhile, has shed the extravagant pop colours she wore earlier in the show but has maintained the glamorous style, favouring a dramatic gray gown. Her rendition of the first verse of “Blown Away” is uneventful, but as she starts the first chorus, the stage setting begins to change. The screens which display the house backdrop show the open bedroom windows letting in gusts of wind, and the house begins to dissolve; picture frames are first torn from the walls, and then the house itself crumbles as the roof comes off, the drywall is ripped away, and the entire structure of the house is torn down. By the end of the first chorus, the house is entirely gone and the screens instead show dark, foreboding clouds. During the second chorus, the clouds appear to spin, as if the audience was inside Dorothy’s house as it was picked up by a tornado. In the third pre-chorus, rain begins to fall and a tornado approaches on screen. As Underwood starts the third and final chorus, the tornado comes closer and eventually appears to engulf her, represented on stage by a dramatic tunnel of smoke just behind her and accompanied by leaf-shaped confetti swirling both around Underwood and being dropped into the audience from above. As soon as Underwood sings her last note, the screens around her change from dark clouds to a bright orange sunrise. She thanks her audience, exits the stage, and the concert is over.
“Blown Away” certainly presents the most complex narrative staging of any song in the tour. Not only does the staging for the song itself draw most heavily on its accompanying music video, but references to “Blown Away” are found throughout the entire tour. The opening of the first act of the tour and the interludes between Acts 1-2 and Act 4-Encore all use video clips from or make direct references to the “Blown Away” music video. Because of the emphasis placed on its material and narrative, “Blown Away” in all its forms (song, music video, and tour video) becomes a valuable source of analytical material.

The tour video of “Blown Away,” in replicating the narrative of the music video, emphasizes several of the messages present in it, most notably the possibility of class mobility and escape from abuse. The tour video achieves this through its attention to visually and thematically pairing the “Blown Away” theme with The Wizard of Oz.

The tour video supports a reading of “Blown Away” as a retelling of The Wizard of Oz. The video clips taken from the music video and shown during the tour display important narrative moments present in both “Blown Away” and The Wizard of Oz, clips of an approaching storm, cloudy skies, Underwood running from a tornado towards a house, and the house spinning in the air to land in a new, brighter land all recall both works. As could be expected, the staging of “Blown Away” in the Blown Away Tour mimics the music video’s narrative ending, which, as discussed above, can be read as an alternate narrative ending to The Wizard of Oz. The simple orange sunrise that ends the tour easily symbolizes a new day, or stage of life, after darkness. The sunrise leaves the audience with an image of rebirth, newness, and hope, instead of a return to a previous life like Dorothy in The Wizard of Oz. Ahmed asserts that “feminism gives time and space to women’s
desires that are not assembled around the reproduction of the family form;” shifting narratives so that they leave the possibility for alternatives to traditionalism allows for this space.24 What Underwood’s character in “Blown Away” chooses to do with her new freedom is not the point; instead, it is the possibility for change and choice that is highlighted by the tour’s simple yet effective ending.

The Blown Away Live Tour additionally highlights class mobility in similar ways to the song and music video. I argued earlier that the Blown Away album cover presents a final narrative statement of the “Blown Away” music video, showing the main character finally achieving autonomy and a higher class despite her rural setting; in the final chorus of “Blown Away” in the tour video, this album cover is imitated on stage as Underwood stands confidently centre-stage in her flowing gray gown in front of screens showing rural scenes of storm and then sunrise (Fig. 5.7). The juxtaposition of high and low class is perhaps even more obvious in the initial tour setting for “Blown Away,” where the elegantly dressed Underwood sits on a small bed in a clearly underprivileged household.

24 Ahmed, The Promise of Happiness, 64.
This broadening of possible life paths and possibility of class mobility also speak to Underwood’s use of genre influences. By allowing narrative space for alternate paths, she opens up musical possibilities as well. Her use of external genre influences, then, seems fitting in a song that encourages the audience, and women especially, to look past their immediate situations and to find new opportunities. In using stylistic influences from various pop and rock styles in her country music, Underwood explores these new opportunities, which include the possibility of class mobility; the stereotypical rebellious middle-class rock listener and higher-class teen pop listener recall very different social statuses than country’s traditional appeal to working-class individuals.

Conclusion

Underwood’s use of pop music styles, especially the cinematic production of the song’s vocals, within the context of a strong country trope, assists in the creation of narrative possibilities unavailable to other country stars in a purely country context. By blending pop and country,
Underwood highlights class difference, and by heavily altering the second female vocal line creates a narrative of class movement, presenting the possibility of female freedom, autonomy, and success in the face of domestic abuse. She maintains her country credibility through the way in which she incorporates pop, that is, she employs these pop styles to add character, depth, and an alternative narrative possibility to an already meaningful country trope; but this alternate narrative, not just of escape but of achievement, also means a break from traditional gendered country happiness scripts, where rural family life is highly valued and prioritized. By simultaneously maintaining her authority as a female country star and integrating pop music influences into her songs, Underwood ultimately expands the definitions and accepted values of country music and provides new, positive, alternative narrative endings to key country tropes.
Conclusion.

In this thesis project, I have examined the complex and multi-dimensional narratives presented in the work of mainstream female country artist Carrie Underwood, and how her blending of musical genres (pop, rock, and country) affects the narratives pertaining to gender and sexuality told through her musical texts. I interrogated the relationships between and among the domains of music, lyrics, images, and staging in Underwood’s live performances (Blown Away Tour: Live DVD) and related music videos in order to identify how these gendered narratives relate to genre. More specifically, I examined where these performances and videos adhere to, expand on, or break from country music tropes and traditions.

To do so, I adopted an interlocking theoretical approach grounded in genre theory, gender theory, narrative theory in the context of popular music, and happiness theory. I examined how, as a female artist in the country music industry, Underwood uses genre-blending to construct complex gendered narratives in her musical texts. I applied this conceptual framework to Carrie Underwood’s Blown Away Tour: Live DVD and associated texts, specifically songs, lyrics, and videos. In brief, I examined how genres are conceptualized, how gender is performed through genre, how musical narratives (specifically metanarratives and multiple narratives) are constructed and portray identity, and how these narratives can be seen to operate within the context of cultural happiness scripts.

I have found that in her Blown Away Tour: Live DVD, Underwood clearly uses diverse narrative strategies, sometimes drawing on country tropes, to engage techniques and stylistic
influences of several other major genres, notably various pop and rock styles, and in doing so explores the gender norms of those genres.

In Chapter 2, I find that Underwood uses *The Wizard of Oz*, its characters, and its narrative to frame her tour and musical experience as one grounded in rural domesticity, but which allows for exploration outside this rural sphere. Her use of rock musical influences emphasize that she has stepped outside of her rural landscape (that is, she is “not in Kansas anymore”), but is instead exploring new lands just as Dorothy did in the iconic film. Her draw upon goodness and naivety as primary lyric themes serve to liken her to Dorothy; her ambivalent presentation of good and bad in the music video mirror Dorothy’s conflicted state in the opening of *The Wizard of Oz*, both loving home and craving adventure. Ultimately, in the *Blown Away Tour*, “Good Girl” serves as a perfect opening song that ties the tour in with intertextual references, establishes a strong narrative theme and corresponding values, and still allows for the growth of maturation of the tour’s character and theme.

Chapter 3 argues that Underwood uses stylistic and strategic intertextuality in her work, modeling her song “Jesus Take the Wheel” after other religious country music, and presenting happiness scripts, presented in part through its religious message, which prioritize traditional heterosexual family forms. Through this intertext and adherence to traditional country music values, Underwood aligns her song within a lineage of other country songs with religious themes, and thereby aligns herself with other powerful country artists.

Chapter 4 demonstrates how Underwood adopts a hard country style and likens “Before He Cheats” to early country murder ballads. I also find that while traditional heterosexual love scripts
are a dominant driving force of the narrative, they become slightly subverted by Underwood’s positioning as a heroic and model figure through the universalizing of female experience. Additionally, the song’s narrative placement within the Blow...
in ways that enhance the music’s narrative complexity and relate back to country music in a
meaningful way.

II. How does she present and represent narratives of gender and sexuality through her music,
lyrics, and images (knowing that these presentations are likely bound up in her presentations
of race, class, and ability)? Furthermore, how do these presentations reinforce or conflict with
each other?

While each individual song and performance within the larger tour metatext does not
necessarily communicate feminist messaging, or encourage female independence and the subversion
of gender roles, the construction of the tour as a whole allows these messages of feminism to be
prioritized. The Blown Away Tour: Live video communicates a narrative of class ascent and change,
of alternative narrative endings and female autonomy, and in demonstrating strong alternative
gender constructions to those traditional within the country sphere. Underwood’s presentations of
gender are not consistent throughout the tour, but are strategically incorporated into a larger
metanarrative of personal transformation, through the adoption of a narrative based on The Wizard
of Oz. Her varied presentations of gender, therefore, are explicable in that context; when considering
the tour’s overall framing and narrative (in particular the tour’s closing song “Blown Away”),
Underwood’s subversive and progressive statements stand out as the primary messages of her tour.

III. How do Underwood’s performances of gender and sexuality intersect with her performances
of pop, rock and country conventions? Can Underwood’s music help us to refine our
understanding of genre codes in relation to gender codes?
Underwood’s performances of gender are inextricably linked to her performances of generic conventions, as shown through several in-depth analyses of her pieces (most pertinently in her songs “Good Girl” and “Blown Away”). To broadly summarize, I find that Underwood’s use of genre directly relates to her presentation of country music gender norms and happiness script tropes in The Blown Away Tour: Live DVD. This direct relationship between genre and gender presentation likely exists in other music, both in country music and in other popular music genres. This is particularly convincing considering the insistence of most genre theorists that musical genre is composed not just of musical factors, but of social ones as well; the auditory shift of style, therefore, could conceivably point to a shift in social norms as well.

My conclusions here point to the need for further feminist analysis of country music. While several scholars, including Pamela Fox, Kristine M. McCusker, Diane Pecknold, Beverly Keel, and Nadine Hubbs skilfully and thoroughly discuss some aspects of feminism in country music, the body of scholarship on the topic still lacks the depth and rigour that would qualify it as a healthy field of study. In particular, in this study I found incorporating a theory from the field of gender studies (in this case Sara Ahmed’s happiness scripts) incredibly fruitful. Country music studies needs not only more studies about women (though it certainly does need those), it also needs more studies incorporating feminist theories; this would widen the scope of the analysis to include the social and cultural impacts of music and the act of making music.

Though Burns and Watson develop an analytic model for the study of concert video recordings in their 2013 article “Spectacle and Intimacy in Live Concert Film,” concert films remain
underexplored in academic scholarship.\textsuperscript{1} Concert tours are fundamental components of most popular music artists’ careers and promotion. These tours, though often designed to promote a specific album, almost always showcase material from throughout an artist’s career. An artist’s musical output inevitably varies or transforms somehow throughout their careers, and so a medley of material from all stages of artistic development predictably requires careful preparation and consideration. The creation of new narratives or expansion of, pre-existing narratives, and any other method by which artists and tour producers create uniformity between these many songs, deserves further study in all popular music genres.

Explorations of the intersections of musical genre, gender, and narrative are unavoidable complex. I hope that this thesis provides one example of how such analysis can be approached, and that other scholars will continue to dig deeper into the issues raised herein.

\textsuperscript{1} Lori Burns and Jada Watson, “Spectacle and Intimacy in Live Concert Film: Lyrics, Music, Staging, and Film Mediation in P\textsc{nk}’s Funhouse Tour (2009),” \textit{Music, Sound, and the Moving Image} 7 no. 2 (2013).
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Discography


