

Loretta Lynn's Lyrics: Songwriting for Women and the Working Class

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Abstract: This article argues that country music singer, Loretta Lynn, performed songs reflective of women's issues throughout the second wave feminist movement. However, Lynn did not identify as a feminist; she believed mainstream feminism ignored working-class issues. Her beliefs, conveyed in her lyrics, reflected her working-class experiences during her childhood, marriage to Doolittle Lynn, and musical career. Throughout the 1960s and 1970s, Lynn performed songs supportive of women who lived in poverty, endured abusive spousal relationships, and observed the significance of traditional working-class gender roles. Though Lynn did not always agree with feminist thought, her songs reflected pro-feminist perspectives, including demanding men's respect for women and women's access to birth control. Her ability to write songs about working-class women's lives increased her female fan base and ultimately contributed to her success as a country music star. This article analyzes Lynn's lyrical messages and contributes to the scholarship of country music history by providing a detailed account of how music affected working-class women. This work also describes what working-class women thought of the feminist movement.

Yeah, I'm proud to be a coal miner's daughter
I remember well, the well where I drew water
The work we done was hard
At night we'd sleep 'cause we were tired
I never thought of ever leaving Butcher Holler.¹

These nostalgic words belong to country music star Loretta Lynn. Lynn worked her way to stardom as a singer and songwriter at the urging of her husband Doolittle Lynn. Her life experiences influenced the messages portrayed in her songwriting. Lynn's songs brought fans together in a variety of ways, with both sentimental songs about family and working-class struggles. Yet, the most controversial of her song lyrics appealed specifically to women. Even though many of her songs were about topics that coincided with the 1970s feminist movement,

¹ Loretta Lynn, "Coal Miner's Daughter" in *Honky Tonk Girl: My Life in Lyrics* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2012), 83.

Lynn did not claim a feminist identity. The feminist movement advocated for women's access to public jobs, daycare, and contraception, while also prompting for greater respect for women, though the movement failed to equally represent the interests and perspectives of the lower class. Lynn's songs reflected on women's issues, inspired by her own childhood, marriage, and musical career, but she did not identify as a mainstream feminist because the movement ignored the issues of the working-class.

Doolittle gave Lynn a guitar for her eighteenth birthday; by the time she reached twenty-four, he introduced the idea of her becoming a professional singer.² After playing in a few clubs and in a music competition on the *Buck Owens* show, Lynn caught the attention of Norm Burley, a wealthy lumber businessman who offered to pay for Lynn to record a song. Lynn recorded her song, "Honky Tonk Girl," and on July 25, 1960, *Billboard* listed her recording as number fourteen on the country music chart.³ Following the success of her music, Lynn went on a concert tour. Lynn wrote songs to express her emotions. She stated, "I guess when you boil it all down, every song is about me. It's my eyes that are seein' what I write about. And my heart that's feelin' all those things."⁴ Lynn's intended audience were working-class women who related to the emotions articulated in her music. Lynn noted that working-class women "felt I had the answers to their problems because my life was just like theirs."⁵ Referring to working-class women's issues more broadly, she stated, "They could see I was Loretta Lynn, a mother and a wife and a daughter, who had feelings just like other women."⁶

Lynn's autobiographies, *Coal Miner's Daughter* and *Still Woman Enough: A Memoir*, as well as the biographical film *Coal Miner's Daughter*, contributed to her success as a female country music star. Her memoirs detailed how her life affected her music. She also shared her belief that the second-wave feminist movement failed to address working-class women's issues. Country music historian Jocelyn Neal has explained that Lynn's contemporaries "Merle Haggard, Hank Williams, Jr., ... and George Jones, for instance, infuse their songs with an autobiographical meaning that transcends the lyrics' interpretive

² Loretta Lynn and George Vecsey, *Loretta Lynn: Coal Miner's Daughter* (Chicago: Regnery, 1976), 71.

³ *Ibid.*, 70-79.

⁴ Loretta Lynn, *Honky Tonk Girl: My Life in Lyrics* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2012), 3-4.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ Lynn and Vecsey, *Loretta Lynn*, 113.

potential.”⁷ According to Kate Heidemann, Lynn's lyrics were noteworthy because they explicitly noted issues of hunger, poverty, physical labor, emotional hardship, and gender roles.⁸

Lynn was from Butcher Holler, a working-class coal mining community in Van Lear, Kentucky.⁹ Charles Wolfe has argued that the core of Lynn's best songs were formed from the values she developed growing up in this community.¹⁰ The goal of this analysis is to further examine Lynn's lyrics to uncover and explicate specific aspects of her life which were influential in her music and worldview. Growing up in poverty was a formative experience for Lynn which shaped her opinions about the women's movement. Lynn reminisced in “Coal Miner's Daughter” that her father worked in the mine, recalling,

We were poor but we had love,
that's the one thing that daddy made sure of
He shoveled coal to make a poor man's dollar.¹¹

The song “Coal Miner's Daughter” and her autobiography of the same name demonstrate that Lynn remembered what it was like to live in poverty. Her nostalgic songs reflected her perceptions of how women were supposed to act, in marriage and society. The major themes of Lynn's songs are poverty, spousal abuse, and alcoholism. While spousal abuse and alcoholism were issues that transcended the confines of any particular social class, Lynn seemed to believe the mainstream feminist movement failed to adequately represent the ways working-class women encountered these issues.

Lynn's Working-Class Beginnings

Lynn felt that the mainstream feminism of the 1970s failed to represent working-class women who frequently embraced a traditional, patriarchal culture rather than progressive, feminist ideals. Myra Marx Ferree uses sociological research from the late 1950s and early 1960s to

⁷ Jocelyn Neal, “The Voice Behind the Song: Faith Hill, Country Music, and Reflexive Identity” in *The Women of Country Music: A Reader*, eds. Charles K. Wolfe and James E. Akenson (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2003), 112-113.

⁸ Kate Heidemann, “Remarkable Women and Ordinary Gals: Performance of Identity in Songs by Loretta Lynn and Dolly Parton,” in *Country Boys and Redneck Women: New Essays in Gender and Country Music*, eds. Diane Pecknold and Kristine M. McCusker (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2016), 167.

⁹ Lynn and Vecsey, *Loretta Lynn*, 1-2.

¹⁰ Charles K. Wolfe, *Kentucky Country: Folk and Country Music of Kentucky* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1996), 162.

¹¹ Lynn, “Coal Miner's Daughter,” 83.

suggest that patriarchal ideals resonated deeply within working-class culture. Ferree argues women who worked outside the home related to feminist ideas more than housewives who were financially dependent on their husbands. Though working-class women worked outside the home during the 1960s and 1970s, working-class people who held on to patriarchal ideals firmly believed it was ideal for women to remain home while men worked outside jobs. The Women's Movement strove for workplaces to overcome this stereotype. However, many working-class women believed that this concept only applied to middle-class women who had reliable options for childcare and contraception.¹² While many held to these patriarchal ideas, working-class women did work outside the home. A famous example of this is the employment of working-class women in factories during the Great Depression. In this period, girls typically started working around the age of twelve and continued through their early twenties.¹³ However, when they married, many women left their employment to stay home and care for their children while their husbands worked.¹⁴ In all, Ferree's findings suggest many working-class women, such as Lynn, believed the women's movement did not relate to traditional working-class culture.

Lynn's lyrical reflections on her parents' behavior show her deep connection to traditional working-class patriarchal culture. In her autobiography, she recalled:

Daddy worked the night shift. He left home around four o'clock every afternoon and walked down the holler. We kids, we hardly said good-bye to him. But looking back, I can see the worried look on Mommy's face. She would keep busy with the kids all afternoon and evening. She had her hands full.¹⁵

¹² Myra Marx Ferree, "Working Class Feminism: A Consideration of the Consequences of Employment," *The Sociological Quarterly* 21, no. 2 (1980): 173-174; Nancy Maclean, "The Hidden History of Affirmative Action; Working Women's Struggles in the 1970s and the Gender of Class," *Feminist Studies* 25, no. 1 (Spring 1999): 44-46.

¹³ According to Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, "Most [women] were under twenty-one, but many were as young as twelve, or more commonly, fourteen." Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, "Disorderly Women: Gender and Labor Militancy in the Appalachian South," in *Women's America: Refocusing the Past*, 2nd ed., eds. Linda K. Kerber and Jane DeHart Matthews (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 345; Hall cites U.S. Congress, Senate, Committee on Manufactures, *Working Conditions of the Textile Industry in North Carolina, South Carolina, and Tennessee*, 71 Cong., 1 sess., May 8, 9, and 20, 1929.

¹⁴ Ferree, "Working Class Feminism," 173-174; Maclean, "The Hidden History of Affirmative Action," 44-46.

¹⁵ Lynn and Vecsey, *Loretta Lynn*, 11.

She emphasized her father's traditional role as a proud breadwinner. Lynn sometimes chose to sing songs written by others if she identified with the lyrics. One such example is songwriter Jerry Chestnut's "They Don't Make 'Em Like My Daddy Anymore" about a dad who never took handouts.¹⁶ Lynn later recalled that the song described exactly how she felt about her father.¹⁷ The song portrayed a proud man who did everything he could to support his family even though it was not enough to provide them with luxury food items. Through Lynn's accounts of her parents, we can infer much about the power working-class men held over their wives. In her first autobiography, *Coal Miner's Daughter*, she said of her father, "he wasn't one of those men that's gone half the time either—he didn't have no bad habits. He was always teasing Mommy but in a nice way."¹⁸ This quote implies other working-class men may have been both absent and violent with their wives.¹⁹ Lynn recalled in her song, "Little Red Shoes,"

And Daddy always kept a big stick
Behind the door
Just in case somebody was to come in
That was drunk on moonshine.²⁰

Lynn's father was prepared to protect his family from violent, drunken men who could possibly stumble into the wrong household. Lynn's lyrics and memories of her father give a nuanced portrait of working-class men, but her frame of reference is firmly rooted within traditional working-class society.

In comparison, Lynn's mother was the caretaker of the children and represented the moral ground for the family. In "Coal Miner's Daughter," she wrote, "Mommy rocked the babies at night and read the Bible by the coal oil light."²¹ Just like Lynn's father, her mother did everything she could for her family. In "My Angel Mother," Lynn stated, "I love you more day by day and I could never repay all the things that you've done for me."²² In her lyrics, Lynn recalled her mother's domestic

¹⁶ Loretta Lynn and Patsi Bale Cox, *Still Woman Enough: A Memoir* (New York: Hyperion, 2002), 17.

¹⁷ Lynn and Vecsey, *Loretta Lynn*, 8; Wolfe, *Kentucky Country*, 162.

¹⁸ Lynn and Vecsey, *Loretta Lynn*, 10.

¹⁹ Heidemann, "Remarkable Women and Ordinary Gals," 167.

²⁰ Loretta Lynn, "Little Red Shoes," in *Honky Tonk Girl: My Life in Lyrics* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2012), 130.

²¹ Lynn, "Coal Miner's Daughter," 83.

²² Loretta Lynn, "My Angel Mother," in *Honky Tonk Girl: My Life in Lyrics* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2012), 57.

work with a sense of reverence:

Mommy scrubbed our clothes on a
washboard ever' day
Why, I've seen her fingers bleed. To
complain, there was no need,
She'd smile in Mommy's
understanding way.²³

Lynn also recognized the hardships faced by her mother and other working-class women. These issues are reflected in Lynn's lyrics. In "Your Squaw Is On the Warpath," Lynn laments, "Well you leave me at home to keep the teepee clean[,] Six papooses to break and then wean."²⁴ She used the song to draw attention to the stereotype in which working-class women were confined to the house whereas men could leave and do as they pleased. She also drew attention to the constant cycle of pregnancy, birthing, and nursing that women endured. The woman in "Your Squaw Is On the Warpath," was angry that her husband went out drinking when she constantly cleaned up after him and had his children. Lynn's experiences with her own mother and exposure to issues of other working-class mothers shows her complex relationship with traditional working-class culture.

Lynn's own experience with traditional working-class culture began as a young child. As the oldest daughter in her family, Lynn's parents tasked her with caring for her younger siblings. This role helped prepare young girls for motherhood.²⁵ Women were expected to marry young and often went straight from living with their parents to living with their husbands. Historian Nicholas Syrett argues,

Although early marriage could be detrimental for working-class girls, it was the daughters of the bourgeois or professional class who might have the most to lose by marrying young, because they had greater access to the protection afforded by childhood.²⁶

In other words, upper-class girls had more time to be children whereas working-class girls were more likely to work, even as children.

Lynn married young, as was stereotypical of working-class

²³ Lynn, "Coal Miner's Daughter," 83.

²⁴ Loretta Lynn, "Your Squaw Is On the Warpath," in *Honky Tonk Girl: My Life in Lyrics* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2012), 63.

²⁵ Lynn and Vecsey, *Loretta Lynn*, 22.

²⁶ Nicholas L. Syrett, *American Child Bride: A History of Minors and Marriage in the United States* (Chapel Hill: University of Chapel Hill Press, 2016), 102.

women. By the 1960s, upper-class women married at an older age because they had the opportunity to go to college or work outside the home. Conversely, lower-class women married earlier because marriage afforded them the opportunity to be financially supported by a male protector.²⁷ Lynn's experience as a young bride might have been typical for many working-class women. At age thirteen, Lynn did not know if her husband expected her to have intercourse on the night of their honeymoon.²⁸ When she was first married, Lynn never refused her husband's requests for sex, but did not enjoy it. She later recalled "looking back, I'd say that sex didn't mean much to me for a long time. I think I picked up the old woman's attitude that sex was fun for men—but not for women."²⁹ Moreover, she believed that her aversion to sex and nescience of sensual pleasure influenced Doolittle's infidelity. She explained, "I can see where having such a young wife would give a man ideas about straying. But still, at the time, it hurt me bad. I could tell Doo wasn't happy with me. I didn't know what sex was all about."³⁰ Lynn's young marriage clearly shaped her opinions on the working-class' normative expectations for marital sex. In all, her personal experiences and relationships with her mother, father, and husband helped create the framework for her later views on feminism and working-class women.

Lynn and Motherhood

Lynn's lyrics about motherhood were also influenced by the social and economic situation in Appalachia during her childhood and young adulthood. While some industry had come to the South, married, working-class women did not have access to childcare or education about contraception. Leslie Reagan has explained that the Great Depression led to the end of the Comstock Laws against contraception, which helped legitimize birth control methods, such as the availability of condoms in drug stores. However, she admits that

middle-class married couples had greater access to contraceptives than did the poor or unmarried. They could afford douches and condoms and had family physicians who more readily provided middle-class women with diaphragms.³¹

²⁷ Syrett, *American Child Bride*, 253.

²⁸ Lynn and Vecsey, *Loretta Lynn*, 50.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 50-51.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 52-53; Lynn and Cox, *Still Woman Enough*, 33.

³¹ Leslie J. Reagan, *When Abortion Was a Crime: Women, Medicine, and Law in the United States, 1867-1973* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 40-41.

Despite the industrial boom of World War II, the greatest concern for working-class women continued to be economic survival. Middle- and upper-class women during this period had opportunities for better education, homes, healthcare, and childcare. However, the Appalachian region did not significantly benefit from improvements in infrastructure and education, and many children continued to walk several miles to and from school each day.³² The closest hospital to Lynn's childhood home was ten miles away. Lynn explained,

I do remember Mommy saying that as long as she was nursing, she couldn't have another baby. That's about the only kind of birth control they had in the mountains in those days. And the truth is, that's the only method I knew until after I had my first four.³³

The birth control pill was not approved by the Food and Drug Administration until 1960, and Lynn did not have money to purchase other forms of contraception.³⁴ Reflecting on this, she stated,

Sometimes in my show I make a joke about how I stopped having babies every year: "I keep my legs crossed now instead of my fingers." But it wasn't funny back then. I was so ignorant, and women didn't have what they do today. I love my kids, but I wish I had the pill when I was first married. I didn't get to enjoy the first four kids, I had 'em so fast. I was too busy trying to feed 'em and put clothes of them.³⁵

When the Lynns moved to Washington, Lynn begged her doctor to help her not have any more children. She recalled,

By that time, I was eighteen years old and had four babies. After one miscarriage, I went to the doctor to ask how to stop having babies, and he said, "Honey, you should be thinking about having your first baby, not your last." Then, he gave me a diaphragm.³⁶

Lynn's interest in birth control often focused on the working-class issue of access to contraception. She also believed that women should have access to abortion. Concerning the birth control pill, she stated,

³² Syrett, *American Child Bride*, 220.

³³ Lynn and Vecsey, *Loretta Lynn*, 21.

³⁴ Susan J. Douglas, *Where the Girls Are: Growing Up Female with the Mass Media* (New York: Random House, 1994), 61.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Lynn and Vecsey, *Loretta Lynn*, 61.

I'm glad I had six kids because I couldn't imagine my life without 'em. But I think a woman needs control over her own life, and the pill is what helps her do it. That's also why I won't ever say anything against the abortion laws they made easier a few years ago. Personally, I think you should prevent unwanted pregnancy rather than get an abortion.³⁷

In 1976, concerning abortion, she similarly stated,

I don't think I could have an abortion. It would be wrong for me. But I'm thinking of all the poor girls who get pregnant when they don't want to be, and how they should have a choice instead of leaving it up to some politician or doctor who don't have to raise the baby. I believe they should be able to have an abortion.³⁸

Although she was pro-birth control and pro-choice, Lynn did not align herself with the mainstream feminist movement. In her co-written autobiography, *Loretta Lynn*, Lynn recalls making a snide comment to women's rights activist Betty Friedan when they both appeared on the *David Frost Show*.³⁹ Lynn might have included this anecdote in her autobiography to highlight her rift with the mainstream feminist movement.

Jennifer Terry argues middle- and upper-class women relied on post-war psychiatric literature to tell them how they were the source of their own marital problems and failure to be good mothers. This literature emphasized that women were responsible for their own unhappiness—it was not their husbands' fault. Such ideology paralleled Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique*, in which she claimed mothers felt guilty for their unhappiness since they had access to material possessions made for making lives easier, such as modern appliances, that most working-class and lower-class women still did not own by the 1960s.⁴⁰

Lynn did not identify with the 1970s feminist movement because she felt that it did not reflect the experiences of working-class women. Lynn argued middle-class women had more opportunities because they had the choice to stay at home rather than get a job.⁴¹ This idea ran counter to Friedan's argument that middle-class women experienced

³⁷ Lynn and Vecsey, *Loretta Lynn*, 61.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 62.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 152.

⁴⁰ Jennifer Terry, "'Momism' and the Making of Treasonous Homosexuals," in *"Bad" Mothers: The Politics of Blame in Twentieth-Century America*, eds. Molly Ladd-Taylor and Lauri Umansky (New York: New York University Press, 1998), 185.

⁴¹ Lynn and Vecsey, *Loretta Lynn*, 5, 58.

similar situations as mothers who stayed home with children while their husbands worked.⁴² Moreover, middle-class women had easier lives because of household appliances, such as dishwashers, that would not have been available to the isolated people of Van Lear, Kentucky. Friedan observed issues such as women marrying young, having many children, or giving up on their education, such as in Lynn's case.

Friedan argued that throughout the 1950s and 1960s, middle-class women were happy with their lives.⁴³ If middle-class wives were ever unhappy, Friedan believed their unhappiness stemmed from problems within their marriage or with themselves. Friedan's solution was to have women correct themselves to eliminate their unhappiness.⁴⁴ To a degree, Lynn had a similar idea. Her songs often addressed her marital problems, which she believed stemmed from men's natural urges to drink and have sex, even as husbands and fathers. She thought negative behaviors, such as infidelity and violence, were natural for men and wifely behaviors, such as honouring one's husband, were more natural for women.⁴⁵ Regarding Doolittle's infidelity, she stated, "Doo let me know he wouldn't stand for me changing my values. I know that sounds like a double standard, but that's the way it is."⁴⁶ However, a quote from *Loretta Lynn* demonstrates that her perspective on power dynamics in relationships changed over time. She said, "I guess I always felt Doo was in charge of me, just like my Daddy, because he knew better and was older. Maybe then I believed that a wife was her husband's property."⁴⁷ Her use of the past tense indicates that her opinion changed later on. Lynn might not have allied herself with the mainstream feminist movement, or agreed with them on all issues, but some of her beliefs resemble those of Friedman and other feminists.

Lynn's lyrics gave women insight into her life. She explained her desire to write songs for working-class women:

they [women] could see I was Loretta Lynn, a mother and a wife
and a daughter, who had feelings just like other women. Sure, I
wanted men to like me, but the women were something special.
They'd come around the bus after the show and they'd ask to

⁴² Betty Friedan, "The Feminine Mystique," in *Women's America: Refocusing the Past*, 2nd ed., eds. Linda K. Kerber and Jane De Hart-Mathews (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 436.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Lynn and Cox, *Still Woman Enough*, xvi, 58-59.

⁴⁶ Lynn and Vecsey, *Loretta Lynn*, 131.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

talk to me. They felt I had the answers to their problems because my life was just like theirs.⁴⁸

Bill C. Malone observed that “Loretta Lynn had sometimes written and performed songs that questioned the older hierarchies of patriarchal dominance,” raising awareness of other options.⁴⁹ For example, in her song “Adam’s Rib,” she declared, “From Adam’s rib to woman’s lib[,] We’ve come a long way from cookin’ and rockin’ the crib.”⁵⁰ She furthered,

The Lord made man, and man made
His woman to do what he wanted her to

Hey, hey, girls, we’re catchin’ up
With him
Lord it’s good for us and it’s good for them
It’s from working hard and working late
If there’s lovin’ on his mind, he’ll just have to wait.⁵¹

Reflecting on the biblical story of Adam and Eve, Lynn explained that by working outside the home, even late shifts, a woman could be more independent. Lynn felt this independence could allow women the freedom to refuse sex with their husbands, resulting in fewer pregnancies.⁵² Lynn herself began to work outside the home, singing professionally and touring. She realized, however, most women could not relate to her career as a singer and songwriter. Thus, Lynn began writing inspirational songs about everyday issues that impacted working-class women’s lives such as poverty and marital struggles. Through her songs, Lynn led other women to understand that she had been through similar issues and struggles as a working-class woman.

Lynn was also an inspiration to many working-class women and female singers. Mary A. Bufwack and Robert K. Oermann doubted Lynn and other singers she influenced during her early career, such as Jeannie C. Riley, Melba Montgomery, and Norma Jean, “would ever call themselves ‘feminist,’ but all of them reflected working-class women in

⁴⁸ Lynn and Vecsey, *Loretta Lynn*, 113.

⁴⁹ Bill C. Malone, *Don’t Get Above Your Raisin’: Country Music and the Southern Working Class* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2002), 249.

⁵⁰ Loretta Lynn, “Adam’s Rib” in *Honky Tonk Girl: My Life in Lyrics* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2012), 114.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

⁵² *Ibid.*

song.”⁵³

Lynn’s Marriage and Appeal to a Working-Class Audience

The issues of working-class women were furthered in Lynn’s lyrics about her adult life and marriage to Doolittle Lynn. The first time Doolittle had a relationship with another woman was when Lynn was two months pregnant with their first child in 1949. Lynn thought Doolittle kicked her out of their home because he did not like her cooking.⁵⁴ When Lynn found out Doolittle was seeing another woman, she expressed her feelings of jealousy in a letter to his mistress; this so enraged Doolittle that he claimed to no longer love her.⁵⁵ Despite her husband’s infidelity, Lynn did not let it get her down. In regard to Doolittle’s first act of infidelity, she stated, “I think the seeds were sown that very day that would grow into songs like ‘Fist City’ and ‘You Ain’t Woman Enough’.”⁵⁶ Regardless of Doolittle’s infidelity, she stayed with him, and in 1949 supported his decision to move to Washington state for a job.⁵⁷

Working-class audiences recognized and related to aspects of infidelity, alcoholism, and spousal abuse in Lynn’s song lyrics. Lynn’s beliefs about alcoholism and abuse resembled those of the working class rather than the beliefs found in feminist discourse. Paula J. Caplan believes scholars, particularly psychiatrists, misunderstood twentieth century women who stayed with abusive and alcoholic husbands. Just as Lynn stayed with Doolittle, many women stayed with abusive husbands because despite their behaviors, they still loved them, wanted their children to have a father figure in their life, and/or needed their husband’s income to adequately provide for the family. According to Caplan,

Men who try to stop their addictive behavior, find it physically and/or psychologically difficult, and all too many take out their frustrations on their families, including subjecting their wives and their children to severe beatings or verbal abuse. When the wives bemoan this worsened behavior, many therapists say,

⁵³ Mary A. Bufwack and Robert K. Oermann, “You’re Lookin’ at Country: Loretta Lynn and Working-Class Pride,” in *Finding Her Voice: Women in Country Music, 1800-2000* (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 2003), 279.

⁵⁴ Lynn and Cox, *Still Woman Enough*, 35-37.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 38.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 41.

“Aha! She doesn't *want* him to stop drinking!” They ignore the fact that the wives wish the men would stop both the drinking *and* the abuse.⁵⁸

While mainstream feminism recognized the relationship between alcoholism and abuse in this period, other issues, like gender equality, were more important to the movement. It was more acceptable to critique the choices available to women rather than the violence of individual men.

Though Lynn disagreed with several main aspects of the mainstream feminist movement, she seemed to agree to an extent with the feminist idea that women should be equal partners with their spouses. Lynn supported working-class women by writing songs that demanded respect for women, especially in relationships. For example, when Lynn first started singing publicly, she noticed a woman who frequently cried at her performances. After this occurred several times, Lynn asked her why she would come to the club to drink and cry. Lynn then wrote her first released single, after the woman told her that her husband had left her and their seven children for another woman.⁵⁹ Entitled “I'm a Honky Tonk Girl,” the lyrics told a story similar to that of the woman's plight. The last stanza intoned:

So fill my glass up to the brim
To lose my memory of him
I've lost everything in this world
And now I'm a honky tonk girl.⁶⁰

In many other songs, Lynn had addressed the concept of the ‘other woman’, such as in “Slowly Killing Me.”⁶¹ The lyrics proclaimed, “Oh what's this other woman done to you[,] why she can't ever love you like I do.”⁶²

Lynn's hit song “Fist City” concerned itself with the ‘other woman’, as well. Lynn wrote the song after her children came home from school one day to explain that their school bus driver was in love with their father. Lynn recollected that her children exclaimed,

⁵⁸ Paula J. Caplan, “Mother-Blaming,” in *“Bad” Mothers: The Politics of Blame in Twentieth-Century America*, eds. Molly Ladd-Taylor and Lauri Umansky (New York: New York University Press, 1998), 140.

⁵⁹ Loretta Lynn, “I'm a Honky Tonk Girl,” in *Honky Tonk Girl: My Life in Lyrics* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2012), 9.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

⁶¹ Loretta Lynn, “Slowly Killing Me” in *Honky Tonk Girl: My Life in Lyrics* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2012), 43.

⁶² *Ibid.*

“Mommy, that old girl school-bus driver tells us that she’s in love with Daddy and that she’s going to take him away from us.”⁶³ Lynn asked the woman to meet with her and Doolittle to discuss the alleged romance. Both Lynn’s husband and the school bus driver denied that they were seeing each other, but Lynn wrote the song anyway so the woman would know how she felt.⁶⁴ Lynn declared, “You’d better close your face and stay out of my way if you don’t wanna go to Fist City.”⁶⁵ The song referenced Lynn’s intention to fight the other woman. These tough lyrics were working-class in spirit and did not reflect the tone of the 1970s mainstream feminist movement.

Throughout the 1960s and 1970s, mainstream feminists believed women should have the right to divorce their husbands.⁶⁶ However, Lynn declared in her second autobiography that during the 1940s, residents of Kentucky’s mountains determined that divorce was not acceptable. She explained, “If you married a man, you entered his life forever. There weren’t no back doors—not even if he beat you, cheated on you, or mistreated your children.”⁶⁷ A 1966 study of working-class women divorce applicants, explained that after mental cruelty, “for wives, the next most frequent complaints were physical cruelty, handling of financial problems, drinking, verbal abuse, infidelity, lack of love and sexual incompatibility.”⁶⁸ Lynn never divorced her husband, even though he expressed many of these characteristics, especially infidelity. Once, just after Lynn had just given birth to their second child, Doolittle had a relationship with her brother’s wife. Doolittle’s mother wanted his marriage with Lynn to endure, despite his misdeeds. Lynn remembered the moment,

Doo’s mama dragged me back to Doo, and like a goodwife, I stayed. The way I looked at it, even at fifteen, when you get knocked down, you get back up, dust yourself off, and get on with it.⁶⁹

Deborah Dinner argues the rise in divorce rates was the greatest

⁶³ Loretta Lynn, “Fist City” in *Honky Tonk Girl: My Life in Lyrics* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2012), 47.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶⁶ Deborah Dinner, “The Divorce Bargain: The Fathers’ Rights Movement and Family Inequalities,” *Virginia Law Review* 102, no. 1 (March 2016): 89.

⁶⁷ Lynn and Cox, *Still Woman Enough*, xvi.

⁶⁸ Judith Long Laws, “A Feminist Review of Marital Adjustment Literature: The Rape of the Locke,” *Journal of Marriage and Family* 33, no. 3 (1971): 506.

⁶⁹ Lynn and Cox, *Still Woman Enough*, 51.

contributing factor toward women's support of the feminist movement.⁷⁰ Lynn might not have agreed with this, as she was taught to stay with her husband no matter his wrongdoings.

Lynn's controversial song about divorce, however, shows a more nuanced perspective. "Rated X," released in 1973, was Lynn's attempt to stand up for divorced women who were perceived as easy by single men.⁷¹ Many of Lynn's fans misinterpreted the meaning of the lyrics in "Rated X," possibly because the notion of divorce was so controversial for the time period. The song had a sarcastic tone; for example, she wrote, "Well nobody knows where you're goin' but they sure know where you've been."⁷² Lynn later stated, "after the show [*Hee Haw*] was on the air, we got some mail saying the song was dirty and putting down women. But that is one thing I'll never do."⁷³

Lynn did not believe women should be unfaithful either. She stated, "all I know is there's no double standard in the eyes of God. It's just as bad for any man as it is for any woman."⁷⁴ She knew that both men and women were unfaithful, and thus wrote about how working-class people perceived the sexes' infidelity differently. "Girl That I Am Now" addressed the double standard amongst working-class people that accepted cheating by men, on their spouse, without consequence.⁷⁵ Lynn wrote, "I cheated and I'm guilty[.] My heart can't stand the pain."⁷⁶ She also addressed female infidelity in "I Got Caught," which proclaimed,

Yeah I got caught but honey you're
A pro
There's not a thing about cheatin'
You don't know.⁷⁷

Lynn further addressed this topic in "God Gave Me a Heart to Forgive."⁷⁸ The song reflected the specific standard working-class people had for men. The lyrics read, "you hurt me as much as you

⁷⁰ Dinner, "The Divorce Bargain," 80-81.

⁷¹ Loretta Lynn, "Rated X," in *Honky Tonk Girl: My Life in Lyrics* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2012), 98.

⁷² *Ibid.*

⁷³ *Ibid.*

⁷⁴ Lynn and Vecsey, *Coal Miner's Daughter*, 131-132.

⁷⁵ Loretta Lynn, "Girl That I Am Now," in *Honky Tonk Girl: My Life in Lyrics* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2012), 12.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷⁷ Loretta Lynn, "I Got Caught," in *Honky Tonk Girl: My Life in Lyrics* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2012), 40.

⁷⁸ Loretta Lynn, "God Gave Me a Heart to Forgive," in *Honky Tonk Girl: My Life in Lyrics* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2012), 43.

can/Then you tell me that you're just weak like any other man."⁷⁹

While Lynn recognized the issues working-class women faced regarding divorce and unfaithfulness, Kate Heidemann writes that Lynn blamed women for male infidelity. Heidemann notes Lynn's contemporaries portrayed similar ideas in their lyrics. This includes country singer Dolly Parton's "Jolene," in which she begs the other woman not to tempt her man to infidelity.⁸⁰ Heidemann explains working-class culture allowed men to be promiscuous but not women. If women had multiple sexual partners or had a relationship with a married man, society assigned them a crueler reputation than men because they thought men's sexual urges were natural.⁸¹ Working-class society expected women to partake in sexual intercourse only to procreate and satisfy her husband; working-class people did not entertain the idea of women's sexual pleasure.⁸² Lynn stated, "Men will usually stick up for each other. Especially if they are protecting a friend's right to run around on his wife."⁸³ Lynn believed men would always support other men rather than condemn them for infidelity.⁸⁴

Lynn also wrote songs about alcoholism among the working class. While the second-wave feminist movement fought against domestic abuse, a lot of abuse suffered by working-class people was due to the effects of alcohol. Since traditional working-class culture tolerated men's bad behaviors, women often suffered the consequences of drunken husbands and physical violence as a result of intoxication. Working-class people also generally accepted husbands beating their wives under the pretense of disciplining them, since men expected their wives to obey them.⁸⁵ Political and feminist theorist, Carole J. Sheffield observed that for centuries, "several [southern] states had statutes that essentially allowed a man to beat his wife without interference from courts."⁸⁶ Sheffield argued that this code of law stemmed from the belief that women were the property of men, and therefore allowed wife beaters to "often cite their right to discipline their wives" in cases

⁷⁹ Lynn, "God Gave Me a Heart to Forgive," 43.

⁸⁰ Heidemann, "Remarkable Women and Ordinary Gals," 170-171.

⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸² Ibid., 180-181.

⁸³ Lynn and Cox, *Still Woman Enough*, 59.

⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁵ Dinner, "The Divorce Bargain," 144; Heidemann, "Remarkable Women and Ordinary Gals," 168.

⁸⁶ Carole J. Sheffield, "Sexual Terrorism," in *Women: A Feminist Perspective*, 4th ed., ed. Jo Freeman (Mountain View: Mayfield Publishing Company, 1989), 7.

brought to court.⁸⁷ When Doolittle told Lynn's parents that he was marrying Loretta, Lynn recalled, "Daddy made Doo promise not to whip me, and not to take me too far from home."⁸⁸ Heidemann argued that because of her upbringing, Lynn thought herself responsible for her husband's abusive behavior. She saw a pattern in the storylines of Lynn's lyrics and believed that the songwriter helped women navigate the complexity of their relationships through song lyrics. Heidemann concluded, "the fact that women are the main actors in these dramas reflects a social hierarchy in which women are limited in the ways they can 'talk back' to men."⁸⁹ Women did not feel that they could stand up for themselves when their husbands treated them badly.⁹⁰

Working-class people viewed excessive alcohol consumption as a normal part of life.⁹¹ In a song titled "God's Country," Lynn recalled that, "white lightning [moonshine] flowed like the fountains," meaning that working-class people frequently made and drank liquor.⁹² Lynn recalled that in the absence of entertainment,

Doo liked to go out with the boys and have a few beers. It was them days that gave me the idea for the song, "Don't Come Home A-Drinkin' (with Lovin' on Your Mind)," which I wrote with my sister Peggy Sue.⁹³

Once, when Doolittle came home drunk, Lynn had been canning green beans all day and had not cooked dinner. Upset that there was nothing ready to eat, Doolittle threw the jars all over the kitchen, breaking the glass. It was not unusual for him to have regular drunken tantrums such as this.⁹⁴ Lynn's personal experience with spousal alcohol abuse is one of many possible scenarios that working-class people faced.

Working-class people drank for a variety of reasons. Roderick Phillips has argued that throughout the 1930s and 1940s, Americans associated drinking straight liquor with masculinity. Drinking alcohol became so normalized following prohibition that "drinking at home became more public, too, in the sense that there was no longer any need

⁸⁷ Sheffield, "Sexual Terrorism," 15.

⁸⁸ Lynn and Vecsey, *Loretta Lynn*, 48.

⁸⁹ Heidemann, "Remarkable Women and Ordinary Gals," 169-170.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

⁹¹ Roderick Phillips, *Alcohol: A History* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2014), 301.

⁹² Loretta Lynn, "God's Country," in *Honky Tonk Girl: My Life in Lyrics* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2012), 122.

⁹³ Lynn and Vecsey, *Loretta Lynn*, 63.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 56-57.

to pretend that it was not done.”⁹⁵ This “presented different kinds of dangers,” other than threats to one’s health, including:

heavy drinking and alcoholism, but one of the worst effects of these behaviors—domestic violence against women—was scarcely mentioned until the 1970s [with the women’s rights movement].⁹⁶

Lynn also sang songs about drinking to describe problems that arose as a result of alcoholism. She thought that if a man failed to consider the woman’s feelings, then he should have stayed out for the duration of the night rather than come home drunk.⁹⁷ “I’m Gettin’ Tired of Babyin’ You” and “What’s the Bottle Done to My Baby,” are two of Lynn’s songs that address alcoholism.⁹⁸ Lynn believed that her husband drank because, as a singer, she made more money than he did in a time when men were expected to be the breadwinners.⁹⁹ She wrote lyrics to raise awareness about the negative effects of alcohol on relationships and families. In “Bartender,” the bartender warned:

It’s not too late so stop and think
Before all of your pride is gone
You can end up like all the rest with
A barroom for your home.¹⁰⁰

Rural women related to Lynn’s songs because they too wanted to prevent abuse influenced by alcoholism. Yet, Lynn crossed a boundary by actually condemning alcoholism as the cause of bad behavior whereas other women only criticized the bad things one did while intoxicated. For example, Dolly Parton, who grew up in the working-class community of Sevierville, Tennessee, recalled that

it was not within the bounds of the man/woman relationship of that time and place for her [mother] to criticize the drinking that had caused him [her father] to pee off the porch, so she had to

⁹⁵ Phillips, *Alcohol*, 282.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 301.

⁹⁷ Loretta Lynn, “Don’t Come Home a Drinkin’ (With Lovin’ on Your Mind)” in *Honky Tonk Girl: My Life in Lyrics* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2012), 39.

⁹⁸ Loretta Lynn, “I’m Getting Tired of Babyin’ You” in *Honky Tonk Girl: My Life in Lyrics* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2012), 67; Loretta Lynn, “What’s the Bottle Done to My Baby” in *Honky Tonk Girl: My Life in Lyrics* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2012), 77.

⁹⁹ Lynn and Cox, *Still Woman Enough*, 106-107.

¹⁰⁰ Loretta Lynn, “Bartender” in *Honky Tonk Girl: My Life in Lyrics* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2012), 41.

confine her complaint to the act itself.¹⁰¹

While working-class women drank alcohol too, working-class people thought addressing the negative aspects of alcoholism was taboo. In fact, working-class wives commonly believed that “they were to understand how stressful jobs might lead their husbands to drink heavily.”¹⁰² Lynn gained the attention of working-class women when she wrote and sang songs that addressed the negative effects of alcohol anyway.¹⁰³

Abuse, in its emotional and physical forms, was an element in Lynn's own life. In “Two Steps Forward,” she sang: “These tears in my eyes they're not so real I'm just puttin' on a show.”¹⁰⁴ The song relayed multiple times that one had to stay strong and move on rather than spend so much time hurting. Lynn's sad lyrics conveyed messages to other women about how to handle despairing situations or problems with their husbands. In “Darkest Day,” she wrote:

Oh how I wish that old saying is
True
It's always the darkest just before dawn
Then I'll know soon I'm gonna see the sun-shine
I just can't take this darkness on and on.¹⁰⁵

Lynn never went to marriage counselling, but writing songs provided her an opportunity to voice her feelings and her own experiences of emotional abuse. She recalled that sometimes following arguments with her husband she would get headaches so painful she would have to sleep for twelve to eighteen hours straight. However, in cases such as this, she recommended that women in similar situations think happy thoughts, and rather than escape their problems, try to confront them.¹⁰⁶

Lynn experienced many instances of physical abuse from her husband. Once she saw Doolittle kill a dog because he thought it barked too much. She remarked on the incident, “I don't believe in force, unless you're really pushed. I think you can do things with kindness.”¹⁰⁷ According to Lynn, when people witnessed Doolittle and her in an

¹⁰¹ Dolly Parton, as quoted in Kate Heidemann, “Remarkable Women and Ordinary Gals,” 168-169.

¹⁰² Phillips, *Alcohol*, 301.

¹⁰³ Heidemann, “Remarkable Women and Ordinary Gals,” 168-169.

¹⁰⁴ Loretta Lynn, “Two Steps Forward” in *Honky Tonk Girl: My Life in Lyrics* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2012), 19.

¹⁰⁵ Loretta Lynn, “Darkest Day” in *Honky Tonk Girl: My Life in Lyrics* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2012), 31.

¹⁰⁶ Lynn and Vecsey, *Loretta Lynn*, 134.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 133.

argument, it scared them into thinking the fighting would escalate physically.¹⁰⁸ Lynn had hit her husband before. Though she did not approve of spousal abuse, she viewed violence as a way to protect herself because she saw violence in relationships as an inevitable part of life. Consequently, her lyrics argue that people did not understand violence in working-class society. Violence was so common in Van Lear that the school teacher taught children to sing a song about a woman named Luly Barrs who became pregnant. The father of the child would not marry her, so he wrapped a piece of railroad steel around her neck and threw her in the Ohio River to die.¹⁰⁹ Lynn recalled not thinking badly about the content of the song because she learned it at school. Even though themes of abuse and violence were conjured up in many of Lynn's lyrics, she never played the victim. She wrote about crying a lot, but most of the time, she told the man that she simply would not accept his behavior. Typically, Lynn fought back. In "You Didn't Like My Lovin'," Lynn told the lover, "far as I'm concerned you can turn and walk out that door."¹¹⁰ Similarly, in "From Now On," she wrote: "You better shape up or start shippin' out, big man, I'm warnin' you."¹¹¹ In "Women's Prison," Lynn sang of a woman who was put in prison and sentenced to death for murdering her husband after seeing him with another woman.¹¹² In her songs, Lynn encouraged fighting back, both verbally and physically. These lyrics evoke the same images of tough working-class women as those in "Fist City." While she did not agree with several tenets of mainstream feminism, Lynn's lyrics reveal a more unique brand of feminism inspired by issues faced by working-class women.

Conclusion

Although Lynn did not completely agree with the women's rights movement because it did not appeal to working-class women, Lynn did express feminist perspectives in her music, particularly in terms of demanding respect for women and advocating women's access to birth control. Lynn's upbringing influenced her opinions about working-class women's lives, a heritage to which she stayed true. However, while she

¹⁰⁸ Lynn and Vecsey, *Loretta Lynn*, 134.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 30.

¹¹⁰ Loretta Lynn, "You Didn't Like My Lovin'" in *Honky Tonk Girl: My Life in Lyrics* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2012), 50.

¹¹¹ Loretta Lynn, "From Now On" in *Honky Tonk Girl: My Life in Lyrics* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2012), 92.

¹¹² Loretta Lynn, "Women's Prison" in *Honky Tonk Girl: My Life in Lyrics* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2012), 142-143.

believed women should respect the men in their lives, she also demanded respect for women. Lynn once stated, "I'm not a big fan of Women's Liberation, but maybe it will help women stand up for the respect they're due."¹¹³ Lynn was a voice for working-class women. She shared her opinion and advice for working-class women best when she observed, "That is what 'still woman enough' means to me: taking responsibility for what you feel, for what you are."¹¹⁴

Lynn reached an audience desperate to feel understood. She appealed to women because she wrote about her life as a working-class woman. Her female audience was able to relate to memories of her childhood, motherhood, and marriage. Lynn was exceptional as a performer not only for talents in singing and songwriting, but also for her ability and courage to write about all aspects of her life. Her honesty and desire to be there for other women going through similar situations has become part of her life legacy. Wolfe stated of Lynn's musical career, "many of these hit songs Loretta wrote herself, and many of them began to chronicle working-class life from the fresh perspective of women: the house-wife, the mother, the lover."¹¹⁵

¹¹³ Loretta Lynn, as quoted in Mary A. Bufwack and Robert K. Oermann, *Finding Her Voice*, 267.

¹¹⁴ Lynn and Cox, *Still Woman Enough*, 228.

¹¹⁵ Wolfe, *Kentucky Country*, 165.

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- “Bartender”
- “Coal Miner’s Daughter”
- “Darkest Day”
- “Don’t Come Home a Drinkin’ (With Lovin’ on Your Mind)”
- “Fist City”
- “From Now On”
- “Girl That I Am Now”
- “God Gave Me a Heart to Forgive”
- “God’s Country”
- “I Got Caught”
- “I’m a Honky Tonk Girl”
- “I’m Getting Tired of Babyin’ You”
- “Little Red Shoes”
- “My Angel Mother”
- “Rated X”
- “Since I’ve Got the Pill”
- “Slowly Killing Me”
- “Two Steps Forward”
- “What’s the Bottle Done to My Baby”
- “Women’s Prison”
- “You Ain’t Woman Enough”
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