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**“I Ran My Fingers Through Her Coal Black Hair to Cover Up My Sin” :
Violence, Gender and Faith in 19th Century Appalachian Murdered Girl Ballads**

By

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Senior Thesis

Abstract

My thesis presents a literary and historical examination of the genre of songs known as “Murdered Girl ballads” in the canon of 19th century Southern Appalachian folk music. The Murdered Girl ballad, which tells the story of a young woman murdered by her male lover, became an archetypal narrative in Appalachian folklore in the 1800’s. In my research I examine some of the many Appalachian Murdered Girl ballads and the mountain society they sprang from, drawing connections between the lyrics of the ballads and three specific aspects of Appalachian mountain life: violence, gender roles, and religion. I argue that at the core of the ballads is the tension between male culture and evangelical Protestantism, both of which played extremely important roles in governing social behavior at the time. Male culture, which was heavily influenced by what many historians have called a “culture of violence,” held up gendered ideals of honor, freedom, reckless individualism, and aggression. This set of attitudes and behaviors was hotly opposed by evangelical Protestantism and revival culture, which dominated Appalachian religious attitudes and condemned the rough behavior around which male culture revolved. These “upright” religious values found psychological embodiment in the woman, who was seen as pure, demure and eternally self-sacrificing and who was traditionally associated with religion, home and family. I argue that the traditional Appalachian Murdered Girl ballad embodies the conflict between the dominant culture of male violence and evangelical Protestantism in the 19th century Appalachian South, an interplay that is reflected in the lyrics through the archetypal murder of the Woman, who represents home, family and piety, by the Man, who represents the culture of violence and Southern masculinity.

Introduction

There is perhaps no other form of cultural expression that can tell us more about the spirit of a particular time and place than its music, which functions as history, literature and art. While a song's lyrics give us a glimpse into the stories, themes and outlooks that populate the culture it reflects, the music itself – the whine of the slide on a one-string blues guitar, the mournful twang of a banjo – allows us to experience those things in a way that transcends mere intellectual understanding. This freedom from intellectualism is in fact one of popular music's greatest assets; unlike traditional literature, it gives even the most illiterate and uneducated groups of people a vehicle through which to express themselves. Perhaps more importantly, it gives scholars a unique window into the values, attitudes, preoccupations and experiences of these groups, who leave few written records. My study examines the Southern Appalachian region in the 19th century, where this is especially true. Although we have few firsthand accounts of life in the mountain South during this period, we do have access to a vast treasure trove of Appalachian music. Music played an unusually important role in Appalachian folk life, and is an indispensable tool in understanding the society that created it.

In my exploration of Appalachian society through music, I focus specifically on the type of Appalachian folk song known as the Murdered Girl Ballad: quite simply put, a song that tells the story of a woman who is murdered by her lover. The Murdered Girl ballad, which originated with the Scots-Irish immigrants who settled the Appalachian region in the 1700's, was adapted throughout the 19th century into hundreds of Americanized variants – more than half of the ballads composed by white folk singers in America, according to the great folklorist Alan Lomax.¹ The amazing abundance of Murdered Girl ballads in circulation

¹ Alan Lomax, *The Folk Songs of North America*. (New York: Doubleday and Company, 1960). xxi.

at the time and the increasing popularity of the genre throughout the 19th century led me to ask, what was it about the Murdered Girl theme that so appealed to people in the 19th century Appalachian South? How did these ballads reflect societal attitudes towards violence, gender, and religion? And finally, what social function did the archetypal Murdered Girl ballad play in the region? In my research I examine some of the many Appalachian Murdered Girl ballads and the mountain society they sprang from, drawing connections between the lyrics of the ballads and three specific aspects of Appalachian mountain life: violence, gender roles, and religion. In conducting my research I collected dozens of Murdered Girl ballads from universities and archives in the region and studied their lyrics, contextualizing my findings through several firsthand accounts of life in the region at the time as well as many secondary sources relating to gender, religion and violence in the 19th century Appalachian South.

My research led me to several conclusions about the meaning and function of Murdered Girl ballads in the 19th century Appalachian South. At the core of the ballads is the tension between male culture and evangelical Protestantism, both of which played extremely important roles in governing social behavior at the time. Male culture, which was heavily influenced by what many historians have called a “culture of violence,” held up gendered ideals of honor, freedom, reckless individualism, and aggression. This set of attitudes and behaviors was starkly opposed by evangelical Protestantism and revival culture, which dominated Appalachian religious attitudes and condemned the rough behavior around which male culture revolved. These “upright” religious values found psychological embodiment in the woman, who was seen as pure, demure and eternally self-sacrificing and who was traditionally associated with religion, home and family. Male rebellion against the religious and moral restraint that threatened to compromise masculine freedom and aggression was

thus directed against women. The Murdered Girl ballad dramatizes this struggle, turning male resistance to religious restraint into literal violence against women. I argue that the traditional Appalachian Murdered Girl ballad embodies the tension between the dominant culture of male violence and evangelical Protestantism in the 19th century Appalachian South, an interplay that is reflected in the lyrics through the archetypal murder of the Woman, who represents home, family and piety, by the Man, who represents the culture of violence and Southern masculinity.

The first section of this study provides an overview of the Murdered Girl ballad's definition, its origins, and the formula it tends to follow, as well as an overview of my sources, research methods, and the scope of the study. The following three sections address the three primary aspects of 19th century Appalachian society present in the traditional Murdered Girl ballad: first, Appalachian concepts of masculinity and the culture of violence that defines it; second, gender roles and the tensions between them; and finally, evangelical Protestantism and its dominant role in Appalachian culture. The final section of the study discusses the social function of the Murdered Girl ballad and its role in the lives of Southern Appalachianers.

Defining the Murdered Girl Ballad

The Appalachian region has always had a rich musical heritage. Settled primarily by Scots-Irish who brought with them the music of their homeland, the region's singers and storytellers adapted these traditions into what ultimately became a distinctly American sound. Sung around the hearth in isolated cabins, crooned by lonely women to their babes, and passed down through the ages by each new generation, the music of the mountains was woven deeply into the fabric of everyday life. Music expressed their woes, told their stories,

and provided opportunities for both entertainment and reflection. “Had I but words to say how these tunes are bound with the life of the singer, knit with his earliest sense impressions, and therefore dearer than any other music could ever be—impossible to forget as the sound of his mother’s voice!” writes Emma Bell Miles, a traveler to the region who lived and worked for a time in the mountains of Tennessee.²

Around the turn of the 20th century, outsiders “discovered” this rich music nestled in the hills and popular interest in Appalachian music spiked. Much of this interest had to do with the region’s perceived potential as an untouched pocket of Anglo-Scotch heritage, and dozens of ballad collectors ventured into the mountains in pursuit of “pure” English ballads -- most notably Francis Child, whose name is now synonymous with traditional Scotch-English ballads (Child ballads). Within the first few decades of the new century, folklorists began to appreciate Appalachian music as an end in itself rather than just a means of preserving Scots-Irish heritage, and collections documenting American-born music, like Alan Lomax’s 1934 *American Ballads and Folk Songs*, began to emerge. With the advent of recorded sound, ballad collectors were able to capture their findings on disc, and native Appalachian musicians began to record their music commercially. Radio stations broadcast this unique “old-time” sound around the country, creating a musical movement that paved the way for bluegrass and the folk-music era of the 1950’s and 60’s.³

In *The Folk Songs of North America*, Alan Lomax draws distinctions between the varying musical styles of the country’s regions, noting that the Northern region is characterized by a relatively more permissive and open voiced style, while the Southern

² Emma Bell Miles, *The Spirit of the Mountains* (Knoxville: Univ. of Tennessee Press, 1905), 170.

³ Bill C. Malone, “Music” in *High Mountains Rising: Appalachia in Time and Place* (Chicago: Univ. of Illinois Press, 2004), 114-132.

region is more “guilt ridden, pinched voiced, and violent.”⁴ Violence is indeed one of the most characteristic attributes of Southern music, particularly Southern mountain music, and is in large part the focus of this study. Stories of bloodshed, desperadoes, murders and betrayals populate the dark world of Appalachian ballad, adding to the frequently mournful, dangerous feel of mountain music. Of the many kinds of violence in Appalachian music, what has been called the “Cruel Ship’s Carpenter” theme – the girl murdered by her lover – is perhaps the most specific and codified.

The Murdered Girl ballad originated in the British-Isles with such traditional ballads as “Lady Isabel and the Elf-Knight” and “The Cruel Ship’s Carpenter.” These ballads were brought overseas by the Scots-Irish who settled the Appalachian region in the 1700’s and were gradually adapted to fit a more Americanized worldview and a uniquely Appalachian mode of experience. Out of this adaptation grew an unwritten yet standard model for the narrative components of a Murdered Girl ballad, which can be broken down as follows:

- 1) Woman loves man and man loves (or pretends to love) woman
- 2) Man leads woman on a walk or a ride into the wilderness
- 3) Man tells woman he is going to kill her
- 4) Woman begs for her life
- 5) Man murders woman by drowning, stabbing or clubbing
- 6) Man disposes of woman’s body and flees
- 7) Man is caught
- 8) Man confesses and is punished

While there is of course some variation from this model in every Murdered Girl ballad, a majority of the elements appear in every well-known variant. Exactly how and when the

⁴ Lomax, *Folk Songs*, xx.

model developed is not easy to pinpoint and is not the focus of this study, but as a rule many of the ballads began to follow the formula more and more closely as they were passed down through the generations over the course of the 19th century. One of the most important and popular Murdered Girl ballads in history, “Pretty Polly,” originated in the British Isles and erupted into dozens of variants in America, over time shedding important elements of its original story and evolving to fit the American Murdered Girl model.

One of the most important modifications to the “Cruel Ship’s Carpenter” theme in America was the addition of the true crime element. Many of the Murdered Girl ballads born in the Appalachian region were in fact based on true murders of women by their lovers, the most famous of which is probably “Naomi Wise” (or “Omie Wise,” “Oma Wise,” “Little Omie,” etc). Naomi Wise, an impoverished young woman living with an older benefactor in Randolph County, North Carolina, whose sweetheart John Lewis lured her to the banks of a river and drowned her in 1807.⁵ Other notable Murdered Girl ballads based on true murders include “Pearl Bryan” (Fort Thomas, KY, 1896), “Poor Ellen Smith” (Winston-Salem, NC, 1892), “Helen Flannery” (Peart Creek, KY, 1907), and “Lula Viers” (Auxier, KY, 1916) as well as ballads named for the murderer: “Tom Dula” (Elkville, NC, 1866), “Stephen G. Effler” (McDowell Co, NC, 1881) and “McAfee’s Confession” (Unknown, 1847).⁶ Many scholars have undertaken in-depth studies of these crimes; the Omie Wise story has been

⁵ Robert Thomas Roote, *“Naomi Wise”: The Story of a North Carolina Murder Ballad* (Raleigh: NC State Univ. Press, 1982).

⁶ “Pearl Bryan,” James Taylor Adams Collection; “Poor Ellen Smith,” James Taylor Adams Collection; “Helen Flannery,” G.R. Combs Collection; “Lula Viers,” Dowda, “Golden Curls,” 28-30; “Tom Dula,” James Taylor Adams Collection, “Stephen G. Effler,” James Taylor Adams; “McAfee’s Confession,” Katherine Jackson French Collection.

written about extensively, and the sensational love-triangle/sex-scandal involved in Tom Dula's murder of Laura Foster has inspired several books.⁷

Since my study is focused primarily on the literary and thematic components of the ballads rather than their factual origins, the details of these crimes will not be discussed at length. In fact, the details of the true crimes were almost always amended to fit the accepted Murdered Girl ballad formula, and ballads that left out the more "journalistic" details of the actual incident in favor of a more archetypal approach in fact achieved greater popularity, which I take as an indication that they more aptly reflected wider societal attitudes, values, and tensions at the time.⁸ But though the reality of woman-killing will not be addressed specifically in this study, the conclusions drawn about male aggression towards women as reflected in the ballads can just as easily be applied to an understanding of the real murders.

Much of the previous work done on Murdered Girl ballads has focused not on the social significance of the ballads but on a statistical assessment of the genre itself. Kermit Keith Cunningham, who made a great contribution to the field in his 1976 dissertation "A Study of the Southern Folk Song Style Area Sweetheart Murder Ballad: The Search for An Oicoclass," painstakingly analyzes the components of Southern Murdered Girl ballads to determine whether or not they can be said to legitimately constitute their own category in folk music, what he calls an "oicoclass." By breaking down each ballad in his study into the narrative components listed above and other major textual traits, assigning letters to each possible variable, and compiling aggregate data based on averages, Cunningham is able to mathematically compare the contents of Southern Murdered Girl ballads to other Southern Murder ballads and Northern ballads. In so doing, he determines that these ballads do

⁷ John Foster West, *Lift Up Your Head Tom Dooley* (Asheboro: Down Home Press, 1993), among others.

⁸ Cunningham, Keith Kermit, "A Study of the Southern Folk Song Style Area Sweetheart Murder Ballad" (PhD Diss., Indiana Univ., 1976), 62.

indeed constitute their own oicoclass and compiles useful at-a-glance statistics regarding the contents of individual ballads as well as their relationships to each other. What Cunningham does not do is present a well-developed analysis of the ballads' social role and their historical context. The one section of his study devoted to this purpose makes some generalized claims regarding Freudian psychology and repressed sexual desires in the Victorian era, but fails to present any analysis rooted in an in-depth understanding of the Appalachian region and is ultimately incomplete.

A master's thesis by Rus Dowda entitled "He Took Her by Her Golden Curls and Threwed Her Round and Round': Appalachian Women in the 19th Century and Their Image in the Murder Ballads of the Time" hits closer to the mark in terms of social analysis and historical context, addressing the Murdered Girl ballad with regards to the role of women in the 19th century Appalachian South.⁹ Dowda correctly describes the woman as being relegated to an inferior social position, forced to work long hours, and expected by society to be a bastion of piety and purity, but his conclusions about these roles in regards to the Murdered Girl ballad are questionable. Drawing upon the analysis of Alan Lomax, he sees the ballads as an "escape into exotic adventure" for the women, and the murders as "Calvinistic punishment" which they wrote in for themselves.¹⁰ Given the fact that many of these murders were real events committed by men in Appalachian society, placing the agency for the murder in the hands of the women makes little sense even from a literary standpoint. Although the role of the archetypal Southern mountain woman plays an extremely important role in the Murdered Girl ballad, it is folly to ignore the man's power and agency in

⁹ Rus Dowda, "He Took Her by Her Golden Curls and Threwed Her Round and Round' : Appalachian Women in the 19th Century and Their Image in the Murder Ballads of the Time" (Master's thesis, Berea College, 1978).

¹⁰ Ibid., 6.

committing the violent act itself. My study builds on the groundwork laid by Dowda's portrayal of women's roles at the time, adding an analysis of masculinity, the culture of violence, and evangelical Protestantism.

Before launching into the historical context of the Murdered Girl ballad and its social meaning, a note on sources. In collecting ballads to study, my approach was to cover as wide a range of the Southern Appalachian region as possible, including Southwestern Virginia, Northwestern North Carolina, Eastern Tennessee, and Southeastern Kentucky. In conducting my research I took trips to all of these states, visiting various archives and Universities including the Blue Ridge Heritage Archives, the Southern Folklore Collection at UNC Chapel Hill, several collections at Berea College, and others. Many of the ballads I found were collected in the 1930's and 1940's directly from people in the region who had heard them passed down from relatives, dictating the lyrics to collectors like James Taylor Adams.¹¹ While most of my ballads come from collections compiled by him and other individual collectors,¹² I also use variants published in music and folklore compendiums like the "Published Songbooks" section of the Appalachian Ballad and Folk Music Collection and the Frank C. Brown Collection of North Carolina Folklore.

Altogether I collected 71 Murdered Girl ballads ranging from the early 19th to the early 20th century. It is near impossible to pin exact dates on ballads that are not traceable to a true crime, because they were collected from people who learned them from relatives and do not know their origins. Even variants of true crime ballads are hard to place in time, since any popular ballad traveled far from its original birthplace and was constantly adapted and changed. Of the 71 ballads I collected, 13 have more than one variant. For instance, I have 6 variants of "Pretty Polly," 4 of "Naomi Wise" and 2 of "Freda Bolt." These numbers are of

¹¹ James Taylor Adams Collection, Blue Ridge Heritage Archives, Ferrum, VA.

¹² G.R. Combs; James Taylor Adams; John F. Smith; Katherine French.

course no indication of the actual number of variants in existence (any one ballad probably has hundreds), but I believe my collection gives me an adequate sampling.

An important point for clarification is the definition of the word “ballad” itself. By its strictest definition, “ballad” is intended to refer only to compositions that have no known author or exact origin, pieces that in the words of Greil Marcus and Sean Wilentz “emerged from the mist of the experience of country commoners.”¹³ By this definition, some of the pieces I analyze which do have a known origin and in some cases a known author may more rightfully be labeled “songs.” However, because of their archetypal structure and narrative style (and also for the sake of simplicity), I find it appropriate to apply the “ballad” label to the Murdered Girl genre as a whole.

Manhood and the Culture of Violence

It is obvious from even the briefest glance at any Murdered Girl ballad that the defining feature of the genre is violence. Not only does the Murdered Girl narrative revolve around a violent act (the murder of an innocent), but the lyrics of the ballads themselves are exceedingly gruesome. The men in the ballads frequently assault, torture and beat their sweethearts before the final act of murder, indicating not only a desire to dispatch of the woman but a sadistic pleasure in violence. Consider the following lyrics:

He whipped her and he beat her till she barely could stand,
And threw her in deep water just below the milldam.
- “Poor Oma Wise”¹⁴

I hated for to kill her, but I beat her all the more;
I beat her till her body lay a-bleedin’ in the gore.

¹³ Wilentz, Sean and Greil Marcus, ed, *The Rose and the Briar: Death, Love and Liberty in the American Ballad* (New York: W.W. Norton and Co., 2005), 4.

¹⁴ “Ballads and Rhymes from Kentucky,” Series 2: Published Songbooks, Box 1, Folder 1-2, 265. In The Appalachian Ballad and Folk Music Collection, Berea College Special Collections & Archives, Berea, KY.

- “The Wexford Girl”¹⁵

Why are the men in these narratives so extremely violent in committing their murders, and why are the violent details in the ballad lyrics so frank? The following section will explore the role of violence in the Southern Appalachians and the connection between Southern masculinity and aggression.

* * *

The South is and always has been a very violent region. This fact is almost universally accepted by historians and is based not only on general observations about the region and its culture but also on crime statistics and detailed psychological studies of Southerners and their attitudes. In Culture of Honor: The Psychology of Honor in the South, Richard E. Nisbett and Dov Cohen attest to this Southern predisposition towards violence with several compelling psychological studies, in which modern Southern men prove a tendency to react with more aggression than their Northern counterparts to perceived insults and threats.¹⁶ The Southern Appalachian region is perhaps historically even more violent than the rest of the South; according to one account, a particular region in the Cumberland Mountains boasted a homicide rate of 130 per 100,000 between 1865 and 1915 – more than ten times today’s national homicide rate and twice as high as that of our most violent cities.¹⁷

Where does this violent Southern Appalachian impulse originate? Historians have proposed several theories for the aggressive tendencies of the region, including its frontier heritage, its hot climate, the isolation and hard work of rural life, and so on.¹⁸ Richard Nisbett and Dov Cohen propose that the violent tendencies in the Appalachian South can

¹⁵ James Taylor Adams Collection #8868, Blue Ridge Heritage Archives, Ferrum, VA.

¹⁶ Richard E. Nisbett and Dov Cohen, *Culture of Honor: The Psychology of Honor in the South* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1996), 41-55.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 1.

¹⁸ Ted Ownby, *Subduing Satan: Religion, Recreation and Manhood in the Rural South, 1865-1920* (Chapel Hill: Univ. of NC Press, 1990), 15.

actually be traced to the herding economy brought into the region by Scots-Irish settlers in the 18th century, arguing that the economic precariousness inherent to a lifestyle dependent on highly vulnerable herds led to a stance of aggressiveness and willingness to kill in order to protect one's animals at all costs.¹⁹ The mountainous terrain of the Appalachian region and its unsuitableness for traditional agriculture reinforced this herding lifestyle and concurrent attitudes, which Nisbett and Cohen call a "culture of honor." According to legal historian Edward Ayers, the culture of honor can be defined as "a system of values within which you have exactly as much worth as other confer upon you."²⁰ The typical Appalachian man held his reputation in very high esteem, and any perceived blow to a man's honor was seen as appropriate grounds for violence – as a means of punishing the affront as well as regaining the honor that had been called into question.²¹

The bloody tendencies of the Southern Appalachian region were only exacerbated by the coming of the Civil War. Due to its border location between the North and the South, the Appalachian region suffered highly divided loyalties and was dominated by vicious conflict between neighbors – a true Civil War. A general lawlessness settled upon the area during the war, as guerilla factions and bushwhackers pillaged, robbed and killed across the borderline.²² In the region, which Richard Drake calls "an area in part seceded from secession," authority was all but lost and violence became a standard means of achieving goals and defending oneself.²³ Due to the isolation of mountain communities, law and order were slow to return to the region after the war and much of this vicious guerilla violence continued into the 1870's. According to many historians, the violence of the war and its

¹⁹ Nisbett, *Culture of Honor*, 5.

²⁰ Ownby, *Subduing Satan*, 13.

²¹ Nisbett and Cohen, *Culture of Honor*, 2.

²² William Montell, *Killings: Folk Justice in the Upper South* (Lexington: Univ. Press of Kentucky, 1986), 9.

²³ Richard B. Drake, *A History of Appalachia* (Lexington: Univ. Press of Kentucky, 2001), 104.

extremely personal bloodshed left an indelible mark on the Southern Appalachian consciousness. James Watt Raine, who visited and studied the region at the turn of the century, writes, “Their minds were saturated with bloodshed, and they were cursed with the greatest evil of Civil War, the poison of individual and personal hatred, not against unreal or remote creatures of romance, but against neighbors.”²⁴ Rus Dowda points out that many of the bloodier Murdered Girl ballads began to appear in the 1880’s and 1890’s, during the coming-of-age of men who were children during the war.²⁵

Whatever the myriad causes for the Southern culture of violence may be, it is clear that aggression and violence played an extremely important role in Southern Appalachian society, particularly with regards to manhood and masculinity. A passion for physical activity and the constant need to assert honor and status combined to form a masculine culture defined by rough, colorful, active endeavors.²⁶ The Southern male loved to drink, fight, gamble and swear; he sought release through activities that involved aggression, recklessness, and the expression of masculinity through danger. More often than not, these pastimes involved a great deal of violence. Nisbett and Cohen describe a favorite activity among frontiersmen known as “fighting with no holds barred,” a gruesome sport characterized by the gouging out of eyes, loss of extremities, and the general aim of inflicting as much damage upon one’s opponent as humanly possible.²⁷ In his firsthand account of 19th century life in the Appalachian mountains, John C. Campbell describes roving gangs of young men who wandered the countryside “damaging individuals and objects that meet with their disfavor,”

²⁴ James Watt Raine, *The Land of the Saddle-Bags: A Study of the Mountain People of Appalachia*. (New York: Council of Women for Home Missions, 1924), 138.

²⁵ Dowda, “Golden Curls,” 9.

²⁶ Ownby, *Subduing Satan*, 13.

²⁷ Nisbett and Cohen, *Culture of Honor*, 1.

burning property, and robbing orchards in expression of their “lawless independence.”²⁸ The adult Southern Appalachian male was no different; he craved excitement, and excitement involved violence. “To stand on his head in a bar, to toss down a pint of raw whiskey in a gulp, to fiddle and dance all night, to bite off the nose or gouge out the eye of a favorite enemy, to fight harder and love harder than the next man, to be known eventually far and wide as a hell of a fellow—such would be his focus,” writes W.J. Cash.²⁹ Carrying a gun was a must for the Appalachian mountain man, and men took great pleasure in shooting; the “wanton firing of pistols” suggested lawlessness, independence, lack of self-control and a quick temper, all attributes that were expected of and celebrated by the Southern male.³⁰

This masculine endorsement of violence and honor naturally led to a highly increased rate of killing in the region. William Montell describes the combination of “a boost from three or four big swigs of moonshine whiskey” with “the feel of gunmetal in their hip pockets” as a guarantee that any confrontation among Southern men could easily lead to shooting, and frequently killing.³¹ In the Southern Appalachian region, attitudes towards violence were governed by a community code that actually accepted killing as a means of settling disputes, given the right precipitating factors. If the killing was considered justified – for instance, if a man shot another man in defense of his own honor – the matter was usually settled quickly and the killer was accepted back into the community.³² Alan Lomax quotes a North Carolina man whose attitudes towards killing as a means of settling disputes reflects these values:

²⁸ John C. Campbell, *The Southern Highlander and His Homeland*. (Lexington: Univ. of Kentucky Press, 1921), 125.

²⁹ Ownby, *Subduing Satan*, 1.

³⁰ Ownby, *Subduing Satan*, 46.

³¹ Montell, *Killings*, 147.

³² *Ibid.*, 152.

Talkin' bout killin' people, there ain't nothin' to it. I don't see what a man worry his self bout a trial for. If I has enough 'gainst a man, I'd set on the roadside one night an' pick him off jes' like I would a bird. There ain't nothin' to it. If they ketch you and you use your head a little bit an know what lawyer to git, you'll come clear...³³

Southern Appalachian residents learned from an early age to view homicide as a societal tool, and came to accept the possibility that at some point in their lives, a member of their own family might be involved in a killing as either perpetrator or victim.³⁴

This frank acceptance of violence as a fact of life and killing as an acceptable social tool explains why the lyrics of many Murdered Girl ballads were so explicit. The people in the Southern Appalachians were simply not shocked by violence, and so the gruesome details in the ballads were not as sensational to people in that region as elsewhere. The question of why men felt such a need to violently lash out against women, however, is a more complicated one and will be addressed in the following section.

Saints and Sinners: Appalachian Gender Roles

Many Appalachian folk songs celebrate masculinity and violence – consider the archetypal Desperado ballad, for instance, which tells of fighters, outlaws, and other male heroes who exude honor and status through their violent deeds. On the surface, it may appear that the violence in Murdered Girl ballads is, like the violence in Desperado ballads, a simple illustration of violent male Appalachian culture. But the Murdered Girl ballad is not a celebration of killing. In fact, the murder of a woman was one of the few kinds of killing that was *not* socially acceptable. What then, is indicated by male violence toward women? The great preponderance of these ballads indicate that the man's murder of his sweetheart has to

³³ Lomax, *Folk Songs*, 261.

³⁴ Montell, *Killings*, 162.

do with much more than just a lover's squabble; rather, it is rooted in deeply ingrained gender conflict resulting from the opposing societal expectations of men and women. While men were expected to be violent, aggressive and generally engage in "sinful" activities in order to achieve masculinity, women were expected to be the "Saints" of society, remaining pure, pious, innocent and self-sacrificing in the face of whatever hardship befell them. Naturally, then, the two genders were frequently at odds with each other. To the Southern male, woman represented exactly the thing that masculine culture encouraged him rebel against: purity and restraint. The murder of the woman, then, is a symbolic enactment of male resistance to piety and conformity. This section explores the complex relationship between men and women in Appalachian society, traditional assumptions about female piety, and the role of the woman in a male-dominated world.

* * *

Women in the Southern Appalachians led hard lives. Before daylight, a typical Appalachian woman would have already risen, chopped wood, cooked breakfast and milked the cow. In the late morning she would go out and tend to the garden, feed the chickens and hogs, and hoe corn until evening, taking a break around midday to cook another meal for the family. At dinner time she would cook again, wash some laundry, clean the dishes, perhaps can some vegetables, do the mending and sewing, and milk the cow again; all the while tending to at least five or six children, several of whom were infants. In the words of James Watt Raine, who witnessed Appalachian life firsthand, "She works a 16 hour day, scarcely gets one baby weaned before the next arrives, and for wages gets a home, the blessings of copious motherhood, and the privilege of wearing her husband's name on her tombstone, which, with all her endurance, is sometimes settled upon her before she is 30."³⁵

³⁵ Raine, *Saddle-Bags*, 90.

Many poor rural Appalachian women never held a dollar in their hands or ventured more than a few miles from the place they were born.³⁶ Expected to attend to duties within the home as well as many duties outside it – hoeing, tending livestock, and bartering at market – the Appalachian woman was frequently given to more lengthy and arduous labor than the man.

Perhaps as a result of their laborious lifestyle and low life expectancy, Appalachian women learned to view the world with a certain degree of fatalism. Emma Bell Miles, a visiting schoolteacher to the region in the early 20th century and a unique source of insight into the lives of women at the time, writes of the Appalachian woman’s nobility in the belief that nothing can happen which has not happened before and her courage in the face of hardship:

Is it sickness? How many have lain in agony unto death on her old four-poster bed!
Has her husband ill-treated her? She can endure without answering back. She has
heard her elders tell of so many young husbands! Her dead babe? So many born here
have slept and laughed for a time beside that hearth and dropped from the current of
life!³⁷

Mandel Sherman and Thomas R. Henry, male visitors to the region around the same time, take a much more negative view of the Appalachian woman’s tendency to accept suffering. They react with particular disdain to her willingness to bear so many children, sometimes up to a dozen or more, and the common notion among women that any woman’s “number” is predetermined and unavoidable. “Dumbly, without reason, these women accept motherhood,” they write.³⁸ This deprecating view towards women only betrays common male attitudes at the time, which devalued their work and looked upon childrearing and other “womanly” pursuits as equally mysterious and repellant.

³⁶ Ibid., 11.

³⁷ Miles, *Spirit of the Mountains*, 67.

³⁸ Sherman, Mandel and Thomas R. Henry, *Hollow Folk* (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Company, 1933), 25.

Self-sacrifice was expected of women, and bore heavily on both male conceptions of womanhood and women's understanding of themselves. First and foremost, the woman was expected to sacrifice her own interests for those of her husband and children. In discussing the role of honor in the South, Bertram Wyatt-Brown argues that men were not the only ones held to codes of bravery and valor; women were expected to behave with just as much honor as men, though theirs came in the form of social acceptance of fate.³⁹ The man's ambition and recklessness led him to make countless impositions on his wife, draining the strength of what Emma Bell Miles calls his "silent, wingless mate."⁴⁰ Woman's lot in life was inevitably that of service to men, and she often had no choice but to accept this role. Sometimes it was even welcomed; Nanny Williams, a young Southern woman, gushed into her diary upon her 1869 engagement that she now had "a purpose in life, something to live for – something that God has made woman to be, a comforter."⁴¹ Maternity, domesticity, and self-sacrifice were the primary attributes expected of women, all of which were designed to serve male interests. Although the labor and hardship inherent in the lives of mountain women required them to be both physically and emotionally tough, society expected them to be gentle, pleasant and soft. Even Emma Bell Miles paints the Appalachian woman in idealized rosy colors, writing "Gentleness and simplicity are characteristic of the faces of mountain girls."⁴²

All of these social attitudes towards the role and behavior of the "ideal" Southern mountain woman are reflected in the Murdered Girl ballad. One of the first things we learn about the woman is how pure and innocent she is:

³⁹ Wyatt-Brown, Bertram, *Southern Honor: Ethics and Behavior in the Old South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982), 234.

⁴⁰ Miles, *Spirit of the Mountain*, 70.

⁴¹ Ownby, *Subduing Satan*, 7.

⁴² Miles, *Spirit of the Mountains*, 47.

Her life was pure as heaven,
 Her heart was free from care.
 She dreamed of love and romance,
 With heart so glad and free,
 No doom was in the future
 Young Freeda Bolt could see.
 - "Freeda Bolt"⁴³

Her youthful heart no sorrow knew,
 She fancied all mankind was true.
 And thus she gaily passed along,
 Humming at times a favorite song.
 - "Tom Dula"⁴⁴

In addition to being pure and innocent, women were also discouraged from expressing the kind of strong emotion that governed the male world. "She cannot give utterance to her passions like a man," commanded T.R. Dew of William and Mary College. She must "suppress the most violent feelings" and show a "contentment and ease which may impose upon an inquisitive and scrutinizing world."⁴⁵ Women were expected to be constantly levelheaded, calm and composed, and any violation of these norms was considered taboo if not flat-out sinful. These societal ideals are reflected in the Murdered Girl ballad, in which the woman remains demure, polite and calm even in death. She never gives in to extremes of emotion; even in pleading for her life she remains sweet and composed, kneeling on bended knee and calmly asking her lover to spare her because she is so innocent:

Oh do you mean it, Johnny?
 It surely could not be.
 How could you bear to murder
 A helpless girl like me?
 - "John Collier"⁴⁶

⁴³ James Taylor Adams Collection, #8874.

⁴⁴ Belden, Henry M. and Arthur Palmer Hudson, ed. *Folk Ballads from North Carolina*. Vol 1 *The Frank C. Brown Collection of North Carolina Folklore*. (Durham: Duke University Press, 1952), 709.

⁴⁵ Wyatt-Brown, *Southern Honor*, 231.

⁴⁶ James Taylor Adams Collection, #8370.

She threw her arms around his neck,
 Saying "I am in no fear,
 How can you kill a poor girl
 That loves you so dear?"
 - "Pretty Polly" ⁴⁷

And when her pleas are ignored, she does not struggle, flee or resist in any way. She accepts her death with typical Appalachian fatalism, fulfilling her role as an eternal servant by sacrificing herself to the beast in man. In an article published in Greensboro, NC in 1925, J.W. Cannon summarizes the archetypal role of the murdered girl in the ballad "Naomi Wise": "The spirit of Naomi Wise is the tragic muse of Randolph County... Most of the people list her among the saints and let her stand for all that was pure and holy in womanhood sacrificed to the beast in man."⁴⁸

The male "beast" learns early in life that this kind of self-sacrifice in service of his desires is exactly what women are made for. From babyhood, writes John C. Campbell, the male child is the Lord of all he surveys. "There is a dignity, a conscious superiority, that says more clearly than spoken words that womankind are not his equals."⁴⁹ The boy sits at the table while his mother and sisters stand to serve him, learning that woman has been placed on earth to please him and do his bidding. These attitudes, sown early in life, taught the Appalachian man to treat his wife with indifference at best and contempt at worst. Inferior treatment of women was present in all aspects of life, but the example of childbirth gives special insight into these attitudes. Several authors give firsthand accounts of the man's behavior while his wife is in labor: Mandel Sherman and Thomas R. Henry observed one man who refused to leave the warmth of the cabin to call a doctor for his wife, and another

⁴⁷ "Ballads and Rhymes from Kentucky," Series 2: Published Songbooks, Box 1, Folder 1-2, 262.

⁴⁸ Robert Thomas Roote, *"Naomi, Wise": A Study of a North Carolina Murder Ballad* (Raleigh: North Carolina State Univ. Press, 1982), 3.

⁴⁹ Campbell, *Southern Highlander*, 124.

who did call a doctor but viewed the behavior as “an almost unprecedented concession to the whims of a woman.”⁵⁰ Emma Bell Miles tartly reports the disgusted male attitude towards childbirth and other “womanly” affairs: “I should have known that the first bond established between the primitive mother and her baby is that of being temporarily repulsive to their lord and master.”⁵¹

These kinds of attitudes about gender led to a serious rift between the sexes, which was quite paradoxical given their dependence on each other. Although the Appalachian man depended on his wife to feed him, make his clothes, raise his children and grow his crops, to admit this dependence would undermine his own masculine authority and violate his assumptions about women’s fragile inferiority. And although the Appalachian woman depended on her husband to hunt and defend the homestead (note the difference in the length of the lists), restrictive social expectations regarding her behavior made it difficult to communicate with him about her needs and desires. Though a man and woman may be married for 20 years, they still “must needs regard each other wonderingly, with a prejudice that takes the form of a mild, half-amused contempt for one another’s opinions and desires,” writes Emma Bell Miles. “The pathos of the situation is none the less terrible because unconscious. They are so silent. They know so pathetically little of each other’s lives.”⁵²

The rift between Appalachian men and women was embodied in the different worlds they inhabited. The woman’s realm was the home, while the man associated himself with the outdoors and the wild freedom it represented. Although the man came inside the house to eat and sleep, he was much more comfortable out in the wild, asserting what he considered to be his pioneering spirit and heroic restlessness. Emma Bell Miles depicts this

⁵⁰ Sherman and Henry, *Hollow Folk*, 21.

⁵¹ Miles, *Spirit of the Mountains*, 63.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 70.

rugged masculine attitude toward the outdoors with an air of irony: “Heartily, then, he conquers his chosen bit of wilderness, and heartily begets and rules his tribe... Let the woman’s part be to preserve tradition, his are the adventures of which future ballads will be sung.”⁵³ The man roamed the wilderness with his gun, an item itself endowed with masculinity: “Once the boy could shoulder his own gun he was emancipated from the dominion of women and free to spend his days tramping through the woods,” write Mandel Sherman and Thomas R. Henry. But while the man was free to roam, the woman was very much shut in. Tied closely to the homestead by her children and her many duties raising the crop and raising the animals, the Appalachian woman’s world revolved around a more interior space. Despite their ultimate dependence on each other, the sexes did, to a large degree, live separate lives.

This divide between interior and exterior space – the home versus the outdoors – ultimately came to take on a socially and religiously charged meaning. With the wave of revivalism sweeping the region during the early 19th century came a new social alignment portraying the home as a sacred place, the seat of safety and morality, outside of which individuals were exposed to temptation and sinfulness.⁵⁴ Drinking, fighting, gambling and other male activities all took place far from the peace and harmony of the home, and so this exterior space took on new meaning as the nexus of hot-blooded masculinity and sinfulness.

These societal distinctions between sin and righteousness also applied to the genders themselves; while women were regarded as pure, good and pious, men were seen as sinners lacking self-control. Men were generally considered to be somewhat bestial, both in their lack of morals and their ferocious energy. “His strong teeth flashed, his eyes gleamed as he talked,” writes Emma Bell Miles of a young Appalachian man. “He was simply a young

⁵³ Ibid., 68.

⁵⁴ Ownby, *Subduing Satan*, 14.

savage with an overabundance of energy.”⁵⁵ The sins condemned by evangelical religion – passion, desire, and violence – were almost entirely rooted in the male realm, leading to a general conception of men as more sinful than women. This distinction is especially evident in church disciplinary records between 1866 and 1915, in which men were charged with moral offenses five times more frequently than women. All of these offenses had to do with violations of the sacred nature of the home and family and involved masculine aggressiveness – drinking, fighting, and so on.⁵⁶

Just as Murdered Girl ballads reflect the woman’s social role as a pure, constant bastion of righteousness, they also portray the man in accordance with social attitudes towards masculine sin. The men in the ballads frequently attest to their own sinfulness, often in remorse for their awful murders:

I was thoughtless, young and gay,
And often broke the Sabbath day.
In wickedness I took delight,
And often done what was not right.
- “McAfee’s Confession”⁵⁷

But Satan’s temptation ruling over me
Caused me to murder
That fair young lady
Whose name is Rose Conilee.
- “Rose Conilee”⁵⁸

And sometimes the man’s expression of his own sinfulness take the form of a kind of perverse pride:

I’ve lived my life of sin,
I’ve had a bit of fun;
Come Ann, kiss me goodbye

⁵⁵ Miles, *Spirit of the Mountains*, 59.

⁵⁶ Ownby, *Subduing Satan*, 134.

⁵⁷ Cunningham, *Oicoclass*, 211-213.

⁵⁸ John F. Smith Traditional Music Collection, 1915-1940, Box 2, Folder 2-5 "Ballads and Song Texts R," Southern Appalachian Archives, Berea College Special Collections & Archives, Berea College, Berea, KY.

My race is nearly run.
- “Tom Dula’s Lament”⁵⁹

Social divides between men and women based on religiously charged conceptions of gender extended to several societal institutions as well – most notably family and marriage, which were grouped together with the home as feminine, religious conventions. Marriage, in itself a religious institution, came to be used as a tool by women in attempting to convert men from their sinful ways. Although the self-sacrifice that was expected of women often led to hardship and suffering, it was also seen as a formidable weapon in its use as an example to men. Writing in her 1835 diary, North Carolinian Anne Turner expressed the hope that her newly married daughter would be such a submissive, charitable, and self-sacrificing wife as to induce her husband to “flee to the only sure refuge” of God.⁶⁰ Women, assumed to possess greater spiritual capacity than men, took their religious responsibilities seriously and worked hard to build marriages grounded in piety and submission to God.⁶¹

Men, deeply attached to opposing violent and “sinful” masculine institutions like fighting, drinking and gambling, rebelled against piety and control, viewing marriage as a threat to manhood and independence. Male resistance to perceived religious and feminine dominion through marriage is especially evident in the Murdered Girl ballads, in which the murder is *almost always* connected to the idea of matrimony. It is perhaps the one narrative element of the model, besides the killing itself, which appears in almost every ballad. The man typically leads the girl into the wilderness on the pretense of discussing their wedding plans:

⁵⁹ Cunningham, *Oicoclass*, 200.

⁶⁰ Jean E. Friedman, *The Enclosed Garden: Women and Community in the Evangelical South, 1830-1900* (Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 1985), 34.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 35.

I asked her to take a walk down to the meadow shade,
Till we could plan our future wedding day.
- "The Knoxville Girl"⁶²

He says, "My dear let us wander
Down by the meadows gay;
While wandering we will ponder
And name our wedding day."
- "Pearl Bryan"⁶³

Said he, "Loved One, let's wander
O'er meadows dark and drear,
None will disturb nor hinder;
We'll name our wedding day."
- "Flora Ella"⁶⁴

Rose Connaley loved me
As she loved her very life,
And I have often told her
I'd make her my lawful wife.
- "The Willow Garden"⁶⁵

These lyrics indicate that the man is feeling unwanted pressure from the relationship and from society to consummate the relationship in marriage; he uses the "wedding discussion" as a ruse to lead the girl away from the homestead and end this threat through murder. Peter DeGraff, the murderer and narrator in "Poor Ellen Smith," sums it up nicely:

I didn't intend to marry her
Or to make her my wife,
But loved her so dearly
To take her sweet life.
- "Poor Ellen Smith"⁶⁶

Some ballad scholars have argued that the murder is related not only to the threat of marriage, but also the fact that the woman is pregnant. Hardly any of the American variants

⁶² James Taylor Adams Collection, #9161.

⁶³ Ibid., #8637

⁶⁴ John F. Smith Collection, Box 1, Folder 5-I, 1-6 "Ballads and Song Texts F."

⁶⁵ James Taylor Adams Collection, #8895.

⁶⁶ Belden, Henry M. and Arthur Palmer Hudson, ed. *Folk Ballads from North Carolina*. Vol 1 *The Frank C. Brown Collection of North Carolina Folklore*. (Durham: Duke University Press, 1952), 715.

of the Murdered Girl ballad mention this fact explicitly, which make it hard to substantiate. But many early British Murdered Girl ballads, like “Jellon Grame,” do reference illegitimate pregnancy as the motive for the murder:

If I should spare your life, he said,
 Until your child be borned,
 I know your cruel father would
 Have me hanged by morn.
 - “Jellon Grame”⁶⁷

Such frank references to pregnancy out of wedlock do not generally appear in American Murdered Girl ballads, and some scholars believe this is due to American taboos about sex. Yet scholars such as Keith Cunningham argue that the idea of illegitimate pregnancy is still present between the lines, and that the “walk to talk of marriage” could be understood as a reference to previous sexual activity. (Cunningham 80) Either way, the motive for the man’s murder of his sweetheart is obviously rooted in a desire to escape what he considers the “female dominion” of commitment, marriage and home life. Further evidence of this rejection of home-centered values can be found in the fact the murder always takes place outdoors; the man always leads the woman “out in the woods so cool”⁶⁸ or “o’er meadows dark and drear,”⁶⁹ frequently taking her to a secluded spot in the woods to do the deed and disposing of her body in a river. The man rejects the home and asserts his freedom and independence by leading the woman into that dangerous masculine realm, the wilderness.

All of these narrative components serve first and foremost to reflect traditional Appalachian gender stereotypes of the trusting, gentle, pious female and the sinful, violent male. The woman is killed because she makes the mistake of trusting the man; her innocence

⁶⁷ Dowda, “Golden Curls,” 19.

⁶⁸ Belden, Henry M. and Arthur Palmer Hudson, ed. *Folk Ballads from North Carolina*. Vol 1 *The Frank C. Brown Collection of North Carolina Folklore*. (Durham: Duke University Press, 1952), 580.

⁶⁹ John F. Smith Collection, Box 1, Folder 5-I, 1-6 "Ballads and Song Texts F."

is no match for his wickedness. The Murdered Girl ballad draws heavily on the theme of the trusting young woman led astray by the lies of a villainous man:

Yes she loved him very dearly,
 For he was both young and gay,
 And in him she firmly trusted,
 And by him she was led astray.
 - "Pearl Bryan" ⁷⁰

They said she had a lover
 John Lewis was his name
 Each evening he would have her by his side
 She learned to love and trust him
 And she believed his word
 He told her she was soon to be his bride.
 - "Naomi Wise" ⁷¹

The Murdered Girl ballad presents a view of gender by which the woman is always an innocent, trusting lamb and the man is a savage, deceitful wolf. But while many of these attitudes toward gender were well-founded, especially as evidenced by the masculine culture of violence so dominant in the region, life and gender roles were not always so simple as the ballads imply. The fact that so many of the ballads were based on true crimes that can be studied and analyzed gives us an intriguing insight into the reality of male/female relationships in the 19th century Appalachian South. On one hand, the very fact that so many men were murdering their female lovers corroborates the truth of male violence and aggression; however, the details of the crimes make it clear that the archetypal Murdered Girl ballad does not tell the whole story. The various true crimes that inspired the ballads were invariably adapted to fit the accepted Murdered Girl model, and were always modified to tell the story that most reflected accepted social norms. Consider the following lyrics from "The Murder of Laura Foster:"

⁷⁰ John F. Smith Collection, Box 2, Folder 2-4 "Ballads and Song Texts P."

⁷¹ James Taylor Adams Collection, #8572.

When soon she thought a bride to be,
 Which filled her heart with ecstasy,
 Her youthful heart no sorrow knew
 She fancied all mankind were true.
 - “The Murder of Laura Foster”⁷²

This particular variant of the ballad goes on and on about Laura’s purity, goodness and innocence, fitting her perfectly into the traditional female role as pious saint. But when the ballad is compared to the actual crime, an entirely different picture emerges. Laura Foster was in fact a young woman “of shaded reputation” who was involved in a love triangle between Tom Dula and her own cousin Ann Foster Melton. After a summer visit from another cousin, Pauline, all three of them discovered that they had “the pock” – syphilis. As the story goes, Tom murdered Laura either out of misplaced anger about his contraction of syphilis, or out of a general desire to get rid of her in order to take up more fully with Ann – who, by most accounts, helped him murder her.⁷³ Thus, Laura Foster was not the pious, trusting young girl the ballad makes her out to be, but rather, in lay terms, a promiscuous woman with venereal disease. It is also interesting to note the omission of Ann Melton’s involvement in the murder – a woman murderer does not fit well into society’s morally ordered gender roles. The only person in the story who largely remains the same in the ballads as in life is Tom Dula, the murderer, whose womanizing, violent behaviors perfectly fit the stereotype of the sinful, aggressive male. Other true crimes were also modified to fit the Murdered Girl model, for the ballads which most truly followed the formula were able to achieve greater popularity and social acceptance than the ones which included too many journalistic details. “Lula Viers,” which had “every mark of journalistic report in ballad form,” received only limited distribution while “Pearl Bryan” and “Poor Omie,” both true

⁷² James Taylor Adams Collection, #8548.

⁷³ West, *Tom Dooley*, ix.

crimes modified to reflect societal expectations regarding the Murdered Girl narrative, achieved wide popularity.⁷⁴

The Murdered Girl ballad model evolved over the course of the 19th century primarily as a reflection of accepted societal definitions of gender. In the traditional Murdered Girl narrative, a sweet, innocent young woman is led into the wilderness by a sinful, voracious man who resists her efforts to tame him through the feminine tool of marriage, asserting the finality of his independence through the masculine tool of violence. Although in reality both genders played much more complex social roles than the ballads suggests, the very fact that this narrative emerged and achieved such widespread success points to the fact that there was something fundamentally true about it. The gendered conflict in the Murdered Girl ballad speaks deeply to the social tensions that ran prevalent in 19th century Appalachia, as both men and women worked to understand and define their roles in a society characterized by isolation and hardship.

Evangelism and Revival Culture

At the same time that the Appalachian male felt his masculinity under siege by the feminine institutions of home, family and marriage, he was encountering even stronger opposition to his violent behavior from the church. In fact, the reason the woman posed such a threat to male culture was because she was endowed with the power of evangelical Christianity, which allied itself with the same values typically attributed to women – purity, righteousness, and so on. With the growth of revivalism in the 19th century, religion played an increasingly strong role in Appalachian life and men found their rugged, aggressive ways of life continuously under attack. The church’s community-oriented approach made it

⁷⁴ Cunningham, “Oicoclass,” 62.

difficult for men to avoid being swept up in the evangelical tide, which often created within them a genuine desire to behave well and renounce their sinful ways. Murdered Girl ballads often reflect this inner conflict between rebellion and submission to the church, most notably at the end of the narrative when the man confesses his crimes and repents, occasionally even asking God for forgiveness. But before investigating the precise interplay between masculinity and evangelism within the ballads, it is important to understand the background of evangelical Protestantism in the Southern Appalachian region and its role in society at the time.

* * *

When the Scots-Irish poured down from Pennsylvania into the less populated Appalachian region in the 1700's, they brought with them a form of Calvinist Presbyterianism that defined Appalachian culture and religion for centuries to come. Religious scholar Loyal Jones writes that the inhabitants of the Southern Appalachians are perhaps the most traditionally Calvinist of any people.⁷⁵ Presbyterianism and related branches of Christianity follow the scheme of salvation originally laid out by Paul, and later by Luther and Calvin in an attempt to escape the sacramental obedience which they believed had obscured faith as the sole causal condition of salvation. This Pauline doctrine, which defines evangelical Christianity, argues that humans are born sinful and undeserving of God's grace, and can only achieve salvation through the selective gift of God's love.⁷⁶ Scottish and Irish Presbyterians became perfect exemplars of this hard, reformed faith, and brought it with them to America.

⁷⁵ Drake, *A History*, 130.

⁷⁶ Paul Conkin, *Cane Ridge: America's Pentecost* (Madison: Univ. of Wisconsin Press, 1990), 10.

Over the course of the early 19th century, however, Presbyterianism itself gradually lost ground in the Appalachian region in large part due to its insistence upon an educated ministry, which was simply not a possibility in the isolated mountain communities. According to W.D. Weatherford, Presbyterianism was also at a disadvantage because it could not adjust to “the primitive life and pioneering spirit found in the wilderness.”⁷⁷ With the decline of Presbyterianism came the rise of the Methodist and Baptist denominations, which gained particular popularity during the Second Great Awakening between 1800 and 1820. The Cane Ridge Pentecostal Meeting, an enormous camp meeting in Cane Ridge, KY in 1801, sparked a revival culture that dominated the Appalachian region throughout the 1800’s.⁷⁸ These religious tent revivals, essentially week-long festivals celebrating the church-centered values of evangelical culture, were extremely important events that put religion at the center of Southern Appalachian culture. The growth of evangelicalism led to a powerful integration of sociology and theology, serving to define everyday life in terms of sin and salvation.⁷⁹

Revival meetings in the Appalachian South were much more than just religious gatherings, however. Characterized by intense emotional expression, hellfire-and-damnation preaching, and electric conversion experiences, evangelical revivals were understood by their participants as staging grounds for the very battle between good and evil. Due to their size and lively atmosphere, revivals frequently drew not only devout believers but also the morally questionable element of society, who lingered on the fringes of the proceedings – sometimes joining in, but more often drinking, dancing and gambling in the shadows. The excitement of the camp meeting was, to some extent, the excitement of danger. How many

⁷⁷ W.D. Weatherford, ed., *Religion in the Appalachian Mountains: A Symposium* (Berea: Berea College, 1955), 32.

⁷⁸ Conkin, *Cane Ridge*, 4.

⁷⁹ Friedman, *Enclosed Garden*, 7.

would hear the call of the Lord? Would the sinners be converted? And which would ultimately prevail, good or evil? ⁸⁰ In his description of the Cane Ridge revival, Peter Conkin writes that the people of Kentucky believed that they had attended “an unusually dramatic confrontation between God and Satan,” and were forced by the powerfully suggestive revival atmosphere to “reenact the drama of Jesus’s passion and the ever-recurring drama of their own tortured quest for salvation.” ⁸¹ Peter Cartwright, an 18th century Methodist preacher and a penitent at Cane Ridge, describes the conversion experience in similarly violent terms: “Hundreds fell prostrate under the mighty power of God, as men slain in battle.” ⁸²

W.J. Cash argues that the intensity of male culture and evangelical culture in the South were in fact related, stemming from the same passion for excitement and sensory experience. ⁸³ Revivals were characterized by extreme emotional expression, with both preachers and congregants frequently giving over to shouting, crying, and uncontrollable physical convulsions known as “the jerks” – a socially acceptable parallel, perhaps, to the brawling, swearing and gun-shooting of the male world. “The opposites of aggressive, fun loving male impulses and a deep evangelical piety worked to intensify each other,” writes Ted Ownby, whose book *Subduing Satan* explores the conflict between Southern evangelism and male recreation. “If some Southerners raised hell to dramatic heights, others felt a special need to bring heaven down to earth on a very personal level.” ⁸⁴ The tent revivals of the 18th century were riotous, emotional affairs, which achieved such great popularity in the Appalachian South precisely because of their intensity. Evangelism in the

⁸⁰ Friedman, *Enclosed Garden*, 4.

⁸¹ Conkin, *Cane Ridge*, 101-104.

⁸² Peter Cartwright, *Autobiography of Peter Cartwright* (New York: Abingdon Press, 1956), 34.

⁸³ Ownby, *Subduing Satan*, 14.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 1.

region was primitive and visceral, speaking to something deep within the passionate, violent nature of the Appalachian people.

Yet despite their shared intensity, Appalachian religion was hotly opposed to the excesses of male culture. The culture of honor and masculinity, which called for rugged, competitive, violent behavior that violated evangelical norms, was viewed as a threat to God-fearing society and sparked a strong desire on the part of evangelical moralists to convert male sinners.⁸⁵ The traditional Southern male, with his violent outbursts and reckless ways, was seen as a savage beast that needed to be dragged up from the mud of sin into the civilizing light of God. A Methodist sermon in 1890 summarized the Church's position on the matter: "It is wonderful to see a great burly man, mostly animal, who has lived under the dominion of his lower nature and given rein to his natural tendencies, when he is born of God and begins to grow in an upward and better direction..."⁸⁶ The church worked to restrain expressions of masculinity and convert sinners to God, using tent revivals and community pressure to influence wild men to repent. At times of revival, efforts to reform and convert were strengthened and already rigorous moral standards were tightened. Men, understandably, received the brunt of this reform effort.

The intensity of the evangelical movement in the region endowed it with enormous social power, such that it truly dominated the worldview of most Southern Appalachianers. It was almost impossible to find a person in the region who did not consider himself religious; after all, evangelical Protestantism offered the only societal means of understanding the world and humankind's place in it.⁸⁷ In addition, religion played an extremely important role in shaping community; for many isolated families in the mountains, once- or twice-

⁸⁵ Ownby, *Subduing Satan*, 12.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 14.

⁸⁷ Ownby, *Subduing Satan*, 15.

monthly church meetings may have been their only opportunities to interact with people outside the immediate kin circle. For almost everyone in the region, religion exerted a powerful influence in setting standards of behavior and belief; both men and women measured their lives in terms of sin and salvation, and constantly struggled to gain favor with God.⁸⁸

Even the outsiders of society, the “sinful” men who gave in to the excesses of male culture and violence, found themselves strongly impacted by evangelical Protestantism. Everyone felt the influence of religion. For the pious and well-behaved, religion was an inspiring presence in life, infusing the hardships of mountain existence with joy and satisfaction. But for the outsiders of society, those who liked to drink, gamble, and fight, religion loomed dark and grim on the horizon, a guilt-inducing reminder of God’s judgment and wrath.⁸⁹ Although they participated in evangelical activities and accepted Christianity, religion made them uneasy and they showed it. “By missing Sunday school, coming in late, sitting in their own section, and spitting tobacco during the sermon, men were indicating that they were not fully comfortable with church life and evangelical sentiment,” writes Ted Ownby.⁹⁰

Appalachian men found themselves ever wavering between their desires for masculine satisfaction and the necessity to redeem themselves in the eyes of the Lord. Every year at the revival, scores of men would come forward to the mourner’s bench to repent, only to return to their “sinful” ways in the ensuing months. Ted Ownby argues that one of the primary functions of revival meetings was the opportunity they provided for the sinners of the community to show their acceptance of evangelical moral norms, even while their

⁸⁸ Friedman, *Enclosed Garden*, 4.

⁸⁹ Ownby, *Subduing Satan*, 15.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 133.

actions belied that acceptance.⁹¹ Evangelical Christianity, with its hard-driving, intensely emotional preaching, succeeded in converting almost everyone in the region to acceptance of its doctrines – but actually changing the deeply ingrained culture of violence and the behaviors it inspired was much more difficult.⁹²

In the traditional Murdered Girl narrative, the man kills the woman because she represents piety, righteousness, and all the other evangelical characteristics that threaten his masculine freedom. He chooses the culture of violence over the culture of evangelism, indulging his violent desires at the expense of the opportunity for salvation – or so it seems. Although the central act of the Murdered Girl ballad is rooted in male destructiveness and sin, many ballads offer an ending that re-opens the debate between sin and salvation. Often, the ballad ends with the man expressing remorse for his crimes:

Down on his knees he bended,
Saying “Oh, what have I done?”
I’ve murdered my Florilla,
True as the rising sun.
- “The Jealous Lover”⁹³

Ah, then my soul was filled with woe,
I cried out “Whither shall I go?
How can I quit this mournful place,
This world again, how can I face?”

I’d freely give up all my store,
Had I ten thousand worlds or more,
If I could bring again to life,
My dear, my darling, murdered wife.”
- “McAfee’s Confession”⁹⁴

⁹¹ Ownby, *Subduing Satan*, 148.

⁹² Montell, *Killings*, 37.

⁹³ Frank C. Brown Collection, version C.

⁹⁴ Box 1, Folder 1-3, "Ballad Manuscripts," in Katherine French Ballad Collection, Berea College Special Collections & Archives, Berea, KY.

The man who has sinned now realizes his mistakes and repents, turning to God in desperate hopes of forgiveness – what could be called a standard conversion experience. Conversion was extremely important to 19th century evangelical Protestantism both doctrinally and socially, and was expected to be accompanied by striking and memorable experiences, usually deeply emotional in nature, by which the sinner labors under tremendous feelings of guilt and condemnation, wrestles with himself and God in prayer, and finally receives salvation and “comes through” as a new man.⁹⁵ This conversion narrative, which became almost formulaic in nature, was testified by thousands of people in the Southern Appalachian region and around the country. Peter Cartwright, a 19th century Methodist who underwent his own emotionally wrenching conversion experience at age 16, describes his agonizing feelings of guilt after indulging in drinking and dancing, and his subsequent salvation at a revival meeting:

I felt guilty and condemned. I rose and walked the floor. My mother was in bed. It seems to me, all of a sudden, my blood rushed to my head, my heart palpitating, in a few minutes I turned blind; and awful impression rested on my mind that death had come and I was unprepared to die. I fell on my knees and began to ask God to have mercy on me.

...

To this meeting I repaired, a guilty, wretched sinner. On the Saturday evening of said meeting, I went, with weeping multitudes, and bowed before the stand, and earnestly prayed for mercy. In the midst of a solemn struggle of soul, an impression was made on my mind, as though a voice said to me, “Thy sins are all forgiven thee.” Divine light flashed all around me, unspeakable joy sprung up in my soul.⁹⁶

Conversion narratives almost identical to Cartwright’s can be found throughout the history of the evangelical movement, and played an important role in shaping Appalachian experiences of God and religion. The “crisis conversion,” as Paul Conkin calls it, is exactly

⁹⁵ Raine, *Saddle-Bags*, 197.

⁹⁶ Cartwright, *Autobiography*, 38.

what the murderer in the ballads experiences.⁹⁷ Evangelical emphasis on original sin and the unworthiness of all human individuals fits perfectly with the experiences of the murderer, who has fulfilled this expectation by committing the terrible sin of murder. Herman B. Yates, a modern-day Baptist pastor in Dingess, WV, sums up the conviction that man can only arrive at conversion after experiencing the depths of sin: “We must come to God as beggars, empty-handed, before we can receive the gift of eternal life... it is not until the sinner comes to the end of his resources that he will run to the Savior.”⁹⁸ By the grace of God alone, the sinner is lifted up from sin and “born again” in the light of God’s love.

Of course, the doctrine of forgiveness was difficult for society to apply to men who murdered innocent women, even those who experienced conversion afterward. Repent as he may, the murderer is still condemned to punishment by society’s laws, and many Murdered Girl ballads end with the murderer facing execution or life in prison. But the evangelical doctrine of salvation told the Southern male that salvation is free; nothing he can do will earn it for him, and it is through faith alone that he may be able to receive the redemptive grace of the Lord. So though the murderer may face retribution from society, he knows that God alone holds the key to his true fate. In several Murdered Girl ballads the murderer on the gallows expresses the knowledge that his soul is in God’s hands, and that the question of his salvation or damnation can be decided by the Lord alone. Two stanzas from the ballad “Lillie Shaw” illustrate this trust in God particularly well:

Then I knelt down to Jesus
 In penetrated grief,
 And begged that he might save me,
 As he did the dying thief.

Now I must hang this morning,

⁹⁷ Conkin, *Cane Ridge*, 11.

⁹⁸ Loyal Jones, *Faith and Meaning in the Southern Uplands* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1999), 142.

The time is drawing near;
 But I have a hope in heaven,
 And death I do not fear.
 - "Lillie Shaw"⁹⁹

Peter DeGraff, the narrator in "Poor Ellen Smith," actually denies committing the murder and calls upon God to vindicate him:

My soul will be free when I stand at the bar
 Where God tries his cross
 --Then there, like a star
 That shines in the night, will an innocent shine—
 Oh, I do appeal to the Justice of Time!
 - "Ellen Smith"¹⁰⁰

In these lyrics we get a brief glimpse of the male internalization of evangelical values, and the possibility for a triumph of salvation over sinfulness. However, these endings are less common than endings that take a more moderate stance toward evangelical values. Often, the murderer is aware that he has committed a terrible deed and faces God's judgment, but sees himself not as a candidate for salvation but a sinner who will be inevitably condemned to hell. Many of the men are tortured by guilt:

The moans and groans of the Waxford girl
 No comfort I could find;
 For the gates of hell stood open wide
 Before my eyes did shine.
 - "Waxford Girl"¹⁰¹

My race is run beneath the sun,
 And hell awaiting for me,
 For I did murder that pretty little miss
 Whose name was Rose Conel Lee.
 - "The Willow Garden"¹⁰²

Her body lies beneath the sod,

⁹⁹ *Folk Ballads from North Carolina*, 722.

¹⁰⁰ James Taylor Adams Collection, #8263.

¹⁰¹ John F. Smith Collection, Box 2, Folder 2-9, "Ballads and Song Texts W."

¹⁰² James Taylor Adams Collection, #8894.

Her soul, I trust, has gone to God,
 While I am doomed to endless pain,
 Destruction surely, I must obtain.
 - "McAfee's Confession"¹⁰³

At time he even seems to invite punishment, reflecting on his sins and his inevitable destruction with a kind of wanton glibness:

He says shoot me or hang me,
 For I am the man
 Who killed Naomi Wise
 Below the mill dam.
 - "Naomi Wise"¹⁰⁴

Poor Laura loved [my banjo's] strains,
 She loved them long and well
 And now I go to pick
 And sing for her in hell.
 - "Tom Dula's Song"¹⁰⁵

The tension between male culture and evangelism which dominates the theme of the Murdered Girl ballad is to some extent actually resolved by this type of ending, for it allows the murderer to display his rugged masculine traits as well as his acceptance of Christianity. The murderer accepts the truth of evangelical values by acknowledging his sin and God's judgment, while at the same time demonstrating his masculinity by his devil-may-care attitude towards condemnation. "I'm such a manly rogue that I'm going to hell and don't even care," he seems to say.

The Murdered Girl Ballad in Society

19th century Appalachian society faced complicated social tensions between masculinity, femininity, violence, evangelism, sin and salvation. The Murdered Girl ballad combines all of these conflicts into a coherent narrative structure, both reflecting and

¹⁰³ Katherine French Collection, Box 1, Folder 1-3, "Ballad Manuscripts."

¹⁰⁴ James Taylor Adams, #8569.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., #8824.

critiquing dominant attitudes toward gender and social mores. But the Murdered Girl ballad did more than just depict societal problems; it also sought to affect change. While the previous sections discussed the thematic content of Murdered Girl ballads and their reflection of Appalachian social realities, this final section will address the role that the ballads played in the lives of the people who wrote, sang and heard them.

Some scholars of folklore argue that the Murdered Girl ballad arose from a guilt-ridden and repressive culture that stifled both male and female needs and desires. Alan Lomax believes that the dominant Calvinist morality left the mountain folk with a sense of inner guilt and shame that no one in 19th century America could really escape. “In the popular mind a gulf was fixed between pleasure and righteousness, thus inflaming the old wound of guilt and sexual anxiety which has so often characterized our civilization,” he writes in the introduction to one of his volumes of American songs.¹⁰⁶ Lomax argues that the death- and sex-obsessed balladry of the Appalachian region reflected a “folklore of sin” both preoccupied with and defiant of traditional evangelical norms.

According to this interpretation, the Murdered Girl ballad functions primarily as an escape from reality, allowing the listener to participate in a sinful fantasy. The man, full of an inner hunger for sex and violence but restrained by evangelical social mores, can live out this fantasy of unchecked violence through the ballad; the woman, who according to societal dictates must be pure, chaste and pious, is able to satisfy her repressed sexual desires by running off with a bad-boy rogue. Lomax argues that the murder of the woman indicates an instinctive sadomasochistic punishment of sin, written in as a guilty renunciation of the sexual fantasy. He believes that the man’s repentance at the end of the ballad fulfills a similar function, allowing the singer and the listener to participate fully in the sinful fantasy

¹⁰⁶ Lomax, *Folk Songs*, xvii.

of murder and still return to God. This kind of moral realignment, he believes, purges the singer of any “guilty residue” and is essential to balancing the violent murder of the ballad within the framework of a culture where aggression was considered wrong.¹⁰⁷

What Lomax ignores is the fact that the Murdered Girl ballad was more than just a literary construct; the tensions reflected in it did not spring from the fantastical imaginings of a repressed people, but from very real conflicts and events in Appalachian society. Although the Murdered Girl ballad model is to some extent a standardized construct, it is by no means a fiction, and is rooted in very real gender conflict and violence. The women in the ballads are murdered because women in Appalachian society were being murdered; it is ridiculous to argue that the ballads were an escape from reality, because they were reality. And while it is certainly true that men felt aggression towards women, the number of real girls brutally murdered by men is evidence that they did not need ballads to allow them to express it. To reduce all of the complexities of the Murdered Girl ballad to Freudian ideas about repression, guilt and sex is to ignore the many other social realities that influenced folklore in the 19th century Appalachian South.

While Alan Lomax sees the Murdered Girl ballad’s social function as primarily rooted in an escape from reality, the standard model actually contained several narrative elements designed to influence social behaviors. Although girl-killing captured the imagination of the Appalachian South and became an important narrative construct in reflecting the spirit of the times, no one was happy that women were being murdered, and the ballads functioned largely as warnings to young women so that they may avoid similar fates. The moral of the Murdered Girl ballad is more often than not something along the

¹⁰⁷ Lomax, *Folk Songs*, 265.

lines of “Don’t trust young men, they’ll kill you.” Like the “Come All Ye” ballad, the Murdered Girl ballad invites its audience to hear the tragic story as a cautionary tale:

Come all you good people,
From all over the world,
And listen to a story
About a poor young girl.
- “Lula Viers”¹⁰⁸

Draw nigh, young friends, and learn from me,
A sad and mournful history,
Oh, may you not forgetful be,
Of all this day, I’ll tell to thee.
- “McAfee’s Confession”¹⁰⁹

In part attributing the murder to the woman’s innocent, misplaced trust in the wicked man, the ballads often include direct advice to young women to be careful around men:

Come all you young ladies and listen to what I say,
Never place your faith in a young man or he will you astray.
- “The Jealous Lover”¹¹⁰

Now people all take warning,
And listen to what I say
You must prepare before it is too late
Don’t listen to a story
Some villain’s tongue will tell
Or you are sure to meet Naomi’s fate.
- “Naomi Wise”¹¹¹

Murdered Girl ballads also frequently include warnings to men, often from the lips of the murderer himself. For the male listener, the moral of the ballad is essentially “Stay true to God and don’t murder your sweetheart.” Along with the murderer’s confession and repentance generally comes a plea to other young men not to make the same mistakes:

Now all young men take my advice,
Never do take your Sadie’s life.

¹⁰⁸ Dowda, “Golden Curls,” 28-30.

¹⁰⁹ Katherine French Collection, Box 1, Folder 1-3, “Ballad Manuscripts.”

¹¹⁰ John F. Smith Collection, Box 1, Folder 1-10, “Ballads and Song Texts J.”

¹¹¹ James Taylor Adams Connection, #8572.

It will cause you to weep, it will cause you to mourn
 It will cause you to lose your Home Sweet Home.
 - "Sadie"¹¹²

Young people, all with one accord,
 Take warning from my dying word,
 And try to serve your God in time,
 And never commit that awful crime.
 - "Stephen G. Effler"¹¹³

Young men, young men, be warned by me,
 And shun all evil company,
 Walk in the way of righteousness,
 And God, your soul will surely bless.
 - "McAfee's Confession"¹¹⁴

Come all ye young men and warning take
 Unto your lovers be true;
 And never let the devil
 Get the upper hand of you.
 - "Never Let the Devil Get the Upper Hand of You"¹¹⁵

Interestingly enough, these "warnings from the gallows" were fairly commonplace occurrences in reality as well; Peter DeGraff, hung in 1894 for the murder of his sweetheart Ellen Smith, made a speech from the gallows warning young men to beware the evils of drinking, gambling and whiskey.¹¹⁶ Just as evangelical mores dictated, masculine transgressions like these were seen as cobblestones on the path to truly horrific sins like murder.

The Murdered Girl ballad also made some sense of societal gender conflict by casting both the man and the woman as the heroes of the tale. The woman is heroic because she can do no wrong; she is the innocent victim and is always treated as such, never receiving even a fraction of the blame for her unhappy fate. The ballad elevates the woman

¹¹² *Folk Ballads from North Carolina*, 252.

¹¹³ James Taylor Adams Collection, #8772.

¹¹⁴ Katherine French Collection, Box 1, Folder 1-3, "Ballad Manuscripts."

¹¹⁵ James Taylor Adams Collection, #8576.

¹¹⁶ Randy Furches (great-nephew of Peter DeGraff), personal conversation, June 17 2010.

almost to the status of a saint, pure and good until the end. But counterintuitive though it may seem, the man is elevated as well. Like John Hardy and Jesse James, he is the desperado hero of the tale – the man we identify with despite his ill deeds. The ballad is always told in either third person from the perspective of the community, or in first person by the murderer himself, sometimes switching back and forth between the two – but never from the perspective of the woman. While the woman remains aloof from the listener’s experience, the man is always at the foreground. The listener feels what he feels, sees what he sees, and is right there with him as he recounts his tale of sin. The ballad’s ability to invoke sympathy for both the man and the woman, who were so often at odds in life, was just one of the many ways that it functioned as a means of increasing social understanding and self-reflection in Appalachian society.

The Murdered Girl ballad said something very true and very dark about Appalachian society, but its existence emerged from an attempt to understand that darkness, not escape it. In dramatizing social tensions related to gender, religion and violence, the archetypal ballad allowed Appalachian men and women to express the problems they were grappling with as well as seek ways to resolve them. The Murdered Girl ballad did not seek to preserve all the complexities of gender relationships and social tensions, but instead boiled some of these complexities down into an understandable and oft-repeated narrative that created a safe space in which to examine them.

Conclusion

My folks come over with Christopher Columbus on an old sail ship. But when they got up hyur, they got kindly wild, and tuk to follerin’ game, a-wanderin’ to and fro, till the generations, they all evaporated and the only ones left of um war them with strength enough to climb up into the hills.¹¹⁷

¹¹⁷ Lomax, *Folk Songs*, 154.

- A 19th century Appalachian man

The Southern Appalachian of the 1800's was descended from a stock of pioneers who ventured into the mountains with nothing to protect them but their wits, their guns, and their dominating spirit. As they settled down, they passed on to their children and grandchildren a tradition of rugged independence, a love of the wilderness, and a willingness to use violence to solve problems. These traits were to some degree innate in the Southern mountaineer, and he formed his conceptions about what was expected of him upon them. But as revival culture and evangelical Protestantism swept the region, converting him into a Christian, he learned that the masculine behaviors he had grown up with – physical competition, boisterous fun through drinking and dancing, spending lengthy periods of time outdoors away from home – were frowned upon by God. The pioneering lifestyle he inherited from his Scots-Irish ancestors was sinful. And who was he to question the Lord? He realized the truth of what was preached at the revivals, he knew that a morally-ordered universe depended upon righteousness and piety and the home – but try as he might to behave, he still found himself in a neighbor's cabin playing cards on Saturday night, passing around a jug of moonshine whiskey. He realized these mistakes, and always made it home to his wife in time to attend church the next morning – but try as he might, he just couldn't get comfortable in all that religion. And so he found himself caught between two conflicting social orders – that of his ancestors, that rugged and violent pioneer masculinity, and the new social order brought by the church that quickly enveloped the hearts and souls of his people.

In the words of Alan Lomax, “The first function of music, especially of folk music, is to produce a feeling of security for the listener by voicing the particular quality of the land

and the life of its people.”¹¹⁸ The Murdered Girl ballad, while not the most comforting kind of folksong, does just this. The violence in the ballads reflects the extreme tension between violent male culture and the other governing social factor in 19th century Appalachian society, evangelical Protestantism. Women and men, despite their intense dependence on each other, were divided by religion. The woman found herself shunned by her mate, who resisted the religious dominion she represented to him. Try too hard to reform him and she just might end up dead, the victim of a culture of male violence made doubly aggressive in defense of itself. In the words of Ted Ownby, “The particular combination of honor and evangelicalism made the South a region of Saints and sinners.”¹¹⁹ In the Murdered Girl ballad, the man is the sinner who kills a Saint because he doesn’t know how to be one.

* * *

*I ran my fingers through her coal black hair
To cover up my sin;
I drug her to the river side
And there I plunged her in.*

- “Never Let the Devil Get the Upper Hand of You”¹²⁰

¹¹⁸ Lomax, *Folk Songs*, xv.

¹¹⁹ Ownby, *Subduing Satan*, 18.

¹²⁰ James Taylor Adams Collection, #8576.

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Index: List of Ballads

- The Ballad of Ellen Flanary* (James Taylor Adams Collection, #9006)
- The Ballad of the Cruel Miller* (James Taylor Adams Collection, #8182)
- Blue Eyed Ella* (James Taylor Adams Collection, #9022)
- Ellen Smith* (James Taylor Adams Collection, #8263)
- Ellen Smith* (James Taylor Adams Collection, #9073)
- Ethel Sullivan* (James Taylor Adams Collection, #8453)
- Fair Ellen* (G.R. Combs Collection, Box 1, Folder 1-6)
- Fair Ellen* (John F. Smith Collection, Box 1, Folder 5-1, 1-6)
- Flora Ella* (G.R. Combs Collection, Box 1, Folder 1-6)
- Flora Ella* (Appalachian Ballad and Folk Music Collection)
- Flora Ella* (John F. Smith Collection, Box 1, Folder 5-I, 1-6)
- Florella* (Frank C. Brown Collection, p 578)
- Freda Bolt* (James Taylor Adams Collection, #8774)
- Frieda Bolt* (James Taylor Adams Collection, #8163)
- The Murder of Gladys Kincaid* (James Taylor Adams Collection, #8545)
- Helen Flannery* (G.R. Combs Collection, Box 1, Folder 1-8)
- Helen Flannery* (John F. Smith Collection, Box 1, Folder 1-8)
- The Jealous Lover* (John F. Smith Collection, Box 1, Folder 1-10)
- Jellon Grame* (Dowda, p 19)
- John Collier* (James Taylor Adams Collection, #8370)
- John Collins* (James Taylor Adams Collection, #8372)
- Lady Isabel and the Elf Knight* (Scarborough, p 127)
- The Murder of Laura Foster* (James Taylor Adams Collection, #8548)

- Laura Foster* (James Taylor Adams Collection, #9168)
- Laura Foster and Tom Dula* (Frank C. Brown Collection, p 703)
- Lillie Shaw* (Frank C. Brown Collection, p 722)
- Lord Thomas* (James Taylor Adams Collection, #9183)
- Lottie Yates* (James Taylor Adams Collection, #8549)
- Lula Viers* (Dowda, P 28-30)
- Mary Bartley* (James Taylor Adams Collection, #8853)
- McAfee's Confession* (Cunningham, p 211-213)
- McAfee's Confession* (Katherine French Collection, Box 1, Folder 1-3)
- Naomi Wise* (James Taylor Adams Collection, #8571)
- Naomi Wise* (James Taylor Adams Collection, #8572)
- Naomi Wise and John Lewis* (James Taylor Adams Collection, #8569)
- Never Let the Devil Get the Upper Hand of You* (James Taylor Adams Collection, #8576)
- On the Banks of the Ohio* (Dowda, p 26)
- Oxford City* (James Taylor Adams Collection, #8626)
- Pearl Bryan* (James Taylor Adams Collection, #8637)
- Pearl Bryan* (James Taylor Adams Collection, #8638)
- Pearl Bryan* (G.R. Combs Collection, Box 2, Folder 1-16)
- Pearl Bryan* (John F. Smith Collection, Box 2, Folder 2-4)
- Pearlie Bryant* (John F. Smith Collection, Box 2, Folder 2-4)
- Poor Ellen Smith* (James Taylor Adams Collection, #9074)
- Poor Ellen Smith* (James Taylor Adams Collection, #8651)
- Poor Ellen Smith* (Frank C. Brown Collection, p 715)
- Poor Oma Wise* (Appalachian Ballad and Folk Music Collection, Series 2, Box 1, Folder 1-2)

Pretty Polly (Scarborough, p 128)

Pretty Polly (James Taylor Adams Collection, #8658)

Pretty Polly (James Taylor Adams Collection, #8662)

Pretty Polly (Appalachian Ballad and Folk Music Collection, Series 2, Box 1, Folder 1-2)

Pretty Polly (Katherine French Collection, Box 1, Folder 1-3)

Pretty Polly (John F. Smith Collection, Box 2, Folder 2-4)

Roan County Prisoner (James Taylor Adams Collection, #8687)

Rose Conilee (G.R. Combs Collection, Box 2, Folder 1-18)

Rose Conilee (John F. Smith, Box 2, Folder 2-5)

Rubeon Combs (James Taylor Adams Collection, #8754)

Sadie (Frank C. Brown Collection, p 252)

Stephen G Effler (James Taylor Adams Collection, #8772)

The Knoxville Girl (James Taylor Adams Collection, #9161)

The Weeping Willow (James Taylor Adams Collection, #9541)

The Willow Garden (James Taylor Adams Collection, #8894)

The Willow Garden (James Taylor Adams Collection, #8895)

Tom Dula (James Taylor Adams Collection, #8823)

Tom Dula's Lament (Cunningham, p 200)

Tom Dula's Song (James Taylor Adams Collection, #8824)

Vernie Frazier (James Taylor Adams Collection, #8114)

Waxford Girl (John F. Smith Collection, Box 2, Folder 2-9)

Waxford Girl (John F. Smith Collection, Box 2, Folder 2-9)

Waxford Girl (Scarborough, p 159)

Waxford Girl (James Taylor Adams Collection, #8868)