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“Ain’t it a pretty night?”: An analysis of Carlisle Floyd’s *Susannah* as an allegory for the socio-political culture of the United States in the 1950s

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“Ain’t It a Pretty Night?”: An Analysis of Carlisle Floyd’s *Susannah* as an Allegory for the
Socio-Political Culture of the United States in the 1950s

An Honors College Project Presented to
the Faculty of the Undergraduate
College of Visual and Performing Arts
James Madison University

by Melissa Lynn Allen

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Accepted by the faculty of the Department of Music, James Madison University, in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Honors College.

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Introduction

In the early twentieth century, American composers attempted to create a fusion of American musical culture and the classical musical conventions of the time. American operatic compositions from this era are no exception. Carlisle Floyd is one of the most successful American operatic composers, but he has stayed out of the spotlight due to his private nature and strict Methodist upbringing. His 1955 opera *Susannah* is by far his most famous. This opera also presents a contrast between traditional folk culture and mainstream American culture. Both the presence of folk culture and folk music are central to the uniquely American style of opera that Carlisle Floyd is credited with helping to create. This American opera style embraced qualities of American music, like folk or jazz, and combined them with the heightened drama of the operas of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries by Italian composers Giuseppe Verdi and Giacomo Puccini.

Despite *Susannah* being first performed in 1955, it is quite conservative in musical style as well as content. This is seen in its heavy use of American folk music idioms and Carlisle Floyd's comparatively conservative and traditional compositional style, which he adopted due to his lack of desire to compose with serial techniques like the Second Viennese School composers as well as the use of traditional American culture and religiosity as the two major influences on development of characters and their actions, as well as text.¹ Through the use of traditional

¹ The Second Viennese School was a group of composers in early twentieth century Vienna, Austria who were very experimental in their compositional techniques. They were led by Arnold Schoenberg, Alban Berg, and Anton Weber. Schoenberg is credited with the creation of twelve-tone serialism during this time in which all twelve tones of the scale must be used in a specific pattern before they can be repeated or the pattern can be changed. This greatly influenced the compositions of the twentieth century as composers began to become less concerned with tonality as Schoenberg effectively eliminated it entirely in his compositions. Carlisle Floyd went the opposite direction and embraced the more American style of composition epitomized by Aaron Copland's early works and Leonard Bernstein who composed in a style that was evocative of the cultures of the United States. Like Floyd, Copland embraced folk culture, while Bernstein depicted city life and culture in his compositions.

musical styles in combination with the portrayal of how change and deviant behavior is viewed by members of an extremely religious, socially conservative town, Floyd provides commentary on the socio-political climate in the United States at the time of this opera's composition.

Susannah tells the story of a young girl in a small southern Appalachian town who is wrongly accused of being sexually promiscuous by the extremely conservative church Elders and their wives. In order to redeem herself in the eyes of the townspeople, Susannah must publically confess her sins during an upcoming revival meeting being held by a traveling preacher named Reverend Olin Bitch. Against her better judgment, Susannah attends the meeting, but runs out, cementing her place as a social outcast and pariah

This thesis presents music and cultural analyses of *Susannah* and evaluates the applicability of this opera as an allegory for the socio-political climate of the United States during the 1950s. It is split into four chapters. The first provides background on Carlisle Floyd and how his background influenced his compositional style as well as a background and historical context of the opera itself. The second and third chapters consist of a thorough analysis of *Susannah* musically and culturally. Chapter Two's musical analysis highlights the use of folk elements to illustrate how Floyd created the social norm through music. The characters whose actions are considered socially acceptable, like the strict religiosity of the Elder and their wives, tend to have more folk-like musical ideas. Characters who are considered outsiders, like Susannah, sing lines that use fewer folk music idioms and more classical in nature. Chapter Three's cultural analysis highlights the need to be socially acceptable in traditional southern Appalachian culture as well as the strict adherence to Christianity in this region. The content in both of these chapters aid in creating the allegory between *Susannah* and the socio-political climate of the United States in the 1950s that is discussed in Chapter Four. This chapter explores

the dramatic content of the opera and how it corresponds to political and social culture in the United States at the beginning of the Cold War, such as McCarthyism and the fear of communism, as well as the views of women and sexuality. The preceding chapters supplement the understanding as they highlight and explain the folk elements in the opera to support the comparison between the Appalachian and general post-World War II American socio-political culture.

In choosing a topic for my capstone thesis, I was rather sure that I wanted to continue the research that I completed as an Honors Option as a first year student. My first Honors Option was for my ethnomusicology and global music class, GMUS 206, that was taught by Dr. Andrew Connell, who would later be my thesis advisor. For this option, I completed a research paper on the connection between the use of religion and traditional gender roles and stereotypes in Appalachian folk music and the longevity of these traits in Appalachian social culture. In fall of 2014, I presented this paper at the General Education Student Conference held in Rose Library.

As a music student, I have always been interested in the connection between music and culture and the study of ethnomusicology. Music and culture are intrinsically linked as music, and other art forms, are responses to the culture that they were created in, which Appalachian folk music shows. Folk music also provides us with a link to the past due to the nature in which it is passed down and has a performance style that is based in tradition. At the General Education Student Conference, I was posed a question asking why does preserving folk music and folk culture matter? Preserving American folk music matters because it preserves traditions and cultural responses that are unique to the United States. The style of Appalachian folk ballads, while rooted in ballads from Northern Ireland and Scotland, is something that is inherently

American, and by studying these songs and practices and making sure that they are kept alive, we are preserving a culture that is often overlooked by historians.

In my studies as a vocal performance major, I was, at some point, introduced to the opera *Susannah*, written by Carlisle Floyd. When I listened to the score, I immediately heard the elements of folk music that Floyd employed to help create the setting and it reminded me of the famous ballet by Aaron Copland called *Appalachian Spring*, with the open harmonies and the folk-inspired melodies. As I began to think about topics, I kept coming back to this opera. I decided to combine my interest in opera with my interest in ethnomusicology, and see how Appalachian culture impacted Carlisle Floyd's compositional style in *Susannah*.

To perform this research, I drew from books and articles, a full list of which can be found in the bibliography at the end and throughout the paper in footnotes. When I began the research process, I returned to my paper from the Honors Option and selected books that would be helpful for this thesis, including, *Life Flows On in Endless Song: Folk Songs and American History* by Robert Wells, a history professor at Union College, and *Exploring American Folk Music: Ethnic, Grassroots, and Regional Traditions in the United States* by Kip Lornell, an ethnomusicology professor at George Washington University whose studies focused on American musical traditions. Most of the research about Appalachian folk music was drawn from these two sources as the Wells book provided the cultural role in American folk music and the Lornell book provided a detailed analysis of the musical traditions of various folk music styles. For cultural content, I did the same and I selected sources from my previous paper as starting points, including chapters from *A Handbook to Appalachia: An Introduction to the Region*, edited by Grace T. Edwards, JoAnn A. Asbury, and Ricky L. Cox, as well as *Appalachia: Its People, Heritage, and Problems*, edited by Frank S. Riddel.

In dealing specifically with Carlisle Floyd and *Susannah*, I consulted journal articles and other scholarly publications, like doctoral dissertations and master's theses. Particularly helpful in musical analysis were "Exploring Performance-oriented Analysis through an Examination of the Title Character's Two Arias in Carlisle Floyd's *Susannah*," a master's thesis by Shannon Cole at the University of Ottawa and "Historical and musical context of the characters in Carlisle Floyd's *Susannah*," a doctoral dissertation by Keisha Cook at Ball State University. Both of these provided musical and dramatic analysis of this opera. There is not a large amount of research done on this opera or on Carlisle Floyd. *Falling Up: The Days and Nights of Carlisle Floyd: the Authorized Biography* by Thomas Holliday was incredibly helpful as it provided an extremely comprehensive biography of Floyd from his youth to present, chronicling his journey in composing *Susannah*. There is only one version of the score available, so all of the excerpts are from the piano-vocal reduction of the full orchestral score, published by Boosey & Hawkes. The recording used as an auditory reference was the only full recording of this opera available, which was the 1994 recording from the Opera de Lyon, featuring Cheryl Studer as *Susannah* and Samuel Ramey as Rev. Olin Blitch and was conducted by Kent Nagano.

Sections of the score and the libretto have been referenced throughout this thesis and placed in the chapters accordingly. All score and libretto examples are from the Boosey & Hawkes piano-vocal reduction of the full score of *Susannah*.² In the libretto, which Floyd himself wrote, dialect is written out phonetically is used to standardize the pronunciation when the opera is performed. Excerpts from the libretto may look as if they are spelled incorrectly, when it is actually a choice that Floyd made to indicate that the word needs to be modified for

² All examples are pulled from Carlisle Floyd. *Susannah, A Musical Drama in Two Acts, Ten Scenes*. New York: Boosey & Hawkes, 1965.

diction purposes to create the appropriate regional dialect. This is seen by the modification of spelling to create the correct vowel when spoken, the elimination of letters, particularly at the ends of the words, as well as using region specific verb conjugations and words. For example. “an” is used in place of “and” and the region-specific contraction “ain’t” is used throughout the opera. Also, words that are capitalized in the score that may not be capitalized in regular usage, like the Elders, have retained their capitalization.

Through this opera, Floyd made a critique of the socio-political climate as a way to show the negative impacts of McCarthyism and conservative social cultures on art, music, and literature, but also on society as a whole. By setting this opera in a historically conservative culture of which he was knowledgeable as he grew up in a similar community, Floyd was able to use this setting to create this allegory without changing or depicting the culture of the southern Appalachian people by relying on the use of stereotypes. Because of this, the end result is a powerful statement about the relationship between fitting into a prescribed social role and the treatment by the individuals in the greater community and how that impacts the individual.

Chapter One: Historical Background of Carlisle Floyd and *Susannah*

Carlisle Floyd is regarded for contributions to American opera by researchers and classical musicians; however, his private nature and desire to stay out of the spotlight have not allowed him to have similar name recognition as fellow American composers, like Gian Carlo Menotti.³ Floyd's childhood greatly influenced his compositional style and choice of content. He was born in Latta, South Carolina on June 11, 1926. Religion played a large role in his upbringing as his father, Jack, was a minister. Floyd's musical education began at the age of three with his mother, Ida, who was a pianist, but he was "an awful student [and] his musical urges took a dive for another six years."⁴ His musical abilities as a child were nothing extraordinary and he was more adept at drawing as a child than playing the piano. After his father graduated from Wofford College in Spartansburg, South Carolina and was ordained as a Methodist preacher, Floyd moved quite often as a child, living in many rural towns in the South. Because of this, he was exposed to the culture and social practices he would later use as the settings for his operas, including *Susannah*.

Floyd was regarded by his family as a sensitive and gentle child. He was more inclined towards artistic pursuits than athletics or more traditionally masculine activities. His father once

³ In the forward to *Falling Up: The Days and Nights of Carlisle Floyd* by Thomas Holliday, Placido Domingo noted how Floyd's music "captures the essence of American life." In the same book, Holliday discusses the awards Floyd won for *Susannah* and his musical abilities, like the Guggenheim Fellowship and the Music Critics Circle of New York's distinction for best new opera in 1956. In her doctoral dissertation, *The Application of Registration to Traditional Singing and Sprechstimme in "Flower and Hawk,"* Stella Dayrit Roden stated, "Floyd has been declared the most renowned, most popular, and most successful, and the most widely performed American opera composer of the 20th century" in her chapter titled, "Floyd, Librettist and Composer."

⁴ Holliday, Thomas. *Falling Up : The Days and Nights of Carlisle Floyd, The Authorized Biography*. Syracuse, US: Syracuse University Press, 2012. Accessed March 17, 2017. ProQuest ebrary, 8.

remarked about his lack of fighting with other boys as “just not boylike!”⁵ As a child, Floyd could often be found drawing or reading instead of running around with the neighborhood children, potentially a result of his rather severe asthma. This sensitivity could have been a result from his father being frequently absent from family life due to traveling to a different church and having to help his mother cope as a result by adopting an unconscious “Oedipal stance of rescuing his unhappy but submissive mother.”⁶ This sensitivity towards women that he had as a result is seen in the treatment of his female characters who are unhappy, like Susannah. His use of corrupt or absent male characters could be a result of his father’s absence during his childhood and adolescence.

While the family lived in Jordan, South Carolina, Floyd’s musical interest spiked after hearing a jazz song titled, “A Little Bit Independent” by Edgar Leslie and Joe Burke. As a result Floyd began to “puzzle out the melody and bluesy harmonies on the [piano],”⁷ much to the happiness of his mother, as well as showing his proclivity to non-classical musical styles, such as blues and folk that would influence his future compositions. However, he also was exposed to classical opera through the Metropolitan Opera’s broadcastings of operas on NBC, like Verdi’s *Un Ballo in Maschera* that may have influenced his use of *verismo* opera traits in *Susannah*.⁸ As he grew older, his interest in piano continued to increase. In high school, Floyd performed in

⁵ Ibid., 30.

⁶ Ibid., 20.

⁷ Ibid., 22.

⁸ *Verismo* style in opera is characterized by melodramatic, often violent, plots and emotionally charged melody and harmonies. Characters were comparably realistic in their actions to previous styles of opera the presented larger than life depictions of the human conditions. *Verismo* reached its peak in the late nineteenth century with composers like Verdi and Puccini.

musical theatre and operetta, including Gilbert and Sullivan's *The Mikado*, where he performed music that "gave first hand exposure to the bel canto that would later influence his vocal compositions."⁹

Because Floyd would attend Methodist camps and take summer piano lessons in Columbia, South Carolina, he often missed the revival season during his adolescence. However, in August of 1941, Floyd attended a revival at his father's parish that was led by a traveling preacher named Henry Bennett. Unlike his father, who was known for his light sermons that would ask for peace, Bennett was a hellfire and brimstone preacher. His sermons had themes like, "'All are sinners,' 'Repentance,' and 'Strive to Enter In' that reflected a fire-breathing and narrow-lipped focus" on salvation and the congregants' relationship with God.¹⁰ In *Susannah*, Reverend Olin Bitch has a preaching style that is very similar to Bennett's.

In 1943, Floyd left home, returning to Spartansburg, South Carolina to attend Converse College to study piano. For Floyd, this was a chance to escape his unhappy home life due to his father's constant absence as well as his mother's stress and unhappiness from being, effectively, a single parent of two children. While there he studied piano with Ernst Bacon, who also was a minor composer in the burgeoning American operatic scene. Academically, Floyd performed averagely, except in his English class where he excelled after a rocky start. Because of his interest in creative writing, Floyd would often write fiction, including his first published play, and reviews to be included in *The Concept*, one of the campus publications. As an upperclassman, Floyd's understanding of music theory sparked his interest in composition as

⁹ Ibid., 49.

¹⁰ Ibid., 50.

“music theory had given him the tools to write down the that theme skittering in his brain since high school like a caged squirrel.”¹¹ At Converse College, Floyd composed his first work, a piano quintet called *Theme and Variations*, which began with a main “sweeping chordal folklike theme in f minor.”¹² Even though this first piece was not a success in Floyd’s eyes, calling it “a primitive little piece,”¹³ folk music would continue to inspire Floyd in his operatic endeavors, like *Susannah*.

When Ernst Bacon, Floyd’s piano professor, left Converse College to become the director of music at Syracuse University, Floyd followed his piano teacher to New York. At Syracuse, he completed his Bachelor of Music in 1946 and later his master’s degree in 1949. At the completion of his undergraduate degree, Floyd was hired by Florida State College, filling a vacant position as a piano and theory professor, despite faculty concerns about Floyd’s age.

Floyd was rehired at the newly-renamed Florida State University, and it was at this point that Floyd’s musical desires changed from performance to composition. With his compositional output increasing, Floyd knew that he would have to define what his compositional style was. Was it influenced by the serial works of composers like Schönberg and Webern? Or was it more in the style of American composers, like Copland, embracing the “openness and spare diatonic harmonies”¹⁴ that are found through Copland’s works? Floyd’s works suggest the latter and his most successful works, like *Susannah*, show this quality.

¹¹ Ibid., 62.

¹² Ibid., 62.

¹³ Ibid., 62.

¹⁴ Ibid., 84.

After two years teaching, Floyd decided to return to Syracuse to pursue his master's degree. In these two years, back at Syracuse, Bacon had been removed from his directorship and was now the composer-in-residence, teaching piano and composition. When Floyd returned, he studied with Bacon again. Floyd also took English classes while he completed his master's in music that would eventually aid him in libretto writing. Because of his gifts as an author and strong background in creative writing, Floyd wrote the libretti for his operas throughout his career. While Floyd was working at Florida State and prior to his return to Syracuse, Bacon had created a permanent opera workshop that Floyd would work with to stage some of his own compositions, where Floyd would workshop his first opera, *Slow Dusk*. He premiered this opera in 1949 and it was an unexpected success for Floyd due to his inexperience with composing operatic works. In composing *Slow Dusk*, Floyd developed his compositional belief of "words first, music later."¹⁵ After graduating, Floyd returned to Florida State to continue his professorship, as well as take classes from the composition faculty.

As Floyd became more confident in his compositional abilities, he began work on *Susannah*. At the same time, McCarthyism and fear of communism began to bleed into Florida State University. Because of Florida Governor Charley Johns' crusade against communism, academic institutions were often targeted during this time, particularly more liberal and artistic programs.. Florida State president, Doak Campbell, went as far as "[withdrawing] support and even employment from anyone who incurred the suspicion of Johns."¹⁶ While Floyd himself was not charged, being in the arts, he was surrounded by allegations of fellow professors and student,

¹⁵ Floyd, quoted in Holliday, *Falling Up*, 93.

¹⁶ Holliday, Thomas. *Falling Up : The Days and Nights of Carlisle Floyd, The Authorized Biography*. Syracuse, US: Syracuse University Press, 2012. Accessed March 17, 2017. ProQuest ebrary. 117.

impacting his life daily. The university eventually made faculty sign “loyalty pledges, attesting that they did not personally advocate, or belong to organizations that advocated the overthrow of the United States government.”¹⁷

Sam Blount, an English master’s student at Florida State, gave Floyd the idea of writing a libretto about the apocryphal tale of Susanna and the Elders after a professor suggested that they would be good writing partners. Given Floyd’s background in religion, he was familiar with the story and was intrigued. Together, the two decided that the story should be set in the present day and the ending should be changed, but that was the end of Blount’s input.

Taking this modernization idea to heart, Floyd added the final ‘h’ to change the protagonist from Susanna to Susannah to both Americanize and distinguish her from the famous Susanna from Mozart’s opera, *Le nozze di Figaro*. As Floyd thought about this composition, he “envisioned an isolated Tennessee mountain setting [with] memories of the stifling midsummer heat of revival weeks and their picnic suppers.”¹⁸ Using his philosophy of “words first,” Floyd began to compose the libretto, using the rural Southern dialect that he grew up hearing. He drew upon the belief he saw as a child that the “faithful” have the answers and those answers shouldn’t be corrected in the creation of characters like Reverend Olin Blitch, the Elders, and the Elders’ wives. For Blitch in particular, Floyd drew from both the Revivalist Henry Bennett as well as his own father, when depicting the “pride swelling from success and adulation”¹⁹ that Reverend Blitch has throughout the first act, culminating in the revival scene. In ten days, Floyd had

¹⁷ Ibid., 117.

¹⁸ Ibid., 118.

¹⁹ Ibid., 119.

completed his first draft of the libretto. The final draft is full of what would become Floyd's customary practices for his libretti, like the use of blank and free verse and an unequal number of feet to make the text appear speech like. Floyd completed the score in March 1954, taking about five months to complete.

Susannah premiered in 1955 at Florida State and a subsequent production by the New York City Opera in 1956. At the time of its original premiere, Floyd was only 28 years old. When looking at Floyd's compositional output as a whole, *Susannah* "best exemplifies Floyd's ability to depict Southern religious fervor and hypocrisy in dramatic terms, with an underlying musical lyricism that balances American folk elements with true operatic *verismo*,"²⁰ as he drew directly from his childhood. In this opera, he uses apocryphal story from the Bible, "Susanna and the Elders."

The apocrypha are Biblical stories or writings that are not accepted as part of the canonical texts of the Bible. Depending on denomination, the story of "Susanna and the Elders" is considered canonical or apocryphal. For Floyd, as a Protestant, this story is apocryphal, but it is still valued due to the content and how it instructs the reader to live a godly life. For Roman and Eastern Orthodox Catholics, "Susanna and the Elders" is considered Chapter 13 of the Book of Daniel. Regardless, the story is the same. A young girl named Susanna is falsely accused by the local elders who were watching her bathe. Due to their lust, they confront her and say tell her that unless she has sex with them, they will tell the town that she was going to meet a young man. Susanna maintains her innocence and refuses to be arrested or blackmailed. When she is about to be put to death, a young man in the crowd, named Daniel, asks the elders if they should

²⁰ Roden, Stella Dayrit. "The Application of Registration to Traditional Singing and Sprechstimme in Flower and Hawk." PhD diss., University of Connecticut, 2008., 5-6.

be killing an innocent. He then questions their story and eventually one of the elders makes a mistake, saying an incorrect detail about the trees around the garden where Susanna was bathing. The two elders are caught in their lie and are sentenced to death and Susanna lives. In *Susannah*, the plot is very similar. The main change is the lack of a savior character and Floyd created a more negative ending.

Act I of *Susannah* begins with the arrival of a traveling preacher, the Reverend Olin Blicht, in New Hope Valley, a deeply religious and conservative town in the Appalachian region of Tennessee. At the town dance, he sees a young and beautiful woman named Susannah Polk, who the women of the town resent for her beauty. Susannah lives with her older brother, Sam, a drunk and an outcast like his sister. The next day, the church elders are looking for a creek to hold baptisms in when they see Susannah bathing. In order to relieve themselves of the shame from finding her beautiful, they accuse her of doing this on purpose and of being sexually promiscuous. The town begins to turn against her, shunning her from activities saying her actions were done to tempt the men of the town. When her best friend, Little Bat, says he can no longer be seen with her, as the townspeople believe that she seduced Little Bat, she asks her brother what she can do. Even though she explains that she did nothing wrong, Sam suggests that Susannah attend the upcoming church meeting and repent. Sam then leaves for his hunting trip.

At the start of Act II, Susannah attends the meeting where Blicht begins preaching of the need to repent and confess your sins, focusing very intently on Susannah. The religious meeting intensifies to the point where Rev. Blicht openly references Susannah and her believed indiscretions, demanding she repent. His and the congregation's efforts begin to work and Susannah becomes mesmerized by Rev. Blicht's charismatic preaching and the congregation's urging. Eventually, Susannah remembers that she is innocent and she screams and runs out of the

church and she returns to her home alone. Later that evening, Rev. Blicht arrives at Susannah's home and continues to urge her to confess her sins, which she refuses. As he begins to leave, he stops and confides in Susannah that he is lonely and desires to be with a woman. Susannah, who at this point is extremely depressed and no longer has the strength to resist his advances, lets Rev. Blicht lead her into her house where he rapes her.

Early the next morning, Rev. Blicht is alone in the church, asking God to forgive him for his actions, admitting he had taken Susannah's virginity the night before. During his sermon that morning, Susannah sits in attendance. He attempts to persuade the congregation about Susannah to believe that Susannah was innocent, but they refuse to believe him. Rev. Blicht begs Susannah to forgive him and she leaves the church. She returns to her home to see her brother who has returned from his hunting trip and is intoxicated. Susannah tells Sam what has happened and he grabs his gun and storms off, looking for Rev. Blicht. A gunshot is heard and Little Bat arrives, telling Susannah that Sam has killed Blicht while he was performing baptisms in the creek. The townspeople arrive, threatening to kill Sam and make Susannah leave town. Susannah grabs one of Sam's shotguns and threatens to kill all of the townspeople who then leave. Susannah tempts Little Bat into coming towards her and when he does, she slaps him and he runs off. She states that no one will ever make her leave her land.

The world premiere of *Susannah* occurred on February 24, 1955 at Florida State University. American soprano Phyllis Curtin premiered the role, one she was known for throughout her career. When Floyd was composing the score, he did not have Curtin's voice in mind, but Priscilla Gillette who was too busy to perform the role. When Floyd approached Curtin at the Aspen Music Festival, she listened to Floyd play Susannah's two arias and she immediately accepted. She also stated that she had a baritone in mind for Reverend Olin Blicht

named Mack Harrell who had the “biggest reputation on Aspen’s vocal roster.”²¹ Mack accepted Floyd’s offer as well, potentially due to his connection to his fundamentalist Texan roots. Both Curtin and Mack were contracted to the premiere at Florida State.

When Floyd returned to Florida State, he learned that the university president Campbell was concerned about the content of the opera. Campbell’s wife, Edna, read the libretto and as the “self-appointed custodian of campus morality,”²² the sexual content made her question if this opera should be produced. President Campbell stated he would not release the funds for the opera to be performed. After being asked to reread the play after discussing the nature of the relationship between Susannah and Blitch as a rape and not a “night of illicit passion [and] gratuitous sex,”²³ they reconsidered due to the new understanding of this relationship. After this, the rehearsal process began and the premiere was extremely well received with Floyd, Curtin, and Harrell invited to attend a reception at the Governor’s Mansion after the premiere.

Due to the success of *Susannah* in Tallahassee, Floyd traveled to New York in April 1956 to talk about a New York premiere on Broadway. While he was there, he spoke with an agent from publishing company Boosey & Hawkes, Robert Holton, who was interested in having Floyd as one of his composer-clients. Despite the company heads’ reservations that the southern setting and use of regionalisms would limit the opera to the South, they eventually signed Floyd to be a composer-client, and they agreed to publish the opera in late 1956. Despite the efforts of Floyd, Curtin, and Holton, they were unable to secure a Broadway or opera house for *Susannah*, and Floyd returned to Florida. About a month later, the new director of the New York City

²¹ Holliday. *Falling Up*, 123.

²² *Ibid.*, 124.

²³ *Ibid.*, 125.

Opera, Erich Leinsdorf, contacted Floyd asking if they could perform his work. On Floyd's April trip, the New York City Opera rejected his work, but Floyd said yes to this new request.

The opera received its New York premiere on September 27, 1956. Curtin reprised her role as Susannah at the New York City Opera with Norman Triegle performing the role of Rev. Blicht. Like in Tallahassee, *Susannah* received extremely positive reviews. Conductor Julius Rudel stated that it was "the only success of the whole Leinsdorf season"²⁴ Music and theatre critic of the New York World-Telegram, and later the New York Times, Louis Biancolli stating that *Susannah*'s score had "some of the most powerful pages in American opera,"²⁵ such as the aria "Ain't it a pretty night" sung by Susannah in Act I and the powerful revival scene sung mainly by Reverend Olin Blicht towards the beginning of Act II. In an article from *The New Yorker*, Winthrop Sargeant summarized the critical community's response to *Susannah* as "the most moving and impressive opera to have been written in America—or anywhere else... since Gershwin's *Porgy and Bess*,"²⁶ highlighting both Floyd's compositional skills as well as his libretto. The opera would go on to win the New York Music Critics' Circle Award for Best New Opera in 1956. It was not until 1999 did the opera receive its debut at the Metropolitan Opera with Renee Fleming performing the title role and Sam Ramey as Rev. Blicht, a role he would be known for as a result of this interpretation.

²⁴ Rudel, quoted in Holliday. *Falling Up*, 146.

²⁵ Louis Biancolli, "Floyd's 'Susannah' At the City Center," *New York World-Telegram*, September 28, 1956., quoted in Kirk, Elise K. *American Opera*. Urbana: U of Illinois, 2001. Print., 286

²⁶ Sargeant, quoted in Holliday. *Falling Up*, 147.

The experiences Floyd had as a child influenced his compositional style and choice of content for his operatic compositions. As the son of a traveling preacher, Floyd experienced the culture he would write about in *Susannah*. His depiction of Rev. Olin Bitch was based off of the revivalists that would preach at his father's church as well as his own father's actions. By setting this opera in southern Appalachia, it also allowed Floyd to compose in the style that he was most drawn to, which was based on American folk music conventions and was popularized by fellow American composer, Aaron Copland, and was not forced to compose in the European style of serialism that was the main style of composition at this time.

Chapter Two: Musical Analysis of Selected Sections of *Susannah*

At first glance, the music in *Susannah* appears simple, especially compared to the compositions of other famous American opera or operetta composers like Leonard Bernstein's 1956 operetta *Candide* and Gian Carlo Menotti's 1947 opera *The Medium* or his 1950 opera *The Consul*. Like Aaron Copland's ballet *Appalachian Spring* and Douglas Moore's opera *The Ballad of Baby Doe*, Floyd composed in a style that embraced American folk traditions and customs in both music and plot. When the music that Floyd composed is analyzed further, the seemingly simplistic nature of Floyd's compositional style shows two distinct styles. Most of Floyd's compositions in this opera are composed using Appalachian folk music conventions of both ballad and religious music; however, Floyd employs twentieth century operatic conventions when composing for the role of Susannah as a method of creating distance between her character from the townspeople through the style of music composition for the characters, echoing the plot of the opera.

In the southern Appalachian region, music played a large role in the development of traditional culture. Traditional American folk song style evolved from the hymns and ballads that the Ulster Scots, or Scots-Irish, brought over when they left their homeland of Northern Ireland. The religious element of this region's music is also a result of the Scots-Irish people and their desire to freely practice their own faith in the United States, something they were not permitted to do in Ireland. Because Floyd solely employed the folk music of the Scots-Irish people, for this thesis, folk song will refer to what Abrahams and Foss call the "folksong style of white rural cultures in America."²⁷

²⁷ Roger D. Abrahams and George Foss, *Anglo-American Folksong Style* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1968), 4.

The study of Appalachian folk music has allowed modern day musicologists and historians to catalogue and understand a culture that is still deeply connected to its roots and has not undergone much cultural change, in terms of morals and beliefs, as seen through the research by John Lomax and Ruth Crawford Seeger in *Our Singing Country: Folksongs and Ballads*. Because the families who have lived in the region for generations have preserved Appalachian musical traditions through the passing down of songs in the traditional oral method as well as the more modern method of writing them down, it allows researchers to have a look into the past to see how music played a role in the development of the region's culture. Much of the research performed by individuals like John Lomax and Ruth Crawford Seeger provided the basis for the definition of Anglo-American folksong from the South. In composing *Susannah*, Carlisle Floyd drew from his personal experiences from his childhood in this region.

Ballads tend to address topics like “personal commentary or expression of emotion, religious sentiment, social attitudes or relations.”²⁸ Because art forms are deeply interwoven into the social culture of this region, it is only appropriate that the artistic choices musicians would make, as far as content and style, reflect the traditional and conservative nature of traditional Appalachian culture, which stresses traditional values and a strong adherence to the moral code that is present in this region.

Music from the Appalachian region is heavily story based and was often passed down orally. These songs presented a clear and linear story line for ease of memorization as well as for the ease of the listener, but the performer would often perform an action called “leap and linger,” in which they would jump from plot point to plot point, spending unequal amounts of time on

²⁸ Robert V. Wells, *Life Flows on in Endless Song: Folk Songs and American History* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2009), 200.

elements in an effort to stress the important sections that add to the moral of the song. For example, in the genre of murdered girl ballads, performers would focus on the actions that resulted in the girl's predicament, often an out-of-wedlock pregnancy, skip the murder, and then jump to the punishment for the murderer, if he was truly punished in real life, before stating the moral.

In terms of morality, Appalachian folk song discussed the need for observance of a strict set of morally acceptable behaviors in society. This theme drives the central conflict in *Susannah* when the elders, unable to control their lust for her beauty when they see her bathing, make the congregation shun her for being promiscuous. Because Appalachian folk music presented a rather traditional view on all aspects discussed the stories used for the text were often about morality in terms of gender relations and amorous relationships between men and women, culminating in the creation of the murdered girl ballads mentioned earlier, like "Omie Wise" in 1808. These songs were widely used as a cautionary tale for young men and women about what would happen if they were not abstinent before marriage. While murdered girl ballads are the most famous of the morality driven songs, other folk songs, like "Mattie Groves" (Child 81) had similar warnings about not observing social norms in relationships.²⁹

If they survive, the backlash that the female characters face in these songs, particularly by and from other females, shows female listeners how their reputation would suffer, potentially excluding them from society, making them an outsider because of what happens to the characters

²⁹ Child numbers were assigned to a set of 305 traditional English and Scottish ballads by Francis James Child that were published in *The English and Scottish Popular Ballads* between 1882 and 1898 in their original form. Because the text of each song varied according to location due to the nature of oral preservation, making it difficult to refer to these songs by title, Child produced the most accurate manner in which to refer to these songs. However, not all folk songs have Child numbers, only those that were catalogued by Child during his research. "Mattie Groves" discusses the need for men to be morally strong when they are tempted by women.

in the song. For men, it's quite the opposite as quite often the women bear the social stigmatization in full. This could be based off of the view at the time of composition, in the nineteenth century, that women were siren-like in nature, tempting men to stray from the path of morality by being "lustful and passionate, easily leading [men] into sin for her own pleasure,"³⁰ as seen in "Mattie Groves." This dichotomy eventually weakened, but it still remains in practice in modern-day Appalachia as well as the United States as a whole.

In *Susannah*, the title character's second aria, "The trees on the mountain are cold and bare," the Act II, scene 1, shows Floyd's adaptation of the moral driven folk song. After Susannah's very public shaming during the camp meeting, she returns to her home to find it empty. As she sits on the porch she sings of the sadness and loneliness a woman feels after her lover seduced her and then ran away, stating:

SUSANNAH:

The trees on the mountain are cold and bare
 The summer jes' vanished an' left them there
 Like a false hearted lover jes' like my own
 Who made me love him, then left me alone.

The reason for her lover's departure is explained in the third stanza, as the Susannah sings, "My heart wants warmin'/my baby a name." While not a murdered girl ballad, it shares the same moral that many of those songs taught about needing to abstain from sexual behavior until marriage as there would be negative repercussions if an individual, particularly a woman, did engage in that behavior.

³⁰ Wells, *Life Flows on in Endless Song*, 17.

The emphasis on the observation of strict morals in this aria is evocative of the emphasis on conservative social culture in Appalachian folk music. However, this aria also uses the ballad aspect of leap and linger that was discussed earlier as well as the use of repetition to aid in memorization to be passed down orally. In the leap and linger technique, the performer would often jump from plot point to plot point, spending unequal amounts of time on elements in an effort to stress the important sections that add to the moral of the song. Throughout the aria, Susannah restates the phrase “who made me love him, then left me alone,” reiterating not only was the woman in the song left alone by her lover, but also by those around her. The moral of the aria acts as a warning for women, like the one in the song, who are sexually promiscuous as to what the potential social repercussions may be for their activities. By painting this melancholy picture through the text and minor tonality setting, it shows the severity and gravity of breaking the social norm of abstaining from sexual activity until marriage. Just as Susannah finishes this aria, Rev. Blich appears out of the shadows, noting the beauty of Susannah’s voice and he asks Susannah where she learned it. She responds, “My mama taught it to me a long time ago,” showing the oral nature of the piece and how it was passed down through generations by ear instead of being written down.

Despite all of the similarities between this aria and folk music traits, Floyd does deviate from folk music style at times in this aria. Traditionally folk music is presented in a linear format to aid the memorization of the singer, but Floyd eliminates this aspect by jumping between present and future in the text of this aria. Susannah sings of the present when she states “the trees on the mountain are cold and bare” but regresses to the past with “the summer jes’ vanished and left them there” as well as thinking of her “false-hearted lover.” Her thoughts move even further

into the future when she sings, “the road up ahead lies lonely an’ far,” but she returns to the present when her thoughts again return to her former lover.

Throughout the opera, Susannah’s melodies are the least folk-like in composition as the citizens of New Hope Valley view her as an outcast due to her beauty and assumed sexual behavior. Of her two arias, “The trees on the mountain are cold and bare” is by far the most folk like. At first glance, this aria appears rather simplistic and in the same style as much of the rest of the opera. The aria is centered tonally around g minor, reflecting the sadness that Susannah is feeling as a result of being falsely accused for a sin she did not commit. Melodically, it is pentatonic in nature, which was common in folk ballads.³¹ Floyd’s use of a minor pentatonic scale is even more evocative of Appalachian folk music as the minor version of this scale was most often used in this region. The music and text both have a verse-verse-refrain relationship with the same melodic content occurring for all the verses and different melodic idea that occurs for every refrain. Each verse or chorus consists of two four-measure phrases or one eight-measure period as seen in Figure 2.1, with the first phrase underlined in pink and the second in blue:

³¹ A pentatonic scale is comprised of five notes instead of the seven found in the traditional Western classical scale. Folk songs, like “Oh Susanna,” use pentatonic melodies and the pentatonic scale was used in both English and Irish folk music, two influences on Appalachian folk music.

Andante piangendo (♩ = 96)
SUSANNAH

The trees on the mountains are cold and bare. The summer jes' vanished an'

Phrase 1

p ma sonoro

4
left them there like a false-hearted lover jes' like my own who made me love him, then left me alone. The

Phrase 2

sempre arpeggiando
mf

Figure 2.1: *Susannah*, “The trees on the mountains are cold and bare,” mm.1-8.

When each verse is occurs, there are very few, if any changes between the previous iteration. Each verse is four lines, like folk ballads typically were for ease of memorization. The single outlier occurs on the third repetition where the text is more closely related to Susannah’s current situation and her own feeling of loneliness versus the rest of the aria, which has some distance between text and Susannah’s situation. This is dictated not as much by the text on its own, but by the change in tonal center as pictured in Figure 2.2. While still notated in g minor, this section was written in e-flat minor, which Floyd notated with accidentals instead of changing keys.

25 ¹¹
 Sus. road up a - head lies lone - ly an' far. There's dark-ness a - round me an' not - e - ven a star to
 e-flat: i v VI iv i VI⁷ II^{#7} i i

29
 Sus. show me the way or light - en my heart. Come back, my lov - er, I fain - would start. The
 sost. pp colla voce
 #II⁶ v VI⁷ IV⁷ V i V i

Figure 2.2: *Susannah*, “The trees on the mountains are cold and bare,” mm. 25-32

This verse modulates from g minor to e-flat minor, and while this is a closely related key, the change is abrupt due to the strophic nature of the piece. He also uses chords that are more complex than would have been found in folk music, like the \flat II⁶, or the Neapolitan chord, on the first beat of measure 29 in Figure 2.2. This, coupled with the change in accompaniment texture from an arpeggiated to block chord accompaniment, signifies to the listener that there is something about this verse that is different from the rest. The stability and resolute nature of the chord-based accompaniment in this section, compared to the flowing and quasi-unstable nature of the arpeggiated accompaniment in the rest of the aria, echoes Susannah’s desire to prove her innocence and persevere and shows that she is unwavering in her convictions about her innocence, but it is combined with a very ominous and melancholy melody line that is identical

intervallically to that of the previous verse, showing the hints of doubt she is beginning to have about her situation.

If Floyd had solely used folk song conventions, these deviations in style would not have occurred. “The trees on the mountains are cold and bare” adheres to the verse-refrain aspect of folk music, quite literally as there is a pattern of verse-verse-refrain. However, because this deviation in the middle it still gives Susannah an aria that does not fully fit the criteria of a folk song, thus highlighting her inability to fit in to the community in which she grew up despite her efforts to do so.

Susannah’s first aria, “Ain’t it a pretty night,” provides a stark contrast to “The trees on the mountain are cold and bare.” This aria occurs towards the beginning of Act I, prior to the Elders’ false allegations, when Susannah is talking to her friend Little Bat about how she wants to leave New Hope Valley but is afraid that she would miss her home. This aria is fundamentally different from “The trees on the mountains are cold and bare.” Where folk music is predictable in its form, twentieth century opera conventions were not, and “Ain’t it a pretty night” shows Floyd’s use of this style in his creation of an aria that is “formally and tonally irregular.”³² When it is analyzed under classical form conventions, it does not fit any of the standard classical vocal

³² Shannon Cole, "Exploring Performance-oriented Analysis through an Examination of the Title Character's Two Arias in Carlisle Floyd's *Susannah*" (University of Ottawa, 2008), 2008, 33, accessed November 19, 2016, <https://ruor.uottawa.ca/handle/10393/27673>.

forms found in operatic literature, as it is best categorized as a through composed aria.³³ A through composed aria consists of musical material that does not fully repeat after it occurs the first time. It could be better classified as “musical theatre rather than opera”³⁴ due to its lack of adherence to strict form and how it was composed around the text instead of writing the text to fit the music.

Melodically and harmonically, this aria is much more complex than the aria previously discussed. While “The trees on the mountains are cold and bare” begins with an interval of a perfect fifth with the vocal line D5 played in the orchestral accompaniment, “Ain’t it a pretty night” begins with an unaccompanied major seventh from a G-flat4 to an F5 that is then echoed by the horns in the following measure, seen in Figure 2.3:

Figure 2.3: *Susannah*, “Ain’t it a pretty night,” mm. 4-8, First Melodic Fragment

³³ Classical vocal forms are used to describe how opera arias and art songs are typically structured. There are exceptions to these forms, but most vocal works fit one of the main forms of strophic, binary, or ternary. Strophic songs or arias have one large musical section that repeats with different text, but the music does not change with each repeat. This form is often notated as A, with repetitions designated as A^(^o). Binary songs and arias have two musically distinct sections, resulting in a notation of AB. In a ternary form, there are two distinct section, but the first repeats after the second, creating three sections in total and a notation of ABA^(^o). The ^o symbol designates if the section is similar enough to warrant the letter of a previous section, but there are small enough changes to be aware of when studying or performing the aria or song.

³⁴ Cole, "Exploring Performance-oriented Analysis through an Examination of the Title Character's Two Arias in Carlisle Floyd's *Susannah*," 33.

The through composed nature of this aria makes it difficult to track melodic progression. There are two melodic fragments that repeat, but this does not create a song that is easy to memorize, like folk music should be in order to learn the song by ear. The first melodic fragment, pictured above, repeats, but it appears modified each time in terms of rhythm or subtle melodic changes. The text that is sung with this motive never changes. It is always, “Ain’t it a pretty night,” showing a connection to the repetition of text in folk music style. However, the second repetitive melodic fragment does not help fill this requirement. It is modified for a specific purpose each time it reappears, like in Figure 2.4.



Figure 2.4: *Susannah*, “Ain’t it a pretty night,” m. 10, Second Melodic Fragment

When this fragment reappears, it is adapted to fit the speech pattern of the phrase, with Floyd dividing or lengthening each rhythmic idea to set the phrase in a speech like manner, drawing from the *Sprechstimme* and *Sprechgesang* tradition.³⁵ In this initial occurrence, the stressed words, “sky’s” and “velvet,” each receive a longer note value that corresponds with how

³⁵ *Sprechstimme* or *Sprechgesang* are vocal techniques of the expressionist movement. It is closely related to operatic recitative, which acts as the dialogue in most opera styles and eras. For Floyd, he employed the technique of *Sprechgesang* more than *Sprechstimme*. *Sprechgesang* was still sung when performed, but required the singer to articulate the words quickly in a speech-like pattern. By doing this, Floyd was able to rhythmically score the correct inflection and speech patterns of the region. *Sprechstimme* is less sung and closer to quasi-pitched speaking. This was used more often in the compositions of the Second Viennese School, most notably in Schoenberg’s 1912 melodrama for soprano and instrumental quintet, *Pierrot Lunaire*.

the sentence would be spoken. When this is compared to a restatement of this idea later in the aria, different rhythmic values are assigned to make it stress the appropriate words as well as fit the correct number of syllables in a natural manner, like in Figure 2.5:

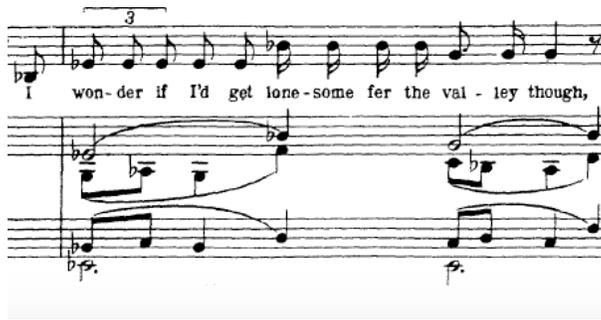


Figure 2.5: *Susannah*, “Ain’t it a pretty night,” m. 38, Second Melodic Fragment restatement

Floyd uses style as a way to convey the social acceptability of a character in a musical and auditory manner. *Susannah*’s first act aria is one of the arias in the opera that is most like the compositions of Floyd’s contemporaries. Because *Susannah* is considered to be an outsider by the townspeople, Floyd created this distance between them by giving her musical ideas a different level of complexity as well as a different and less predictable and structured tonal progression compared to the simple folk influenced melodies of the townspeople.

In composing “Ain’t it a pretty night,” Floyd deviated from folk tradition and embraced the modern musical conventions of early twentieth century opera. The phrase lengths are irregular, there are multiple meter shifts, and Floyd used large amounts of chromaticism, as seen in Figure 2.6.

Figure 2.6: *Susannah*, “Ain’t it a pretty night,” m. 43-44, Use of Chromaticism

By doing this, he created a dichotomy between the music that socially and culturally appropriate characters sing in a more folk-like style, to that of *Susannah*. This highlights the outsider-like nature of this character in her town. Floyd did this to not only create drama through music, but to highlight the distance between the two groups of characters, those who are considered outsiders or “foreign” and those who are viewed as adhering to cultural beliefs and norms.

In addition to the use of folk music conventions of morality through his adaptation of the murdered girl ballad genre, Floyd highlighted other musical aspects of Appalachian culture in his ensemble numbers, particularly the Act I opening square-dance scene and the revival scene in Act II. Because religion played such a strong role in the social culture of Appalachia, it’s only fitting that it would have a strong impact on music and music culture. Many songs integrated the idea of fatalism that was prevalent in Appalachian religious teachings and beliefs, such as “Zion’s Walls,” made famous by Aaron Copland’s *Old American Songs*.³⁶ Fatalism in music is

³⁶ In religion, fatalism is the belief that a person’s fate is decided by God. Because a person’s fate had already been decided, many southern Appalachian churches emphasized the relationship between the individual and God as they felt that, due to fatalism, death was unpredictable and something that they needed to prepare for in order to secure their place in Heaven.

seen quite often in southern gospel music, a style based off of Appalachian traditions, in works like “Will the Circle Be Unbroken?” by the Carter Family as well as “I’ll Fly Away” by Albert Brumley. This element is heavily employed in the revival scene in *Susannah*.

Much of Appalachian music has roots in psalmody, or psalm singing. This style of singing traveled across the Atlantic Ocean with the original Ulster Scots immigrants. Although sacred music has historically been a part of American music, it took many years for the religious aspect of English psalms to join with folk music, creating much of what we consider to be Appalachian folk music today. Like secular Appalachian folk music, psalmody followed the same path of transmission as hymns were originally sung and learned aurally, but were written down for preservation as well as ease of transmission; however, as settlers began to distance themselves from their home country, their style of singing changed. Appalachian congregations embraced the freedom in expression and fluidity because they found it a welcome break from what they viewed as a rigid and emotionless tradition. To make this the musical norm, simple books of psalms and hymns were printed with just the single vocal line to allow for improvisation.

The original hymnals used were shape note hymnals, which were the “first widely recognized form of religious folk music”³⁷ and they often had a social component. Also called sacred harp singing after the publication of *The Sacred Harp*, a popular shape note tune book, this style of writing and singing made multi-part music accessible to all, not just those who were able to read music, the opposite of traditional hymns taught in singing schools. The performance of this music is not known for its beauty, but for its connection between the singer and the text

³⁷ Lornell, *Exploring American Folk Music*, 120.

and notes. It is never accompanied by instruments, focusing on the relationship between the singer and the text, therefore the relationship between the singer and God.

To make it easy for all to read, instead of using traditional music notation, scores were notated with shapes instead of note heads, each corresponding to a single note in the scale.³⁸ The use of shapes allowed individuals to sing without having to worry about knowing the key signature or the letter name of the notes, but to instead sing according to the shape they saw as seen in “I’m Going Home” from *The Sacred Harp*. “I’m Going Home” also shows the use of fatalism in Appalachian music through phrases like “I’m glad that I was born to die” and “Farewell, vain world, I’m going home!/My Savior smiles and bids me come.”

282 **I'M GOING HOME, L.M.**
"And I will rejoice in Jerusalem, and joy in my people; and the voice of weeping shall be no more heard in her, nor the voice of crying." -- Isa. 65:19.

F Major Leonard P. Breelove, 1850.

1. Farewell, vain world! I'm going home! My Savior smiles and bids me come, And I don't care to stay here long!
 Sweet angels beckon me away, To sing God's praise in endless day, And I don't care to stay here long!

2. I'm glad that I am born to die, From grief and woe my soul shall fly, And I don't care to stay here long!
 Bright angels shall convey me home, A way to New Jerusalem, And I don't care to stay here long!

Right up yonder, Christians, away up yonder; O, yes, my Lord, for I don't care to stay here long.

Right up yonder, Christians, away up yonder; O, yes, my Lord, for I don't care to stay here long.

Figure 2.7: “I’m Going Home, 282,” *The Sacred Harp*, 1991 Edition³⁹

³⁸ Shape note hymns played a large role in camp meetings, as a large percentage of the public knew these songs in the Appalachian region. Hymns originally composed in a minor tonality would sometimes be changed to a major key to represent the emotional content of the Originally there were only four note shapes on *fa, sol, la*, giving it the name *fasola* singing in some areas. They were able to use three symbols to represent the major scale as the relationship between whole steps and half steps of a major scale was able to be created with these three notes. Eventually, it changed to a single shape for each note of the scale.

³⁹ Leonard P. Breelove, “I’m Going Home, 282,” *The Sacred Harp*, 1991 Edition, photograph, <http://www.sacredharpbremen.org/lieder/200-bis-299/282-i-m-going-home>

Shape note hymns were most commonly presented in four-part voicing with the melody given to the tenors and often were rhythmically homophonic. They were typically in simple meters and were written a strophic AB form, meaning there were two distinct sections that repeated with different text. Like folk ballads, these songs often had a verse-refrain relationship. Melodies often came from broadside ballads or fiddle tunes that were reworked into singable melodies that mainly used stepwise motion. Rhythmically, sacred harp hymns were mostly comprised of quarter notes, with eighth notes and half notes occurring as well. Often times, composers of these songs disregarded musical part writing rules using concepts like parallel fifths and octaves, creating an open and haunting sound that was full of open fourths and open fifths.

Notation also often neglected to include accidentals, which mainly impacted songs in the minor mode. Singers would naturally and unconsciously raise or lower the sixth scale degree of these songs depending to how they originally learned the tune. This lack of accidental notation, combined with the modal and open sound, is very evocative of Renaissance music because it creates a type of *musica ficta*. Today, this term is “applied to all unnotated inflections inferred from the context, for editorial or ‘performers,’ accidentals rather than notated ones,”⁴⁰ much like the performance practice of sacred harp singing. This style of music also borrowed other early western European music traditions such as *notes inégales*, or the dotting of eighth notes that were written without dots or over dotted already dotted rhythms, which was often seen in French baroque music. This is most easily observed in the opening and revival scenes in *Susannah*,

⁴⁰ Margaret Bent and Alexander Silbiger. "Musica ficta." *Grove Music Online. Oxford Music Online*. Oxford University Press, accessed September 27, 2016, <http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/subscriber/article/grove/music/19406>.

which are the two major ensemble numbers in the opera. Examples of *notes inégales* are pictured in Figure 2.8 and 2.9:



Figure 2.8: “Easter Anthem, 236 by William Billings,” *The Sacred Harp*⁴¹



Figure 2.9: “Realized Rhythm of Easter Anthem by Billings,” *The Sacred Harp*⁴²

In *Susannah*, Floyd uses the folk music conventions of modality and rhythm to continue to incorporate folk music ideas. As a whole, the music in *Susannah* is “folk-like, primarily diatonic with a strong modal influence and with simple rhythmic construction.”⁴³ This is seen from the beginning of the opera. At the opening of Act I begins with a violin solo that is dance-like, echoing the setting of a town dance, that is pictured in Figure 2.10:

⁴¹ “Easter Anthem, 236 by William Billings,” *The Sacred Harp*, photograph, 2005, <https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/3/39/BillingsEasterAnthemPassage2.PNG>

⁴² “Realized Rhythm of Easter Anthem by Billings,” *The Sacred Harp*, photograph, 2005, <https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/2/2a/BillingsEasterAnthemPassage2Dotted.PNG>

⁴³ Wes Flinn, *Baudrillard in New Hope Valley: Motive and Simulacrum in Carlisle Floyd's Susannah*, *Academia*, October 2012, 6, accessed November 19, 2016, http://www.academia.edu/9585386/Baudrillard_in_New_Hope_Valley_Motive_and_Simulacrum_in_Carlisle_Floyds_Susannah.



Figure 2.10: *Susannah*, Opening scene, violin solo, piano reduction score, mm. 1-7

It is not rhythmically complex, consisting of eighth and sixteenth notes. When the rest of the orchestra enters, the violin continues its four-measure idea and the harmony played underneath it echoes the unaffected and almost pentatonic nature of the violin solo melody, playing effectively a block chord accompaniment. This shows the influence of modality and the openness of folk music as employed by Floyd, seen in the bass line of the piano reduction in Figure 2.11. Also in Figure 2.11, the accompaniment shows the use of quartal and quintal harmonies. This type of chordal harmony is based on the intervals between the notes in the chord. Quartal harmony consists of intervals of fourths, whether they be perfect, augmented, or diminished. Quintal harmony consists of either perfect, augmented, or diminished fifths. In this example, Floyd used quintal harmonies in the repeated chord in the second through beginning of the sixth measure. The repeated chord in measures two through five consists of stacked fifths: G2 to D3 and D3 to A3. Each of these is a perfect fifth. On the first beat of the fifth measure in Figure 2.11, the chord consists of stacked perfect fifths as well: D2 to A2 and A2 to E3. Floyd employed quintal and quartal harmonies in other folk-influenced sections, like the Jaybird song Sam sings to Susannah in Act I, Scene 2.

The image shows a musical score for the opening scene of Susannah, measures 7-14. The score is in G major and 2/4 time. It features a piano accompaniment with a melody in the right hand and a bass line in the left hand. The first system (measures 7-10) is marked 'simile' and 'f quasi pizz.'. The second system (measures 11-14) is marked 'sp. sost.' and includes a circled '1' above the first measure of the second system.

Figure 2.11: *Susannah*, Opening scene, accompaniment, mm. 7-14

Throughout this scene, this unaffected style continues until Mrs. Hayes, one of the Elders' wives, begins to talk about Susannah and the orchestra becomes more agitated and less folk-like. Not only did Floyd attempt to create a separation between Susannah and the townspeople through Susannah's arias, he changes styles when Susannah is simply talked about. Before being introduced to Susannah, as she is gossiped about by the Elders' wives before she sings her first line, the listener can infer that Susannah is not liked by the townspeople because of the shift from the unaffected, folk-like style of the square dance music in Figure 2.11 to a more dissonant and less buoyant style. The melody and harmony become less diatonic and the rhythms, while not rhythmically complex, become less stable. The mentioning of Susannah sparks this change in style as right from the start as Floyd attempted to create a musical distance between Susannah and the townspeople that echoed the distance in their relationship. and no

longer create the steadiness of the prior section's reliance on beats one and three as seen in Figure 2.12:

turn to observe Susannah. By the end of Mrs. McLean's outburst, they are nodding their heads in assent.)

Mrs. McLean

Show-in' her-self to all the men. Look at her throw-in' her head back and look at the cut of her dress, but

simile (quasi pizz.) mp

p

Mrs. McLean

what could you ex-pect but a wench of a girl who was raised by a drunk-en broth-er? That

mf

Figure 2.12: *Susannah*, Opening scene, mm. 64-68

There is also some rhythmic tension between the vocal line and the orchestral accompaniment that echoes the shift in mood from lighthearted and happy, as seen in the violin solo line and the bouncy and rhythmically accompaniment, to strained and disjointed when Mrs. McLean begins to sing about her opinions of Susannah. This emphasizes the fact that Susannah does not quite fit in with the people of New Hope Valley. This is created by the use of triplets over duples as seen in the second and third measures of Figure 2.12, creating rhythmic tension.

The second large ensemble scene is the revival scene that occurs towards the beginning of Act II. After Susannah is seen bathing in the creek, the Elders and townspeople shun her until she admits to her sin in front of the congregation. At her brother Sam's urging, Susannah attends

the church meeting that Rev. Blich is presiding over where the Reverend and townspeople demand her confession. When Susannah realizes what they are doing, she screams and runs out of the service back to her home. To compose this scene, Floyd employed the religious and communal aspects of folk music.

The communal nature of Appalachian religious singing can be observed in this scene from the start of the first song. The ensemble sings throughout a majority of this scene, pausing only for Rev. Blich's sung sermon. In composing this scene, Floyd borrowed elements of shape note singing. By setting the opening of the first revival hymn, "Are you saved from sin?" a capella, it connects to the a capella tradition of shape note singing that was prevalent in the Southern United States.⁴⁴ In revivals or camp meetings in particular, there were rarely any instruments present or instruments loud enough to aid the congregation, so songs were performed with only voices. He used a four part composition style, but he moved the melody from the tenor line, where it would historically be sung in shape note singing, to the soprano line, where it is typically written in both modern day hymns as well as most operatic ensemble numbers.

The style of singing in the revival scene is a mixture of the unaffected style of shape notes and the technique-based style of operatic singing. In the stage directions, Floyd indicated that the choir should sing "lustly" and is should "not be a parody" of summer revivals. While the dotted rhythms are written in the score, it evokes the use of *notes inégales*. It follows the typical AB strophic setting and the text is the same for each repetition. The text is broken into two sections, A and B:

⁴⁴ *A capella* singing means that the songs were performed without instruments. For Appalachian folk music, hymns were often performed in four part voicings and used shape notes.

CONGREGATION:

Are you saved from sin, ready to meet your Lord?

Has his blood made you free from the avenging sword?

A

Get down upon your knees, accept the saving grace.

Are you ready to meet your Savior face to face?

Free from sin, yes Lord!

B

Free from sin am I!

And I'm going to meet him with the saints on high

Musically, the A and B texts are each set with a different musical idea and can be seen in

Figure 2.13 and 2.14.

Allegro deciso (♩ = 112)

CH O I R

Soprano
Alto
Tenor
Bass

Are... you saved from sin, read-y to meet your Lord? Has His blood made you free from the a -

veng - ing sword? Get down u - pon your knees, ac - cept the sav - ing grace. Are you

Figure 2.13: *Susannah*, Revival scene, “Opening Hymn: Are you saved from sin?” Fragment of A section, ensemble only, mm. 1-7

Free from sin, yes Lord! Free from sin, am I. And I'm
 Free from sin, yes Lord! Free from sin, am I. And I'm
 Free from sin, yes Lord! Free from sin, am I. And I'm
 Free from sin, yes Lord! Free from sin, am I. And I'm

going to meet Him with the saints on high.
 going to meet Him with the saints on high.
 going to meet Him with the saints on high.
 going to meet Him with the saints on high.

Figure 2.14: *Susannah*, Revival scene, “Opening Hymn: Are you saved from sin?,” Fragment of B section, ensemble only, mm. 9-11

Both the strophic nature of this piece and the repetition of text are evocative of folk music qualities. It is easy to memorize, but it is also easy to learn. At camp revivals, preachers would choose these kinds of simple songs in order to allow for all to participate. Those who had the ability to read music to learn these songs by reading, but it also allowed those who did not have this ability to learn them by ear due to the repetitive nature of the melody and the text. In *Susannah*, this is shown by having the full ensemble participate in this scene, showing that not only was this an important cultural event for New Hope Valley, but it was something that was supposed to be welcoming to all.

Floyd nullified the welcoming nature of these meetings by making the content obviously targeted at Susannah as the revival continues, culminating with her screaming “No!” on a C6 and running out of the church during the third and final song of the revival, breaking the communal aspect of the scene, pictured in Figure 2.15:

The musical score is for a revival scene. It features four vocal parts (Soprano, Alto, Tenor, Bass) and a piano accompaniment. The lyrics are: "bought so dear. Don't wait till dark-ness turns in - to light... Come, sin-ner. Come, sin-ner. Come, sin-ner. Come!" The tempo is marked "molto accelerando". The piano part includes markings "sempre cresc. e sonoramente" and "molto cresc.". The Soprano solo part for Susannah has the lyrics "SUSANNAH" and "No! No!". The piano part includes the instruction "(Showing)" and "Receive the benediction."

Figure 2.15: *Susannah*, Revival scene: “Alter Call: Come, Sinner, tonight’s the night” verse 2,” mm. 20-26

By having Susannah not only not participate in the music of the revival meeting but making her pierce through the congregation’s hymn, Floyd once again shows her inability or a lack of desire to conform to the cultural standards of the town, further ostracizing her as a result of the pointed nature of the congregation’s words. The continued shunning of Susannah after she runs out of the meeting illustrates how resistant and fearful New Hope Valley’s citizens are of behaviors and ideas that do not fit their cultural norms.

However, there are some differences between Floyd’s revival hymns and traditional Appalachian hymns. The range in this hymn is much larger than what would have been found in a traditional Baptist or Methodist hymnal. The melody line of “Are you saved from sin” has a range from E-flat4 to G5. Floyd also composed accompaniment after the initial a capella section,

but “has little to do with the hymn melody, but rather, supplies harsh chordal bursts that occur in a syncopated fashion,”⁴⁵ as depicted in Figure 2.16:

The musical score for piano accompaniment is presented in two systems. The first system includes a vocal line with lyrics: "I don't want to hear no sound of pocket change in them dishpans. Let's praise the Lord". The piano accompaniment features a syncopated bass line with harsh chordal bursts. The score includes dynamic markings such as *fz*, *mf*, and *ma sempre marcato*. A circled number "61" is placed above the piano part. The second system includes a vocal line with lyrics: "with what we give to His servants. Remember the widder's mite, brethren! Remember the widder's mite." The piano accompaniment continues with dynamic markings *mp* and *f subito*.

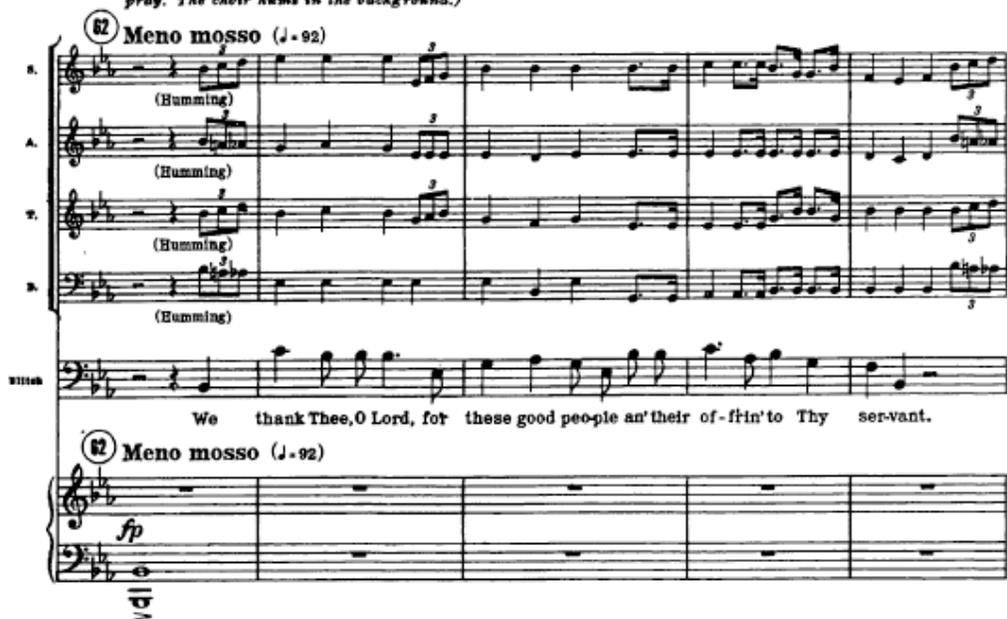
Figure 2.16: *Susannah*, Revival Scene, “Opening Hymn Accompaniment: Are you saved from sin?,” mm. 8-15

It then returns to an a capella section where the choir accompanies Rev. Olin Blicht, humming the opening hymn, during his opening prayer:

⁴⁵ Keisha D. Cook, *Historical and Musical Context of the Characters in Carlisle Floyd's Susannah*, PhD diss., Ball State University, 2013, 106, accessed January 1, 2016, <http://cardinalsolar.bsu.edu/handle/123456789/197779>, 106

(The Elders have come down to the front and put the dishpans on the table in front of the pulpit. Blich raises his hand as soon as the Elders have returned to their seats, and, lifting his head, he closes his eyes tightly to pray. The choir hums in the background.)

62 **Meno mosso** (♩ = 92)



S.
A.
T.
B.

(Humming)

(Humming)

(Humming)

(Humming)

PIANO

We thank Thee, O Lord, for these good people an' their of-fritin' to Thy ser-vant.

62 **Meno mosso** (♩ = 92)

fp

Figure 2.17: *Susannah*, Revival Scene, “Opening Hymn: Are you saved from sin?,” mm. 26-30

The second hymn in the revival scene, “Come, sinner, tonight’s the night,” shows a different kind of hymn. It is still written in the traditional four-part voicing, but unlike the overall positive invitation hymn, this altar call is much more ominous. It occurs after Rev. Blich’s sermon where he describes what happens to a person if they do not repent. Blich has the congregation implore to those in attendance who have not repented to willingly and publicly confess their sins to save themselves and “to take a stand for God and the right [and] cast Satan out, redeem [their] sight” before it is too late. The text in this hymn also changes, but is centered around a refrain:

CONGREGATION:

Verse 1:

Come, sinner, tonight's the night
to take a stand for God and the right.

A

Cast Satan out, regain your sight.

Come, sinner, tonight's the night.

Verse 2:

Come, sinner, salvation is free.

A gift from God on Calvary.

A

That cross it sheds redeeming light.

Don't tarry, sinner, tonight's the night.

Refrain:

Come, yes, come and meet Him here.

Be washed in the blood that was bought so dear.

B

Don't wait till darkness turns into light.

Come, sinner, tonight's the night.

Unlike the invitation hymn, this altar call hymn does not follow as simple a structure. It is initially sung fully, with Verse 1 followed by Verse 2, and then the refrain, an AAB pattern.

After this, Verse 1 repeats, but the hymn has modulated from c-minor to e-flat-minor. While this is between closely related keys, it is uncommon to see this in a hymn tune as it makes it unpredictable for those who are unable to read music. This was especially true in revivals where few individuals were musically literate. The use of minor keys was odd as well as revival hymns were rarely performed in minor keys as participants felt that minor keys were too ominous and did not match the liveliness of the revival.

Figure 2.18: *Susannah*, Revival Scene, “Alter Call Hymn: Come, sinner, tonight’s the night”

melody in c minor, mm. 1-8

Figure 2.19: *Susannah*, Revival Scene, “Alter Call Hymn: Come, sinner, tonight’s the night”

melody in e-flat minor, mm. 25-32

The altar call hymn has the same range as the first hymn, an octave plus a Major 3rd, but the tessitura is much higher in this hymn than the first, especially after the key change. Where the range of the first hymn and the initial c-minor section of the second hymn is from an E-flat4 to a G5, when it modulates, the range changes in the second hymn from a G-flat4 to a B-flat5. Traditional hymns rarely reach these upper pitches in an effort to allow non-classically trained singers the ability to perform the hymn. The pitch increases as the congregation’s pleas become more desperate and the tension builds over whether Susannah will repent or not. The accompaniment of this hymn is also more of mood creator than true accompaniment, except for

the final repetition of the refrain where the accompaniment is effectively a reduction of the choral part:

75) Più mosso (♩ = 56)

Come, yes, come and meet Him here. Be washed in the blood that was

Come, yes, come and meet Him here. Be washed in the blood that was

Come, yes, come and meet Him here. Be washed in the blood that was

Come, yes, come and meet Him here. Be washed in the blood that was

75) Più mosso (♩ = 56)

f con molto intensità

Figure 2.20: *Susannah*, Revival Scene, “Alter Call Hymn: Come, sinner, tonight’s the night” accompaniment, mm. 74-76

Other than this, the accompaniment echoes the “anxiety church members and Susannah are feeling is represented by the dense and highly rhythmic accompaniment,”⁴⁶ gradually dividing the duration as the intensity of the revival increases. It begins with octave dotted half and quarter notes in the lower instruments that is seen in Figure 2.16:

⁴⁶ Cook, *Historical and Musical Context of the Characters in Carlisle Floyd's Susannah*, 109

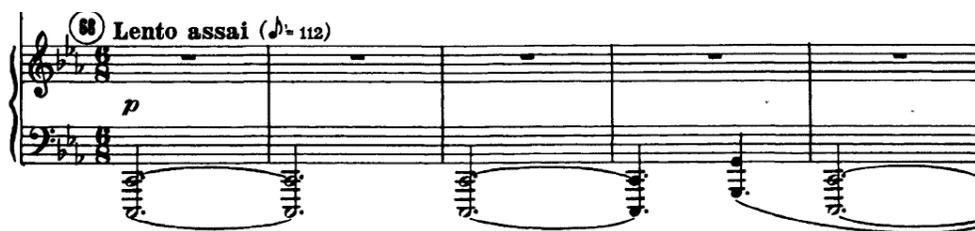


Figure 2.21: *Susannah*, Revival Scene, “Alter Call Hymn: Come, sinner, tonight’s the night”
accompaniment, mm. 1-5

It then picks up intensity by adding the same rhythmic and pitches in the upper instruments, but with opposite motion and adding eighth notes until it reaches peak intensity as Rev. Bitch continues to scream overtop the choir, “Tomorrow might be too late!,” seen in Figure 2.22:

Figure 2.22: *Susannah*, Revival Scene, “Alter Call Hymn: Come, sinner, tonight’s the night”
accompaniment, mm. 30-42

In this hymn, Floyd also employed specific musical choices to reflect the text and the setting. For example, Floyd used the minor seventh interval, creating a modal sound to the hymn as well as “creat[ing] a folkish color in the music that suggests a locale and an earlier time.”⁴⁷ He also used harmonic colorations to evoke the text, such as the use of a-flat minor chord on the word dark and a C Major chord on the word light in the same phrase:

The image shows a musical score for the hymn "Alter Call Hymn: Come, sinner, tonight's the night" from the play *Susannah*. The score consists of four staves of music. The lyrics are: "wait till dark-ness turns in - to light...". A blue box highlights the first two staves, which correspond to the lyrics "wait till dark-ness turns". Below this box is the label "a-flat minor". A pink box highlights the last two staves, which correspond to the lyrics "in - to light...". Below this box is the label "C Major".

Figure 2.23: *Susannah*, Revival Scene, “Alter Call Hymn: Come, sinner, tonight’s the night”
chord coloration, mm. 21-22

Despite the use of more modern elements, the revival scene is evocative of the music that was performed during revivals and camp meetings in Southern Appalachia. Floyd used folk music elements to create and highlight the cultural norms of New Hope Valley. Characters that

⁴⁷ Carlisle Floyd, qtd in Helen Smith, "Faith and Love in New Hope Valley: A Consideration of Community in Carlisle Floyd's *Susannah*," *American Music Research Center Journal* 21 (September 2012): 74, accessed December 12, 2016, <http://connection.ebscohost.com/c/articles/89573744/faith-love-new-hope-valley-consideration-community-carlisle-floyds-susannah>.

do not fully adhere to these beliefs are designated as outsiders by both the characters and action of the plot, but also by the lack of folk elements used in their arias. This is most noticeable with Susannah in her arias, when she is part of the ensemble, and when she is being talked about by the women of New Hope Valley. By doing this, Floyd separates her from the other townspeople, highlighting how different she is from everyone else and how her behavior makes them uncomfortable and fearful when she refuses to change to fit the cultural and social norms.

Carlisle Floyd used music to help distinguish which characters observe social norms are considered a part of society in New Hope Valley. Characters with socially acceptable behaviors tend to perform music that uses Appalachian folk music conventions of both ballad and religious music. For the role of Susannah, Floyd uses twentieth century operatic conventions to isolate her from the rest of the townspeople. Even when Susannah attempts to sing in a folk style, like in “The trees on the mountain are cold and bare,” there are still elements that make her vocal lines noticeable different from the other characters. The distance that Floyd created between characters as a result of musical styles is also created through how culturally acceptable their behaviors are when compared to the traditional social culture of Appalachia.

Chapter Three: Cultural Analysis of *Susannah*

Susannah is set in the fictional Southern Appalachian mountain town of New Hope Valley, Tennessee. In composing this opera, Floyd was able to accomplish two goals: to draw from his childhood experiences as the son of a traveling Methodist minister when scoring the opera, as well as to adapt the plot of the apocryphal tale of “Susannah and the Elders” while correctly applying Appalachian socio-cultural practices to the plot as well. Floyd was not particularly fond of his father’s religious revivals, where Rev. Floyd would invite “a revival specialist from outside the community, renowned for hellfire and damnation preaching,”⁴⁸ and young Carlisle would be forced to attend these revivals throughout the summer. When asked to describe his experiences, Carlisle Floyd showed disdain for these events, stating that they were days full of “a lot of preaching and a lot of eating.”⁴⁹ Because of his experience with these events, Floyd was able to accurately depict this culture and write in a manner that re-created his experiences growing up.

According to the Appalachian Regional Commission Appalachia can be broadly defined as “a 205,000-square-mile region that follows the spine of the Appalachian Mountains from southern New York to northern Mississippi.”⁵⁰ It is comprised of 420 counties in thirteen states and more than 25 million people call the Appalachian region home and is pictured in Figure 3.1:

⁴⁸ Holliday, *Falling Up*, 36.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 37.

⁵⁰ “The Appalachian Region,” Appalachian Regional Commission, 2016, accessed September 4, 2016, https://www.arc.gov/appalachian_region/theappalachianregion.asp.

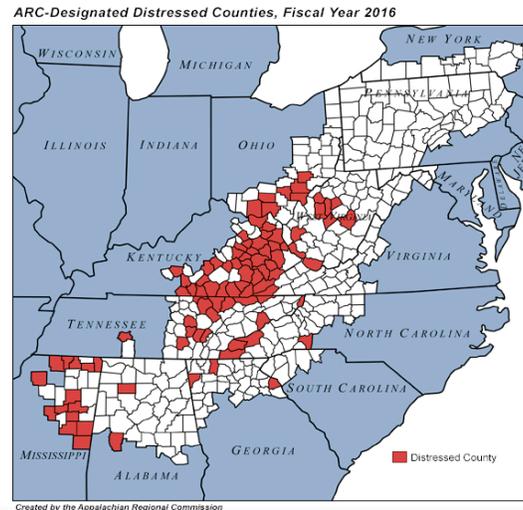


Figure 3.1: Map of ARC Designated Distressed Counties, Fiscal Year 2016, https://www.arc.gov/program_areas/MapofARCDesignatedDistressedCountiesFiscalYear2016.asp.

Appalachia is largely considered a rural area with forty-two percent of the population falling under this designation, compared to twenty percent of the national population.⁵¹ Since the creation of the Appalachian Regional Commission in the 1960s, data characterizes the region as having high poverty rates and lagging behind the nation in strength of education, health care, and transportation.⁵² Historically, there were few rigid divides based on wealth, but some did exist. This lack of wealth-based dividing lines carried through into the twentieth century. Farming was the typical job for an Appalachian family, and because of this, families were generally large. Coal mining was also a popular job because of the large amounts of the natural resource found in

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² . In fig. 3.1, the counties shaded in red, like Morgan County, Tennessee, where the physical New Hope Valley and where *Susannah's* fictional setting New Hope Valley is believed to be located, are considered economically distressed by the ARC, meaning they fall within the worst ten percent of all counties in the United States when compared to the national average in terms of poverty rate, per capita income, and unemployment.

the region. Generally, politics were kin-based and were instituted as a way to evaluate and assist the community as a whole.

The Appalachian region of the United States has been home to some of the most culturally and ethnically diverse communities; however, this region was - and is still - often generalized as being populated by white Anglo-Americans with roots in the Ulster region of modern-day Northern Ireland.⁵³ The earliest record of immigration into the Appalachian Mountains was between 1720 and 1770, when a group of Scots-Irish settlers moved away from Philadelphia and traveled down to the Shenandoah Valley in Virginia.⁵⁴ Because a large percentage of people of in Appalachia were of Ulster Scots descent, their traditions and values of this culture became the most predominantly practiced in the region, spreading that culture's behaviors and customs and permeating many other ethnic groups that had settled along side them. As a result, the culture and values of the Ulster Scots immigrants became the dominant culture of the Appalachian region.

Religion is heavily present in Appalachian social culture and has remained relatively fixed since the beginning of the twentieth century. Appalachian people practice in the same manner as their ancestors in hopes of achieving the "old time religion." Because religious persecution was one of the main reasons the Protestant Ulster Scots left predominantly Catholic Ireland and settled in the United States, it governs many aspects of culture still seen today due to its deep roots within the region.

⁵³ While a large percentage of the Appalachian population does fall into this demographic, there were many other ethnic groups that settled in the region, including Hungarians, Italians, and Melungeons, the ethnic group that had a mixture of European, African, and Native American ancestry

⁵⁴ John C. Campbell, "Pioneer Routes of Travel and Early Settlements," in *Appalachia: Social Context of Past and Present*, ed. Bruce Ergood and Bruce E. Kuhre (Dubuque, IA: Kendall/Hunt, 1976), 49.

Many residents of Appalachia do not consider themselves to be adherent to a certain denomination, but rather observe individual church traditions from multiple denominations. A majority of church traditions of Southern Appalachian people, like the characters in *Susannah*, tend to align with the Holiness Pentecostal church. They typically align with this church because of fundamentalist beliefs, such as being “saved” by spiritual rebirth and acts of repentance, as well as the charismatic Holiness Pentecostal church’s lack of association with other denominations (or even other Holiness Pentecostal churches).

Another strong concept in Appalachian religious culture is fatalism. Fatalism is defined as “the feeling that one’s destiny is in God’s hands.”⁵⁵ This idea is very clearly seen in Appalachian religious culture. Death was commonly thought of as unpredictable and something people needed to prepare for because it was not a conscious choice that a person could make. The idea of fatalism is strongly prevalent in the Holiness Pentecostal faith as seen through acts like faith healing. The concept of faith healing places the person’s fate fully in the hands of God for their healing, and if they don’t heal or they die, it was God’s will.

The term fundamentalism, in its most modern definition, is taken from a series of pamphlets that were published in the 1910s by the Bible Institute of Los Angeles called *The Fundamentals* as well as a magazine article by Curtis Lee Laws, a Baptist preacher, that defined a fundamentalist as “one who was ready to do ‘battle royal’ for the fundamentals of the faith.”⁵⁶ Eventually, a fundamentalist came to be known as an “evangelical [Christian] ... who in the

⁵⁵ Nathan L. Gerrard, "Churches of the Stationary Poor in Southern Appalachia," in *Appalachia: Its People, Heritage, and Problems*, ed. Frank S. Riddel (Dubuque, IA: Kendall/Hunt, 1974), 95.

⁵⁶ Barry Hankins, ed., *Evangelicalism and Fundamentalism: A Documentary Reader* (New York: New York University Press, 2008), 5.

twentieth century militantly opposed both modernism in theology and the cultural changes that modernism endorsed.”⁵⁷ Most fundamentalist Christian denominations believe in concepts such as biblical inerrancy and literalism, creationism, biblical womanhood and manhood, and a complementary view of gender.

Religion was often practiced in large services called camp meetings or revivals. Revivals were part of the Great Awakenings that occurred in American history. The first Great Awakening occurred between 1730 and the mid-1750s, mainly in New England. Around 1790, the Second Great Awakening began and lasted until the 1840s. This movement was seen outside of the northeastern United States, traveling down the Appalachian Mountains. The Third Great Awakening began in the 1850s and continued until the turn of the twentieth century. All of these movements used revivals to make their message reach a large group of people and many times the preachers would use the hellfire and damnation style of preaching. In the Second Great Awakening, the Holiness movement began to influence members of the Methodist Church, leading to the creation of the Pentecostal Church during the Third Great Awakening at the Azusa Street Revival on April 9, 1906. The revivals that Floyd experienced as a child were closely related to these as his father was a Methodist minister and there is a close connection between the Methodist Church and the Holiness Pentecostal Church.

The spirited revivals at these meetings often lasted several days as an effort spread religion and religious music across the country, but they also solidified the religious presence in the already “saved” communities. A traveling preacher, much like the character Rev. Olin Blich in *Susannah*, typically led these meetings. Music was used in events as a tool to reach the souls

⁵⁷ George M. Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture: The Shaping of Twentieth Century Evangelicalism, 1870-1925* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980), 117.

of individuals to begin a trance. These trances were identified as “holy whirling with visions of heaven dancing through their brains,”⁵⁸ as well as having wild gesticulations, leaping, and shouting.

While Appalachian culture is very pluralistic in many aspects, religion is not one of them. Religious beliefs may be used as a way to judge societal acceptability and to regulate behavior, but religion is practiced on an individual basis rather than a group. Services are still held, but Appalachian churches focus on the individual soul and their relationship with God.⁵⁹ This is an uncharacteristically individualistic view for a region that puts so much emphasis on community and family.

The three-part revival scene in Act II, Scene 2 of *Susannah* is representative of the camp meetings that were prevalent in Appalachian religious culture. The scene is bookended by two congregational hymns with Rev. Blicht’s sermon in between. This scene begins with the congregation “enthusiastically singing hymns expressing the religious beliefs”⁶⁰ that create the foundation for the moral standards and unspoken code of conduct that is used to judge the acceptability of an individual’s actions. While Appalachian religion tended to place importance on the individual’s relationship with God instead of the community, there was still a shared set of beliefs that connected the worshippers. Both the first hymn, “Are you saved from sin?,” and the second, “Come, sinner, tonight’s the night” are sung in four part voicing in Appalachian hymn

⁵⁸ Kip Lornell, *Exploring American Folk Music*, 127.

⁵⁹ Melinda B. Wagner, "Religion in Appalachia," in *A Handbook to Appalachia: An Introduction to the Region*, ed. Grace T. Edwards, JoAnn A. Asbury, and Ricky L. Cox (Knoxville, TN: University of Tennessee, 2006), 188.

⁶⁰ Smith, "Faith and Love in New Hope Valley, 74.

tradition and employ the religious beliefs that are commonly seen in this region, particularly the fundamentalist belief in salvation by repentance. The congregation sings:

CONGREGATION:

Are you saved from sin, ready to meet your Lord?

Has his blood made you free from the avenging sword?

Get down upon your knees, accept the saving grace.

Are you ready to meet your Savior face to face?

Free from sin, yes Lord!

Free from sin am I!

And I'm going to meet him with the saints on high.

As discussed previously, this text is representative of Appalachian musical traditions, but it is also an application of Appalachian religious ideas. While still invitational, this hymn does not present the listener with any choice in the matter and it creates a tenser environment than traditional invitational hymns would have done.

The final revival hymn, "Come, sinner, tonight's the night" acts as the alter call, with the congregants pleading for sinners, particularly Susannah, to publically repent. Like in the first hymn, the text of the second hymn showcases the importance of salvation in the lives of the Appalachian community of New Hope Valley:

CONGREGATION:

Come, sinner, tonight's the night
 to take a stand for God and the right.
 Cast Satan out, regain your sight.
 Come, sinner, tonight's the night.

Come, sinner, salvation is free.
 A gift from God on Calvary.
 That cross it sheds redeeming light.
 Don't tarry, sinner, tonight's the night.
 Come, yes, come and meet Him here.
 Be washed in the blood that was bought so dear.
 Don't wait till darkness turns into light.
 Come, sinner, tonight's the night.

The text of both hymns urge the listeners to make sure they are “saved,” but the second hymn conveys the fear that many preachers instilled in listeners in order to convert the individuals to the church during these revivals. As discussed earlier, the increasing intensity and density of Floyd's musical setting of this hymn helps create the sense of urgency and fear that Susannah feels from the congregation and Rev. Blich's pleading. However, the text does this as well by repeating that “tonight's the night” in an attempt to almost pressure the listeners into repenting by making it appear that that particular night is their only chance to achieve salvation.

The main goal of these camp meetings or revivals was to either recommit people to their faith or to bring those who had not been baptized or brought to God. In the later revivals, like those seen in the Second and Third Great Awakenings and the revival depicted in *Susannah*, religious leaders focused their efforts more on the individuals who had not been saved than those who had already accepted religion into their lives. These meetings espoused not only the idea

that the individual needed to be free from sin in all forms, but so did the community and culture if they wanted to truly reach salvation. In *Susannah*, this desire to have a completely morally pure community is seen by the townspeople's desire to have Susannah repent because they view her presumed sin as not only a blight on herself, but a blight on the community. In their eyes, by having a sinner, like Susannah, it compromises the entire town's ability to achieve salvation.

In the Second Great Awakening during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth, much of the revival preaching is based around the delivery of people from sin and guilt through whatever means necessary. Revivalist Charles Finney stated, "New measures are necessary from time to time to awaken attention and bring the gospel to bear upon the public mind."⁶¹ During his revivals, Finney used the "anxious chair" or the "anxious bench" where potential converts and sinners would sit in public and pray for salvation while the congregation watched. Finney believed that revivalists needed to stir the souls of the public so that they "would feel that the devil had no right to rule in this world, but that they ought all to give themselves to God and vote in the lord Jesus Christ as the governor of the Universe."⁶²

For some revivalists and traveling preachers, like Rev. Olin Blitch, that meant using the fear-inducing hellfire and damnation preaching style, where the religious leader effectively scares the congregants into repenting by presenting a horribly graphic depiction of Hell. The second part of the revival scene shows this element of revival culture. During his sermon, Rev. Blitch tells the story of a man he knew when he was preaching at a revival like the New Hope Valley revival in Texas, who called the Reverend to his home when he found out he was dying.

⁶¹ Finney, quoted in William G. McLoughlin, *Revivals, Awakenings, and Reform* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013), 126.

⁶² Finney, quoted in McLoughlin, *Revivals, Awakenings, and Reform*, 126.

Rev. Blich describes the man as being good man, but he never repented his sins and he “wanted to make ev’rything right” before he died, but he was unsuccessful.

Rev. Blich then states that there are many citizens of New Hope Valley in the same predicament of his old friend, preying upon the community’s belief that the entire community needed to be free from sin for salvation to occur. His sermon then intensifies as he asks the congregation “where they will spend eternity?” Are they going to be with the Lord or will they be banished to Hell “where there’s screamin’ an’ gnashin’ of teeth [and] where they holler fer water to ease parched tongues an’ they ain’t none to be had?” The intensity and descriptive nature of the text, combined with the use of odd intervals and a high tessitura for a bass-baritone voice, creates a sense of urgency and tension, all while “incit[ing] fear and dread among the listeners.” This demonstrates how fear was often used as a method for convincing congregants to repent during the revivals of the Second Great Awakening.

The culture’s religious beliefs play a significant role in how gender and gender roles are viewed as well. Appalachian communities believe in a complementary view of gender, which maintains that “God has created men and women equal in their essential dignity and human personhood, but different and complementary in function with male headship in the home.”⁶³ The adherence to the concept of “biblical womanhood” meant women and girls were often confined to the domestic sphere, performing household and childcare tasks, while men were rarely heavily

⁶³John MacArthur, "Male Authority and Female Equality: In the Beginning (Genesis 1-3)," December 15, 2004, accessed August 5, 2016.

active in child-rearing and household maintenance.⁶⁴ This view, sometimes called the doctrine of separate spheres, maintains the view that there are tasks and jobs that are inherently masculine or feminine and they should not be performed by the opposite gender. Individuals who adhere to the doctrine of separate spheres advocate for this strict separation of jobs based on gender as they believe that a person is only fulfilled by tasks that fall within those that are appropriate for their gender,

Throughout history, Appalachian society embraced traditional gender roles and placed emphasis on the importance of the nuclear family. Children were expected to have a mother and a father, and when people deviated from this norm for any reason, they were judged by fellow townspeople. In *Susannah*, the nuclear family structure is seen in families that are socially acceptable, like the McLean family, with Elder McLean, Mrs. McLean, and Little Bat. For Susannah, she lives with her brother. She has no father, no mother, and she is seen as socially deviant. The townspeople notice this and comment on it as well. In the opening square dance scene, one of the elder's wives, Mrs. Hayes, looks at Susannah while she dances and says to the other elder's wives, "Susannah looks mighty pretty tonight. It's a shame that her ma cain't see her." Mrs. McLean responds, "It's a blessin', you mean," continuing on to describe Susannah as a "shameless girl" who is "showin' herself to all the men" and is wearing a low cut dress. She then connects this behavior to the fact that Susannah is parent-less by saying, "But what could you expect but a wench of a girl who was raised by a drunken brother?" After this, the rest of the

⁶⁴ The adherence to complementary gender roles led to the participation in the "cult of domesticity" or "the cult of true womanhood." In this belief a woman judged for her piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity. These attributes were used to classify and judge women according to their behaviors and confined them to the domestic sphere. Under this set of beliefs, women who did not display all four qualities were seen as morally corrupt and socially deviant. This was not solely seen in the Appalachian region as it prompted the rise of the nuclear family and the creation of the "happy housewife" stereotype epitomized by American social culture of the 1950s.

elder's wives agree with Mrs. McLean, saying that "It's a blessing that her ma cain't see her," in a rhythmically homophonic setting, showing they all now share Mrs. McLean's opinion of Susannah. This includes Mrs. Hayes, who just prior to this held the belief that it was sad that Susannah's mother could not see her that evening, showing how important it is to make your views fit the social norm, which Mrs. McLean represents.

In Appalachia, it is "common for the town matriarchs to govern what is accepted socially"⁶⁵ Mrs. McLean's accusatory comments about Susannah come with no evidence or support, but the women of the town automatically accept what she says. Because none of the other wives attempt to silence or contradict what Mrs. McLean is saying, even if they disagree with her, it shows that Mrs. McLean holds the power to declare what is and is not socially acceptable because she possesses the most social capital as she is the highest ranking and most respected woman in town. According to Mrs. McLean, Susannah's behavior shows "lack of self-control and modesty [that] would not have been tolerated"⁶⁶ in a socially conservative town like New Hope Valley. Mrs. McLean's comments about Susannah were made as a result of her jealousy towards the young woman due to Susannah's beauty attracting both her husband, Elder McLean, and son, Little Bat, to Susannah's square during the dance earlier that evening. Mrs. McLean believes that "[Susannah's] beauty, sexuality, and fun-loving personality posed a threat to the community,"⁶⁷ and that as a result, Susannah was inherently evil, even though Susannah is unaware of what her beauty is doing to the men of the town.

⁶⁵ Cook, *Historical and Musical Context of the Characters in Carlisle Floyd's Susannah*, 94,

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 95.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 95

Any time the women of the town talk about Susannah, both before and after the creek incident, Mrs. McLean always starts the same discussion about how Susannah's behavior is shameful, as seen in Act I, Scene 4, when the townspeople discuss Susannah at the church picnic:

MRS. McLEAN:

I ain't surprised. I ain't a bit surprised. It's jest as I was sayin' last night.
'Cept she was caught a-fore I'd a-thought. It jes' goes to prove I was right

MRS. HAYES:

You was righter than right, that's certain. 'Twas a scandalous thing to do.
She's a wicked girl an' a threat to the valley. I'll bound she's evil through an' through.

When Susannah arrives, bringing a dish of field peas, the townspeople don't acknowledge her. After she places her dish on the table, Elder McLean tells her that she is not welcome, leading to her running out of the picnic, formally throwing Susannah out of the picnic, but it is Mrs. McLean that deals the final blow. When Susannah leaves, it is not one of the Elders that speaks, but Mrs. McLean, saying "I wouldn't tech them peas o' her'n," completely stripping Susannah of her social acceptability, even to the extent that even if she simply touches something it is "bad" or "evil," including food, and Susannah is unable to be redeemed.

In Act II, Scene 4, Rev. Blicht pleads to the congregation to forgive Susannah after he found out she was a virgin when he raped her, but the women of the town, led by Mrs. McLean, do not shift their thinking, as they "stare at him [Rev. Blicht], completely unconvinced and shake their heads in pity for his credulity." Mrs. McLean states as they leave the church, "The devil works in queer ways," showing that the women believe that even the preacher has fallen victim to Susannah's womanly charms. By giving Mrs. McLean and the Elders' wives enough power to

ruin an innocent young girl but the reputation of a preacher as well, it effectively shows that “in Susannah, the chorus is the real antagonist in the piece, and in a true sense both Susannah and Blitch are destroyed by it.”⁶⁸

In this culture, women were also expected to act according to a more strict unspoken moral code that mandates that young women retain their virginity until marriage and behave in a manner as not to attract the attention of men, for fear they would be considered “loose” women; however, men were not held to the same set of standards, creating a dichotomy between the social expectations of these two groups. This belief forms the backbone of the plot of *Susannah*.

At the beginning of the opera, the stage notes describe Susannah as “a young girl of uncommon beauty [who is] conspicuous in the group by virtue of a brightly-colored dress and the gravitation of men to her square, [but is] unaware of the eyes [of men] upon her.” While Susannah is described as beautiful, her behavior is not out of the ordinary or the appropriate. Like all of the young people, she is simply dancing, and not in a manner to attract attention from the boys and men. However, she does, attracting the attention of Rev. Olin Blitch after he arrives, with Blitch’s initial description of Susannah as “the pretty one there in the middle that’s gittin’ all the boys.” Throughout the opera, Susannah does not use her physicality sexuality as a way to attract men. She does not appear to be romantically interested in any male character. A conversation between Susannah and her brother, Sam, in Act I, Scene 2 recitative displays this:

⁶⁸ Carlisle Floyd “Composers Carlisle Floyd Talks About Susannah,” *The Times-Picayune* (New Orleans), 18 March 1962., qtd. in Cook, *Historical and Musical Context of the Characters in Carlisle Floyd's Susannah*, 103-104.

SAM:

Any of 'em court y'?

SUSANNAH:

Course not Sam, I ain't old enough for that yet.

SAM:

Sure you are, little robin, you're goin' on nineteen. Pretty soon you'll be an old maid.

SUSANNAH:

I ain't a-gone git married fer a long time yet. I'm gonna stay here an' cook fer you.

This lack of romantic or sexual desire combined with the fact that she did not actively choose to display her physical characteristics to tempt men sexually should be socially acceptable in this town, but Susannah's behavior is eclipsed by the preconceived notions of the women of the town and her lack of female authority in her home life as they feel that she is flaunting her beauty, so it has to be in an effort to attract the men and tempt them. This is evocative of the tradition of women in Appalachian folklore being sirens and luring men off of the path of morality through beauty and sexuality.

This belief that women are sirens is further seen in when the Elders see Susannah bathing in the creek. They are initially shocked, but their emotional state quickly changes with the "expressions of shock on their faces being gradually supplanted by those of lust." The Elders understand that their response to seeing Susannah is wrong, but they are unable to look away, entranced by her beauty and physicality. Ashamed of their behavior and feeling they need to repent their lust, the Elders publically blame Susannah for purposefully bathing in the creek in an effort to tempt them off the path of righteousness. Without asking Susannah, the townspeople

take the Elders' word as truth and condemn Susannah for her behavior, despite the fact that she did not do anything to compromise her moral standing, with Mrs. Ott saying "She shore cain't tend to my young'uns no more. She ain't fittin' for the job" and Mrs. McLean saying that Susannah's behavior is "just the devil's way."

The accusations continue to spiral, with Elder McLean claiming that Susannah seduced his son, Little Bat, who is Susannah's best friend. When Susannah returns home after being shunned from the church potluck, Little Bat arrives to tell Susannah what has happened. He tells her that after the Elders saw her in the creek, they told the townspeople of her shameful behavior and how they "say they ain't a feller in these parts what's safe with you around. They say y'let them love you up all they want, an' then send their souls to hell." He continues, explaining that it was not his choice, but his parents forced him to say that Little Bat "let [Susannah] love [him] up an' in the worse sort o' way," meaning that he effectively told the congregation that Susannah tempted Little Bat into a sexual liaison.

The relationship between these two characters prior to this was as close to a romantic relationship that Susannah has in the opera, but most of the advances came from Little Bat. He was always a little concerned of Susannah and her brother due to his mother's belief that there was "bad blood in [her] family" and Sam's heavy drinking that borders on alcoholism. Despite this, Little Bat often commented on how he was attracted to Susannah. In Act I, Scene 2, Little Bat and Susannah's recitative conversation displays this:

LITTLE BAT:

My ma says they's bad blood in your family, but I like to look at you.

SUSANNAH:

No need to be afraid, Little Bat. No harm's gonna come to y' here.

LITTLE BAT:

(brightening)

You're awful pretty tonight, Susannah. You was pretty at the square dance tonight. All them men was shore a-courtin' you. I seed 'em, ev'ry one.

SUSANNAH:

(pleased)

Pshaw! Won't nothin' of the kind. You're storyin' again, that's what.

In the opera, Little Bat is never reprimanded for having these desires towards Susannah, but they are once again blamed on Susannah. Little Bat is an Elder's son, so he could not have possibly felt these immoral thoughts. How could have his good, moral, upstanding parents raised a son that even thinks about women in a sinful and sexual manner? It had to have been caused by Susannah, the temptress that she is. This relationship shows the differences in moral standards for women and men in Appalachia.

Like Susannah, women often felt most of the social ostracism if they went against the moral codes, especially if it was a violation due to sexual activity. Like most men, Little Bat bears no consequences for his actions. Even after he lies to his parents, telling them that he and Susannah had been involved sexually as a result of her pressuring, he receives absolutely no punishment or social stigmatization, despite the fact that he was more persistent about his

feelings towards Susannah as well as he would have been an equal participant in their amorous liaison. In fact, his father and the other Elders feel bad for him, stating in Act I, Scene Four:

ELDER OTT:

Young men ain't safe with her around. She's an instrument of the devil.

ELDER GLEATON:

The preacher's at Brother McLean's house now a-prayin' that her soul might be saved, that she'll turn aside from her evil ways an' be washed in the cleansing stream.

ELDER McLEAN:

She's a pow'rful one, this Susannah Polk, my son she's lured away.
From all the thinks that he's been teached. Fer that she's gonna have to pay.

At the end of the opera, Susannah plays on Little Bat's feelings for her as he remains on stage after Susannah scares the rest of the townspeople off of her property and "her tone of voice now completely changes, and her manner is spuriously soft and helpless, obscuring only for Little Bat and her contempt for him." Susannah then beckons him over to her saying, "Come on over, Little Bat. Don't be scared. I won't hurt y'. I'm lonesome. Come an' love me up some. Come on. Don't be afraid. I'm all by myself now an' y' know I was allers good to y'. Y' said so yerself. So come on." As he walks towards her in an attempt to embrace her, Susannah slaps him and he runs off.

At the beginning of Act II, Susannah talks with her brother, asking him what to do about the shame she feels as well as how to interact with the people who are accusing her of indecency:

SUSANNAH:

I ain't gonna leave this place no more.

That's one thing know fer sure.

I ain't a-gone let them men at the store talk to me the way they do.

I ain't never taken as much in my life as I've taken since last Tuesday:

men pawin' at me an' jokin' 'bout me

an' boys makin' dirty signs.

The behaviors Susannah mentions, the dirty jokes and gestures, are not reprimanded, and Susannah is expected to handle the derogatory treatment because they feel that she brought it upon herself with her behavior towards the elders as well as Little Bat. The townspeople believe that if she had not acted in such an obscene manner, Susannah would not have to deal with the consequences of her actions. They feel that she deserves the dirty jokes, signs, and propositions for sex that she receives from the men in town until she repents.

Reverend Blitch himself is unable to completely ignore his desire for Susannah, eventually succumbing to this desire in Act II, Scene 3. In the revival scene, Rev. Blitch openly pleads with Susannah, calling her to repent, but there is a juxtaposition between the religious repentance the congregation calls for in the second revival hymn, "Come sinner, tonight's the night," and the text of the countermelody that Rev. Blitch sings at the same time:

REV. BLITCH:

Come, dear sister, it's a short piece to walk to find rest for your weary soul.

The Lord will receive you with open arms an' hold you fast, fast in His grace.

It's only a short, short piece to walk to find rest for your storm-tossed, sin sick soul.

Come, dear sister, and jes' let go.

Meet God and I right here.

The stage directions state, “Blitch fixes his gaze upon Susannah. Slowly into his eyes and face comes an expression of intense desire bordering on lust. His voice also reflects what is happening inside him: “instead of its heretofore peremptory and commanding quality, it now possesses a distinctly cajoling, almost caressing sound.” As this emotional shift happens, Blitch calls upon Susannah come forward and repent so she can find “rest for [her] storm tossed, sin sick soul.” He finishes his plea for her to accept salvation through repentance by not only asking her to meet God at the alter, but to meet him as well, asking her to “jes’ let go [and] meet God and I right here.”

While not out of the ordinary for a preacher to help a congregant to find salvation, when his explicit desire to have Susannah meet him is combined with the lustful gaze he has and the caressing, almost seductive tone to his voice, there is clearly an ulterior motive in this countermelody. He is not just pleading with her to meet him at the alter to repent for her sins as a preacher. There is very clearly a sexual undertone as he is attempting to seduce her. This is seen by the “smile of triumph [that] comes over Blitch’s face as Susannah comes abreast of him” as well as his need to regain control of himself and his emotions after Susannah screams and runs off, realizing what is happening, leaving Blitch angry and frustrated, emotionally and sexually.

In *Susannah*, Floyd drew from his own experiences from living in small rural towns in the Southern United States as a traveling preacher’s son. His knowledge of this region and the culture that is characteristic of these towns allowed him to accurately depict this region in his opera. By emphasizing the importance of religion and adherence to traditional gender roles. Floyd was able to distinguish characters whose behavior aligned with what was considered appropriate, like the Elders and their wives, and those who do not, like Susannah. By creating this chasm between these groups of characters, it labels one group as being an outsider and they

are ostracized as a result. This same exclusion and fear of those outside of the norm happened in the United States in the 1950s as well during the Cold War.

Chapter Four: *Susannah* and the American Socio-Political Culture of the 1950s

While Floyd's *Susannah* does not specifically take place in the 1950s, as Floyd indicated in the vocal score that the opera takes place in "the distant past," in the vocal score, the opera acts as an allegory for the socio-political climate of the United States during the beginning of the Cold War. Through his emphasis on socially acceptable behaviors and the need to adhere to Christian religious beliefs, Floyd effectively and subtly depicted the socio-political culture of the United States through the socially conservative, isolationist viewpoint of the citizens of New Hope Valley. Floyd accomplished this through his musical style as well as the dramatic content of the libretto.

American political culture of the 1950s is characterized by the rise of McCarthyism. Occurring during the Second Red Scare, McCarthyism was a response to the fear of the rise of communism in the United States after World War II. American fear of communism experienced a spike in 1949 when the Soviet Union successfully tested an atom bomb. The event widened the ideological chasm between the United States and the Soviet Union.⁶⁹ This fear continued to grow as the House Un-American Activities Committee, which was created in 1938, became a standing committee in 1945. Much of the committee's anti-communist efforts occurred between 1949 and 1954, performing 109 investigations into individuals believed to be communists living in the

⁶⁹ During World War II, the United States and the Soviet Union were united in their desire to defeat Nazi Germany. When the war ended, it left the countries without a common enemy, and as a result of the ideological differences between the two, each country began to view the other as an enemy.

United States. Most often, individuals investigated by this committee had a large degree of public influence, like politicians, authors, actors, and musicians.⁷⁰

The ideological witch-hunt of McCarthyism began on February 9, 1950 in Wheeling, West Virginia, when the Republican Senator from Wisconsin, Joseph McCarthy, spoke to the Republican Women's Club. In his speech, he proclaimed he had in his possession a list of all American citizens working for the State Department with ties to communism, stating, "I have here in my hand a list of 205 . . . a list of names that were made known to the Secretary of State as being members of the Communist Party and who nevertheless are still working and shaping policy in the State Department."⁷¹ After McCarthy's speech in West Virginia, he led a series of demagogic attacks on American citizens, particularly those with influence on American culture at large, whom he believed were secretly communists or were communist sympathizers. McCarthyism urged Americans to watch their neighbors and report any suspicious belief. Because of this, the United States was sent into a period of accusation and chaos, much like what is seen in Floyd's *Susannah*.

McCarthy's attacks preyed upon the fear of communism that began in the First Red Scare after the end of World War I. This created the foundation for the culture of frenzied paranoia in the United States to escalate to its tipping point after World War II. It also sparked the rise of xenophobia in the United States. Because they were exposed to a doctrine of fear, American

⁷⁰ Many of these individuals, including composers Aaron Copland and Leonard Bernstein, were questioned for suspected Communist ties. In June of 1950, a right-wing, anti-Communism magazine called *Counterattack* published a pamphlet titled "Red Channels" that listed the names of 151 actors, writers, musicians, journalist, and other well known individuals who were suspected of having Communist beliefs.

⁷¹ Joseph A. McCarthy, "Speech of Joseph McCarthy, Wheeling, West Virginia, February 9, 1950" (speech, Republican Women's Club Meeting, Wheeling, West Virginia), accessed September 25, 2016, <http://historymatters.gmu.edu/d/6456>.

citizens were concerned that non-American ideas and beliefs would erode democracy and traditional American values. As a result, the same fear of outside ideas was translated into American social culture. Individuals who did not adhere to the social norms of the time were considered just as un-American and dangerous as an individual from a different country as both could have an equal negative impact on American politics and social culture.

When selecting a source material, Floyd was not familiar with the story of Susanna and the Elders, but when a friend recommended it, he saw through the Biblical elements and focused on the tragic human relationships between the characters. From the start of the composition process, Floyd “saw in the tale of a woman falsely and viciously accused of a crime in a primitive theocratic society a parallel to the fear engendered in America by McCarthyism.”⁷² Like many of the individuals persecuted by the demagogic testimonies and actions of McCarthy, his fellow senators, and the fear mongering that their rhetoric created in the general public as a result, Susannah is consistently accosted by her fellow townspeople as a result of a single person’s view of her behavior. Because Mrs. McLean held a position of high stature in the community and believed Susannah to be evil and wicked, the rest of the townspeople also viewed her in a similar manner. The same group-think mentality happened in the 1950s to cultural content creators, like writers, composers, and actors, when McCarthy and other prominent senators accused them of having communist tendencies or being sympathetic to communists. Because individuals like McCarthy believed them to be communists, the general public accepted this belief simply because he had a position of authority.

⁷² Rachel Hutchins-Viroux, "Witch-hunts, Theocracies and Hypocrisy: McCarthyism in Arthur Miller/ Robert Ward's opera *The Crucible* and Carlisle Floyd's *Susannah*," *Revue LISA / LISA e-journal*, no. Vol. VI – n°2 (2008): 141, August 25, 2009, accessed January 15, 2017, doi:10.4000/lisa.1140.

In *Susannah*, Floyd was able to depict the House Un-American Activities Committee, or HUAC, through the revival scene. The HUAC trials that led to the Hollywood blacklist were public and thoroughly covered by the press. In these trials, the accused would be asked a series of questions that would effectively make them state whether or not they had communist ties or believed in communist thought. If they did not comply by revealing their own tendencies or the tendencies of their friends, they could be held in contempt of Congress or be labeled a communist sympathizer if the individual even hesitated in answering the question. In *Susannah*, the revival scene is very evocative of the HUAC trials of the 1940s and 1950s.

In order to clear her name in the eyes of Rev. Blitch and the townspeople, Susannah must perform one single and seemingly simple action. She, as an outsider, must publically confess her sins. The demand of her public repentance makes “the community and church become HUAC-like inquisitorial institutions.”⁷³ Her accusers see no fault in their own beliefs of Susannah, despite the fact that it was their own lust that drove them to make the accusations about Susannah being sexually promiscuous and attempting to make them stray from their marriages. Despite the fact that she played no active role in the creek incident where the Elders saw her bathing, Susannah must be the one to admit fault as “to deny the validity of the accusation it to deny the authority and the community’s entire belief system,”⁷⁴ as was the nature of allegations of communist beliefs and sympathies in the 1950s. The congregation echoes the Elders’ sentiments as they urge her to repent as well, despite the fact that they have no conclusive

⁷³ Klaus-Dieter Gross, "McCarthyism and American Opera," *Revue LISA / LISA e-journal*, no. Vol. II - n°3 (2004): 176, November 10, 2009, accessed January 15, 2017, doi:10.4000/lisa.2969.

⁷⁴ Hutchins-Viroux, "Witch-hunts, Theocracies and Hypocrisy," 142.

evidence against Susannah, which is illustrated by Floyd through the ominous and overwhelming emotional strength and impact of the ensemble during the revival scene.

As previously discussed in Chapter Two, Floyd uses a four-part, homophonic setting for the chorus in this scene because they are singing hymns as a connection to the musical culture of the Appalachian region. The homophonic nature also creates a lack of musical agency for each individual vocal line as if they deviate from the prescribed line, it would be audibly different from the rest of the group. If the lines were not the same, there would not be such a sense of musical unity between the townspeople and if one were to change, it would no longer adhere to the shared musical content. When this is translated into how this lack of unity would appear on an ideological level, it would weaken the pleas of the townspeople as they would not show a united front against the outsider or outside beliefs, meaning they lacked ideological agency to make their own choices that would go against the cultural norm. By having them sing the same rhythms, it shows that the congregation collectively shares the same ideas. They were expected and forced to believe the words of the most religious men and most moral women of the town, even if one of them is technically more of an outsider than Susannah, but because he shared the ideas and beliefs of the majority of New Hope Valley citizens, he was welcomed into town with open arms.

Because the Elders and their wives were the main source of judgment, they are most representative of the HUAC. Their beliefs were what were used to judge whether a person's behavior was socially acceptable just as the HUAC made judgments based on a person's political beliefs. When the townspeople talk about Susannah during other ensemble sections, like the opening square dance prior to the creek incident as well as the church picnic, the Elders' wives and, eventually the Elders, all make unfounded accusations about Susannah as the result of

hearsay, regardless of if they truly believe them or not. Mrs. Hayes, one of the elder's wives, was sympathetic towards Susannah at the beginning of the opera, commenting on how it was a shame that Susannah's mother was unable to see the beautiful young woman she had grown into. It was only after Mrs. McLean interjected saying that it wasn't a shame, but a blessing did Mrs. Hayes change her mind and view Susannah negatively.

This fear of maintaining personal beliefs that contradict the beliefs of the majority is evocative of the fears of some HUAC members about the committee. Even though it was not universally supported, the committee continued to pass reauthorization every year until it became a standing committee by an overwhelming majority as many Congressmen feared what would happen if they voted against it and appeared "un-American." When Mrs. Hayes felt the slightest bit ostracized by Mrs. McLean for having views against those of the Elders and their wives, she immediately changed her own as not to appear like she agreed with Susannah's behavior, much like the Congressmen who continued to authorize the HUAC for fear of being labeled un-American or being accused of having communist sympathies.

Often times, those being accused of communism would implicate others in an attempt to shift the committee's attention away from them. For many, individuals were "arrested not for having committed dangerous or illegal acts, but merely for having communist thoughts,"⁷⁵ much like the Elders did with Susannah when they accused her of using her sexuality to lure them into desiring and having lustful thoughts about her. In fact, if lust and desire are representative of communist thought in *Susannah*, the Elders are at fault more so than Susannah is in this instance. Susannah did not actively attempt to show herself to the men who happen upon her bathing in

⁷⁵ Hutchins-Viroux, "Witch-hunts, Theocracies and Hypocrisy," 142

the creek. Floyd makes their emotions and thoughts towards Susannah clear by stating the emotional shift they experience as they gaze upon her, moving from a state of shock to lust. The Elders know that what they are doing is wrong, by continuing their rather voyeuristic actions, but they cannot convince themselves to look away, even after they “adopt an outraged tone and stance.” Because the Elders know that Susannah is not the one committing the sin, but they are, they do whatever they can to remove themselves from any sense of responsibility or fault for their feelings and pin it on Susannah. They use the argument that if Susannah had not been bathing in the creek, they would not have seen her body, and therefore would not have had these feelings, by stating:

ELDER McLEAN:

It’s an outrage! It’s a blasphemous outrage!

ELDER HAYES:

A-bathin’ in a public place!

ELDER OTT:

Naked as from her dead ma’s womb!

ELDER McLEAN:

She’s a shameless wench, this Susannah is. My wife allers said she was evil an’ she was right, my brethren, she was mighty right. This girl belongs to the devil!

ELDER HAYES:

Exposin’ herself in plain view of all who care to see

In actuality, this shift of guilt unfounded as Floyd alludes to the Elders' attraction to Susannah during the opening square dance scene. Floyd compounds those emotions with their actions in the creek scene to make the Elders reach a tipping point for their lust where they feel it is necessary to shift their guilt for having these sinful and lustful thoughts to the object of their desire, even though her actions do not put her at fault. This "transference of guilt" between the Elders and Susannah "serves as a means of denouncing the hypocrisy of repression in general and of McCarthyism."⁷⁶ The same idea of transference of guilt occurs between Susannah and Rev. Blicht as well.

The guilt between Rev. Blicht and Susannah is different than that between the Elders and Susannah, but it is more evocative of the hypocrisy that surrounded communist allegations during McCarthyism. When Rev. Blicht first arrives in New Hope Valley, his goal is to "cast out devils and conquer sins and bring sinners to repentance."⁷⁷ He is an outsider that was brought in to make sure that the social norms and morals were being followed and to save those who were not adhering to them. He hears of Susannah's presumed wrongdoings, and automatically believes and perpetuates these thoughts by using the revival meeting for the single purpose of making Susannah publically repent. Because of his station as a moral authority, much like the prominent senators on the HUAC, Rev. Blicht's opinion of Susannah was taken as fact at face value. Blicht's opinion was automatically assumed to be correct because he was an authority figure and authority figures were not be questioned during the 1950s. When he arrives in the opening square dance scene, he is immediately attracted to Susannah's beauty and, like the Elders. Blicht's own

⁷⁶ Hutchins-Viroux, "Witch-hunts, Theocracies and Hypocrisy," 142.

⁷⁷ Gross, "McCarthyism and American Opera" 176.

desire for the young girl intensifies as the belief that Susannah is sexually loose continues to gain support. His lust continues to grow in the revival scene where he is described in the stage directions as having an expression of “intense desire bordering on lust.” When Susannah rejects him by running out of the service, he has to regain control of his emotions, by going through the same emotional shift as the Elders did, lust to shock to frustration.

The one main difference between the Elders’ guilt and Rev. Blitch’s guilt is the physical component of Blitch’s actions. The Elders actions were hypocritical due to their belief that Susannah was the individual tempting them into having lustful thoughts when the Elders themselves created those thoughts and so only she needed to be punished through public repentance. After the revival, Rev. Blitch arrives at the Polk house where Susannah is left home alone while Sam is on a hunting trip. Seeing her defeated state as a result of the constant judgment she had been receiving as combined with the fact that he was still frustrated after being able to neither save Susannah nor relieve the lust and desire he feels for her, Rev. Blitch finally begins to admit to himself that he has inappropriate feelings for Susannah and he intends to act upon them, as he walks up to her “with weary hesitance and obviously fighting himself, [placing] his hands cautiously on her shoulders.” He then attempts to justify his lust for her, singing to Susannah:

REV. BLITCH:

I’m a lonely man, Susannah, an’ ever now an’ then it seems I gotta have somebody,
Somebody I can love like other folks do, ‘cause it’s a lonesome work I do.

My reward it be’s in heaven an’ there’s little reward here below.

But ever now an’ then I near go mad, I need a woman so.

I’m a lonely man, Susannah, an’ made out o’ flesh an’ blood an’ bone,

An’ I need somebody I can love like other folks ‘cause it’s a lonesome work I do.

Rev. Blicht takes advantage of her weakened emotional and physical shape, asking “Will yer brother be home tonight,” to which Susannah replies no. He then carries her into the house and rapes her.

Rev. Blicht does not suffer a single consequence for this action. After realizing that Susannah was a virgin and that all of the accusations about her were unsubstantiated, he prays to God to forgive him for his “sin against Thee an’ the woman.” He admits that he raped Susannah as a result of his lust, privately confessing that his feelings were his own and that he was at fault. His actions would most certainly require a public confession, but he does not need to give one, instead choosing to attempt to convince the congregation that Susannah was innocent and that whatever the Elders saw must have been incorrect. When Rev. Blicht is asked how he came to this belief, he lies and says that God told him in a dream instead of stating the truth and because he holds such a large amount of social capital, he is not forced to publically confess, even though the townspeople do not believe him and think that Susannah somehow bewitched him to say this.

Even when Susannah is a victim of sexual violence, she is still assumed to be at fault because of the hysteria surrounding female sexuality in New Hope Valley. The hypocrisy of Blicht, and by extension McCarthyism, is easily seen in this progression as “Blicht himself, who came to new Hope Valley as the moral arbiter McCarthyite crusaders professed they were, is the first to fall to temptation, but does not dare stand up to his own doing.”⁷⁸ In the aria Rev. Blicht sings just before he rapes Susannah, it appears that this may not be the first time he has done this as he states, “But ever now an’ then I near go mad, I need a woman so.” This line makes it seem that Rev. Blicht has had sexual relations with at least one other woman. It’s not known if she was

⁷⁸ Gross, “McCarthyism and American Opera” 176.

also forced into the encounter, but the fact that Rev. Blicht has performed the same action, or an even worse one, that Susannah is being ostracized for by the townspeople. This hypocrisy and constant belief that Susannah is in the wrong continues to her receiving blame for the death of Rev. Blicht when, in actuality, Sam killed him when he found out the Reverend raped his sister. Even though she was the victim, the townspeople still see Susannah as the root of all the evil and believe that she convinced Sam to kill Rev. Blicht.

During this time, anti-communist leaders argued that communism would erode American culture. They stated that communism was going to eliminate Christianity from the world, reviving President Herbert Hoover's belief that all communists are "godless atheists."⁷⁹ Anti-communist leaders painted a bleak picture of the potential degradation of the American family under communist rule and that communism would break families apart, end marriages, and raise godless children without morals. This was the exact opposite of the family-oriented American social culture of the 1950s, a time where "divorce was still a rarity, premarital sex, taboo, and women were expected to stay home with their kids and bake brownies."⁸⁰ The fear of communism was perpetuated through manipulation of the collective conscience. Individuals would not necessarily make their own judgment calls and would base their opinions off of what someone had told them instead of forming their own conclusion. This idea of manipulating the American collective conscious was seen throughout this period. Because of McCarthyism, an ideological war was effectively being fought at home and abroad at the same time.

⁷⁹ Herbert Hoover, quoted in Schrecker, Ellen, *Many Are the Crimes: McCarthyism in America* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1998), 145.

⁸⁰ Ellen Schrecker, *Many Are the Crimes: McCarthyism in America* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1998), 146.

Blitch's attempts to shift and manipulate the already fearful collective conscience of the New Hope Valley citizens are reflective of Sen. McCarthy's actions during the 1950s. During this time, mass hysteria due to fears of communism was already prevalent in United States social and political culture. McCarthy grasped on to these fears and continued to perpetuate them in an attempt to strengthen and further his political career. Through his accusatory and inflammatory rhetoric that consistently portrayed individuals that held communist beliefs or sympathies as immoral and a threat to the safety of the United States, McCarthy helped to maintain the mass fear and hysteria that plagued the United States during this time. Blitch performed the same actions and created the same fears, as a result, in his sermon during the revival scene. During this sermon, he emphasized the horrible things that would happen if sinners, particularly Susannah, did not repent. Through the description of Hell as having "screamin' and wailin' and gnashin' of teeth," Blitch plays on the already present fears of the deeply religious community in order to maintain those fears so his sermons are more effective. This fearful oratory later backs away from playing on the sheer fear of the congregants, but for the rest of the revival, there is a lingering and overwhelming ominous and foreboding feeling as a result of his preaching.

These political responses helped solidify a fear of communism in the United States in the mid-twentieth century as it treated communism as an aggressive threat on American ideology and politically justified and supported the public's fear about communism. This fear of ideas outside the social norm and the threat they could potentially have an impact on the dominant political culture was replicated in American social culture of the 1950s as individuals who did not fit into this culture were seen as outsiders who presented a threat to the morality of 1950s American social culture.

The social culture of the United States in the 1950s is known for its emphasis on conservative and traditional values. The nuclear family was considered the only acceptable family structure and those who violated it were considered socially deviant. Men and women adhered to traditional gender roles, as women were expected to be homemakers and raise children while men would go to work and earn money. Couples often married young and began to have children at a young age as well. Some historians argue that this shift back to traditionalism was a response to the newfound freedom that women felt during World War II. During World War II, women assumed the jobs that men had vacated to go to war and were experiencing a brand-new sense of independence and self sustainability that had some worried how they would react to returning to their previous lives as wives and mothers.⁸¹ As a result, socially acceptable jobs for women returned to what they were pre-World War II, like homemaker, teacher, and nurse.

The Polks are considered outcasts in New Hope Valley for a handful of reasons, one of which being their untraditional family structure. The Polk siblings, Sam and Susannah, live by themselves. Their mother died and their father is not mentioned in the score, but it is assumed that he was not present in their lives. In particular, the Elders' wives view Susannah negatively as a result of this. Mrs. McLean connects what she believes to be Susannah's promiscuous and loose behavior to the fact that she grew up with no parental figures, just a drunken brother. She is the first character to voice this and almost immediately after Mrs. McLean voices her opinions about Susannah, the three other Elder's wives sing phrases that confirm and align with Mrs. McLean's view. The McLeans' son and Susannah's friend, Little Bat, is also leery of the Polk

⁸¹ Brett Harvey, *The Fifties: A Women's Oral History* (New York, NY: HarperCollins Publishers, 1993), xv.

family despite his close relationship with Susannah. This shows the impact that the collective view of an individual has on their social status and acceptability.

However, because there is not a mother figure in Susannah and Sam's lives, Susannah was expected to step into the main female role in the traditional nuclear family structure. This should have made her appear more socially acceptable as it placed her in a homemaker role. Despite her desire to leave the valley in "Ain't it a pretty night," Susannah shows a desire to stay at home and perform those tasks, stating that even if she leaves, she will return to the valley. However, she shows no desire to marry at a young age, laughing off Sam's question when he asks if anyone courted her at the square dance and telling him that she "ain't old enough fer that yet" and that she "ain't a-gone git married fer a long time yet. [She's] gonna stay here an' cook fer [him]."

Susannah in particular, is portrayed through the eyes of her fellow New Hope Valley citizens as displaying behavior that is socially unacceptable. The actions she actually performs in the opera do not fall outside the realm of social acceptability, but the actions that she is believed to have performed make her fall into the category of a social deviant. Floyd designates this through his plot, but also through the musical choices he made for this character. As discussed in Chapter Two, Floyd heavily employed folk music conventions to represent the social norm. When the music does not fit into these parameters, it signifies that there is something about the character that does not fully fit with the dominant social culture, labeling them an outsider. Even though he shares the ideology of the residents of New Hope Valley, Bitch is technically an outsider, but his actions and beliefs are considered socially acceptable, so his musical lines fit more of the criteria of folk music.

Even when Susannah attempts to fit the folk music criteria, there are still deviations from the standard folk music criteria, as seen in her Act II aria, “The trees on the mountain are cold and bare.” Susannah’s Act I aria, “Ain’t it a pretty night” is the furthest from folk music conventions, falling more into the realm of musical theatre or *verismo* operatic styles, distancing this character musically from the folk influenced melodies of the Elders and their wives as well as Rev. Blich, even though he is technically an outsider as well.⁸²

In order to return society back to a state of normalcy in terms of acceptable professions for each gender, the rapidly growing media industry greatly influenced and reshaped society back into traditional gender roles. Gender roles of this time were biblically based, with men being the “head” or leader and women being subservient. Women in media were once again portrayed in the home. Even ads marketed to girls and young women discussed the “difference that bad breath could make between laughter and love and marriage almost before you know it and boredom and loneliness,”⁸³ hinting that women would not be able to live a fulfilled life if they were not married. Often times, girls and women in media were portrayed at their happiest when at home, performing tasks that were considered socially acceptable for women at the time, such as homemaking. Women who did not fit into this ideal were considered social outsiders, particularly women who were sexually active.

In *Susannah*, none of the female adult characters are shown to have a job in the workforce. They are depicted as being happy and satisfied in their jobs as homemakers and caretakers and as the wives of the church Elders. Even Susannah has a desire to stay at home,

⁸² Specific musical analysis relating to how Floyd used music to represent the distance between Susannah and the townspeople is found in Chapter Two.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, xv.

telling Sam that her current career aspiration is to “stay here an’ cook fer you.” Because her desires align the social schema, it shows that Susannah actually does fit the social stereotypes of women of New Hope Valley and of the ideal woman in the United States during the 1950s. While she does dream of leaving the valley, she never indicates that she desires to break social norms in doing so. By making Susannah fit the social expectations as far as career and familial desires yet still have other characters consider her an outsider, it further emphasizes the weight that society placed on women and sexual activity and experience, whether she was truly sexually active or society believed that she was.

Despite the rebellious nature of teens and young adults in the 1950s, there was a cultural internalization that premarital sex was wrong. In a sense, the idea of “going steady” and “getting pinned” was a pushback against the cultural norms of courtship and decency, because it involved amorous activities that were initiated by the two individuals and not by their parents as courtship practices dictated. As a generalization, even if a couple “went steady,” they would rarely go so far as to consummate their relationships outside of wedlock. This was most likely due to the fear of pregnancy as a result of a lack of contraceptives. Because of this, when people, particularly young women, would participate in sexual intercourse, they would face social backlash. If they became pregnant, they were typically forced to marry the child’s father or they were sent to maternity homes for unwed mothers and the child was put up for adoption, as this was pre- *Roe vs. Wade*. Even if they did not become pregnant, they were still ostracized for their behavior, excluded from social events, and were looked down upon by other members of society, particularly other women. The dominant religion, Christianity, dictated that sex was only allowed between married couples for the purpose of procreation and having sex and children out of wedlock is against the teachings. Media helped sustain this belief as well, with advertisements

and television cautioning women about how they presented themselves in public, not wanting to create a reputation for being loose or immoral. This emphasis on a woman's morality being directly linked to her sexual history, even if it was inaccurate and unfounded, is heavily present in *Susannah*.

The emphasis on sexuality, especially the taboo nature of women's sexuality, drives the plot of *Susannah*. The Elders' lust for Susannah is rooted in the fact that they perceive her as flaunting and using her body and sexuality in a manner that was not considered acceptable at the time. In both Appalachian culture and the social culture of the United States in the 1950s sexual activity was restricted to something that should only be done in the bonds of marriage. In general, women were often seen as non-sexual beings who had little desire to partake in physical acts of affection or lust. As a character, Susannah encompasses this idea. She is unaware or does not reciprocate Little Bat's affections and her dancing at the square dance and bathing in the creek was not done in an effort to lure the Elders from their wives. Despite this, the Elders were able to convince the rest of the town that she was using her body in immoral ways to attract the attentions of men and lure them off the path of righteousness because female sexuality was considered something extremely taboo and fearful.

Because the townspeople thought she was sexually promiscuous, letting "men love [her] up," Susannah was continuously ostracized and excluded from social events, like the church picnic where she was asked to leave by Elder McLean and the congregation would not even eat what she had brought. Susannah's alleged sexual activity and desire also discredit her in the eyes of the townspeople and the church. When Rev. Blich arrives at the Polk house after the revival, he attempts to get Susannah to confess to him. She continued to voice that she was innocent, but because of the severity of the sin in the eyes of the townspeople and Rev. Blich, her protests

were viewed as invalid. Susannah tells Rev. Blitch that Little Bat's testimony that incriminated her was a lie, which it was, but Rev. Blitch still cannot believe that a woman who is believed to have done what Susannah did has the capability of being trusted, even when she is telling the truth.

In *Susannah*, the portrayal of the relationship between sexuality and the church adds to the allegory to McCarthyism as well. In presenting this story, Floyd highlighted how the fundamentalist churches "saw sexuality, especially women's sexuality, as frightening and demonic, as it is both enticing and cause for damnation" in the same manner that "1950s America also saw communism as allied...with the devil."⁸⁴ The lyrics make a direct connection to women's sexuality and the Devil, when upon seeing Susannah in the creek in Act I, Scene Three, the Elders state,

ELDERS

This women is of the devil.
 'Tis a shameful sight to behold.
 She must be brought to repentance.
 All the valley must be told."

Both New Hope Valley and 1950s America viewed their female sexuality and communism, respectively, as the worst of evils. The Elders believe that Susannah has been seduced by the devil because of the thoughts and feelings they develop and as a result she suffers severe social consequences. McCarthy's attacks did the same to those who were accused of being communists or communist sympathizers. They were unable to fully recover their social standing from the

⁸⁴ Hutchins-Viroux, "Witch-hunts, Theocracies and Hypocrisy," 142

allegations because their name was always attached to being a communist, whether the allegations were true or not just as Susannah is unable to separate herself from her alleged sin or gain back any social status in the eyes of the townspeople.

In both traditional Appalachian and 1950s American social cultures, Men also followed a more strict set of social expectations than those adhered to today. Men, and women, were expected to behave in socially acceptable ways at all times. One particular behavior that was frowned upon for men and women was the consumption of alcohol. However, there is a correlation between a higher level of social acceptability of alcohol consumption and a higher income level as “a wealthy man’s alcoholism could not be measured by the relative deprivation of his wife and children, since his income was ample enough to cover all expenses.”⁸⁵ For lower class men, this was less acceptable. In movies, men who were alcoholics were portrayed as unable to provide for their family and were often scorned by society.⁸⁶ Because they were unable to provide for their family and take care of their children, they were almost seen as failures as they were unable to abide by the society’s rule and were quasi-excluded from the larger social group.

Like Susannah, her brother, Sam, is also considered to not fall within the limits of what is considered socially acceptable. Sam’s social deviancy is not due to sex, but is based on his alcoholism. In Appalachia and during the 1950s, the acceptability alcohol consumption was different between the sexes. For women, it was simply something they were expected to abstain from, but for men, it was a little bit of a grey area. While they could consume alcohol, excess

⁸⁵ Lori Rotskoff, *Love on the Rocks: Men, Women, and Alcohol in Post-World War II America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002), 83.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 68

consumption hurt their reputation, as “temperance became a badge of respectability,”⁸⁷ beginning in the antebellum period. Preachers considered excessive drunkenness a sin, but often consumed alcoholic beverages themselves. Excessive consumption created a divide between socially respectable and the “plain folk” or “rural mountain whites”⁸⁸ even within a single community, as seen in *Susannah*’s New Hope Valley.

Sam is not the only person to feel the impact of this. Susannah does as well. When Sam Polk is talked about, it is most often in terms of his alcoholism. In the opening square dance scene of Act I, Elder McLean states that “[he] don’t draw a sober breath” and he “is allers drunk at night.” Even though Susannah does not drink alcoholic beverages at any point in the opera, she feels the social repercussions as a result of Sam’s alcoholism, like Mrs. McLean belief that some of Susannah’s socially deviant behavior was a result of being “raised by a drunken brother.” These beliefs are shared as a result by their son, Little Bat, when he speaks to Susannah, saying he is scared to go to the Polk property because “[Sam] gits drunk. That’s what [his] folks say.” Even though the entire town of New Hope Valley is predominantly described as being rural whites, including the Polks, Sam’s alcoholism sets the Polks apart from the respectable Elders and their families. This culminates in Scene 5 of Act II when Sam returns from his hunting trip and subsequent drinking trip and Susannah admits that Rev. Olin Blich raped her while he was drinking after his hunting trip, instead of coming home.

⁸⁷ Bruce E. Stewart, "Select Men of Sober and Industrious Habits: Alcohol Reform and Social Conflict in Antebellum Appalachia." *The Journal of Southern History* 73, no. 2 (2007): 289-322, 293 <http://www.jstor.org/stable/27649399>.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 293

Religion played a large role in the morals that guided this era. The 1950s can be seen as a complete reversal of the morals of the 1920s and the 1930s. The 1920s were full of decadence and freedom and the 1930s continued the sense of freedom, but not the decadence due to the Great Depression. Religion re-entered the public sphere in large volumes in the 1950s. Adherence to religion was a reversal from the freedom and liberated nature of the 1920s and 1930s. Religion was also seen as a way to fight communism, which was considered godless and a credible threat that could undermine the United States politically and socially. Public officials believed that the American people could be united in their fight against Communism through religion, particularly Christianity. This public push for religion was further solidified by the election of Dwight Eisenhower as President in 1952. President Eisenhower often referred to the “Supreme Being,” he said a prayer during his inauguration, and stated that American institutions “made no sense without a deeply held religious faith.”⁸⁹ Religion also dictated what was considered acceptable behavior. All of these can be observed in Carlisle Floyd’s *Susannah*.

In *Susannah*, religion governs society. It is the uniting factor between the townspeople as well as the defense they used when judging *Susannah*. Individuals who appear more devout and live their lives with religion dictating what they can and cannot do are given a higher social status and therefore their opinions have more weight. In New Hope Valley, these individuals are the Elders and their wives. People like *Susannah* and Sam are given a lower social status because their actions are seen as contradicting what the church is teaching, with Sam being seen as a glutton due to his alcoholism and *Susannah* is seen as being guilty of the sin of lust. However, Floyd makes a cultural critique about the hypocrisy of religion when he has the characters who

⁸⁹ Patrick Allitt, *Religion in America since 1945: A History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), 31.

are seen as the most morally pure, the Elders and Rev. Bitch, fall victim to their own sins when they begin to have impure thoughts about Susannah. By making this comparison, it seems that Floyd was stating that McCarthyism was unnecessarily persecuting the innocent as well as highlighting the hypocritical nature of many of the trials. Rev. Bitch, in particular, also highlights Floyd's view of hypocrisy in American socio-political culture of the 1950s as he was supposed to be one of the most morally pure characters when he committed one of the most disgusting and immoral acts when he raped Susannah. By setting "Susannah and the Elders," Carlisle Floyd was able to make a social critique using something from the source material that he was critiquing, further highlighting the hypocrisy as well, on a broader level.

Susannah is prime example of art as a cultural reaction. McCarthyism had a great impact on the creative output of movies, music, and writings in the United States as many entertainers, composers, and authors were put on trial by the House Un-American Activities Committee during the height of McCarthyism. Floyd's use of a rural setting in a town where religion reigned supreme allowed him the ability to make a social critique about the socio-political climate of the United States during the 1950s because he was able to draw parallels between the socially and politically conservative climate of both the United States at the time and traditional Appalachian folk culture. By doing this, Floyd created an opera that serves as an allegory for the socio-political climate of the 1950s through its constant emphasis on traditional social values as well as its comparison between the hypocrisy of McCarthyism and of religion.

Conclusion

Floyd's attempt to create a uniquely American opera was a success. *Susannah* is his most well-known work and was considered by critics to be a moving work of drama and one of the most successful operatic works by an American composer. While not part of the modern repertory of major opera houses, *Susannah* is an example of an American composer using American-influenced compositional styles to provide a critique of American culture. Through his own background as a traveling minister's son and his ability to write both scores and libretti, Floyd drew from what he knew in order to accurately portray the southern Appalachian culture without degrading, demeaning, or making a caricature of it, making his comparison even stronger.

Carlisle Floyd's opera *Susannah* acts as an allegory between the socio-political climate of the United States in the 1950s and southern Appalachian social culture. Through the use of musical ideas to aurally designate which characters were socially acceptable, Floyd used folk idioms and techniques to show each character's varying degree of social acceptability. For example, characters like Mrs. McLean and the other Elders' wives, who are considered ideal southern Appalachian women, perform musical lines that are heavily folk influenced, while Susannah, our tragic protagonist, performs lines that attempt to use folk elements, but do not fully fit the criteria of folk music style, indicating that her behavior is not considered socially acceptable. The distance between these characters in terms of music style helps indicate their social distance, creating two distinct groups: those who are socially acceptable and those who are outsiders. It is then reinforced by how strict each individual adheres to the social norms of southern Appalachia.

Both the musical and cultural analyses are used when analyzing how *Susannah* acts as an allegory for the socio-political climate of the United States in the 1950s. Floyd combined these

two elements to display the fear of outside thought and beliefs as well as to illustrate the hypocrisy of the allegations of McCarthyism and the House Un-American Activities Committee. In *Susannah*, Floyd replaces political hypocrisy with religious hypocrisy as the allegations are derived from the Elders' shame for committing the sin of lust towards Susannah due to the deeply religious nature of the society in which they live. The emphasis on living a moral and religious life also helps create a connection to the 1950s as that was the social norm of the time. Floyd also made a critique of the impact the views of other had on an individual's social status as well the acceptability of female sexuality. Floyd himself could have suffered consequences for making the comparison that he did through *Susannah*, but the result is a powerful artistic expression against the severity and stifling impact of McCarthyism and conservative social norms on the arts and society as a whole during the early years of the Cold War.

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