HISTORICAL AND MUSICAL CONTEXT OF THE CHARACTERS IN
CARLISLE FLOYD’S “SUSANNAH”

A DISSERTATION

SUBMITTED TO THE GRADUATE SCHOOL
IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS
FOR THE DEGREE
DOCTOR OF ARTS

BY
KEISHA D. COOK

KEITH KOTHMAN AND JOSEPH LEVITT- ADVISORS

BALL STATE UNIVERSITY
MUNCIE, INDIANA
DECEMBER 2013
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to first acknowledge the doctoral committee. Professor Joseph Levitt, Dr. Keith Kothman, Dr. Kathleen Maurer, Dr. Meryl Mantione, and Dr. Allen Truell have contributed their time, effort, energy, experience, and expertise to this document. I would like to give a special thank you to my previous voice professor and committee chair member, Dr. Karri York. Dr. Michael Oravtiz and Dr. Duane Karna also contributed time, advice, and expertise as previous members of the doctoral committee. I would like to thank my family (especially my parents, Mark and Diattra Cook) and friends for their continued encouragement, patience, and understanding. Without their support, this endeavor would not have been possible. Lastly, I would like to thank Carlisle Floyd for his informative interview. Maestro Floyd’s gracious and helpful contribution provided the document with genuine relevance.
ABSTRACT

DISSERTATION: Historical and Musical Context of the Characters in Carlisle Floyd’s “Susannah”

STUDENT: Keisha D. Cook

DEGREE: Doctor of Arts

COLLEGE: Sciences and Humanities

DATE: December 2013

PAGES: 132

This dissertation explores the characters in Carlisle Floyd’s musical drama Susannah within a historical and musical perspective. 1950s culture affected Floyd’s musical drama and this dissertation connects the cultural phenomena to musical phenomena. Each character undergoes dynamic changes that are influenced by plot, text, historical context, and musical devices. Floyd motivates his characters through the use of stage directions, lyrics, musical aspects, religion, politics, and his own experiences. The political and religious themes in Susannah manifest themselves in the plot, characters, and musical drama. Religious zealotry combines with political themes, and is expressed by way of musical features.

Each of the character’s scenes is examined from a cultural and musical perspective. A detailed character description with motivations begins each analysis chapter. Musical elements are studied chronologically through the plot. Carlisle Floyd’s characters in Susannah are either motivated or negatively affected by fear. The dissertation connects the element of fear to the political era in which the opera was composed, as well as shows the musical portrayal of these elements. For example, Susannah is subjected to the perils of fear in a social setting and the music portrays this fear by way of musical and textual elements. Although Mrs. McLean and the
tow people crusade against Susannah, Floyd’s work exposes that the true villain of the opera is fear and religious zealotry.

This 1950s adaptation of a biblical story contains themes of wrongful persecution, fear, fanaticism, and political upheaval. Social ostracism and religious zealotry are common themes in literature, art, and music. Carlisle Floyd successfully composed a musical drama based on these common themes. He used many compositional devices to convey how false accusations, fear, social hypocrisy, and doubt can destroy a society. This dissertation examines how the characters in Susannah behave, interact, and react to the stimuli within the plot and how the music contributes to their characterization and actions.
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CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

Carlisle Floyd’s musical drama *Susannah* premiered in 1957, in a time of political and religious fundamentalism and distrust known as the McCarthy era. This dissertation will examine the characters, relationships, and the dramatic musical elements, as they pertain to the political, social, and religious climate of the 1950s. Elements within and effects of McCarthyism on this opera have yet to be addressed. While religious elements in the work have been discussed, an analysis of each character has not been done, nor a perspective of how the music and character development are shaped by fear and religious zealotry together. The dissertation discusses how the religious elements and fear instilled by narrow-mindedness of this time directly affect the characters, both literally and musically.

The political and religious symbolism in *Susannah* manifests through elements within the plot and characters, as well as the musical drama. Religion and zealotry are intertwined with political symbols in this opera. The McCarthy era, catapulted by the Red Scare of the 1920s, affected many types of creative output in the 1950s. Writers and composers like Ernst Krênek and Arthur Miller can be linked to this wave of stylistic commentary on McCarthyism; and Carlisle Floyd can be linked as well. Themes of ostracism, persecution, fear, distrust, and paranoia are common in 20th century American verismo opera. *Verismo* is best understood as a movement in Italian literature, and subsequently in opera, which developed in the 1870s. Although sharing certain characteristics with naturalism – an impersonal narrative style, an interest in the lower social strata, a true-to-life approach in dealing with contemporary reality –
verismo developed distinctive traits. Any person performing a role, directing the show, or learning about American verismo opera could have something to gain from understanding the political climate and its effect on musical characterization in this musical drama. The dissertation explores each character’s development and influence through a stylistic musical analysis.

Carlisle Floyd’s characters in Susannah are either motivated or negatively affected by fear. The dissertation attempts to connect this element of fear to the political era in which the opera was composed. The fear of evil and social ostracism guides these characters as they each contribute to the symbolic nature of the biblical adaptation. Susannah is subjected to the perils of fear in a social setting. The true villain of the opera is fear and religious zealotry, personified by Mrs. McLean as she leads the crusade against Susannah.

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PLOT SYNOPSIS AND BACKGROUND

Set in “modern day,” the opera brings light to a made-up small town called New Hope Valley, Tennessee. Floyd wanted to use a setting that was remote and untouched by outsiders so that fundamentalism could feasibly be practiced. He needed to choose a setting with close-minded people so that the plot would seem more realistic. A young and pretty girl named Susannah Polk is sweetly naïve and hopeful. Eventually, she and her brother, Sam are destroyed by fear, lust, prejudice, false witnessing, and religious persecution.

The story starts with a town dance, where Susannah Polk is carelessly dancing while unknowingly being admired by most of the men. A judgmental town-matriarch is watching and commenting about her shameless display. The matriarch’s only reconciliation is that Susannah’s mother is not alive to see it. She eventually turns the other women against Susannah by bringing attention to her “sinful ways” and poor upbringing by her drunken brother. At the dance, the Reverend Olin Blitch introduces himself and quickly notices Susannah and even invites her to dance while the town elders and members watch. After the dance, Susannah talks with an admirer, Little Bat, about the dance. She pays no mind to the women who were judging her, and she enjoys her evening.

The next day she is seen by the town elders bathing naked in a creek. She is scorned and called the “Devil Himself.” Later that evening, she is shunned at a church dinner and told she is unwelcome there. She goes home and Little Bat arrives to tell her that the church elders made him falsely confess that she seduced him. Outraged at the lie and betrayal, Susannah tells Little Bat to never return. She discovers that the town will run her out if she does not confess her sins and repent. The Act ends with her complete breakdown.
Sam leaves for a hunting trip and Susannah goes to the prayer meeting. Caught up in the Reverend Blitch’s fervent preaching, she almost repents. After coming to her senses, she runs out. Blitch shows up that night to her house to ask her to repent her “sin-sick soul.” Susannah, defeated and depressed, lets her defenses down, and Olin Blitch rapes her.

The next day Blitch begs for her forgiveness after realizing she was a virgin when he took advantage of her and stole her innocence. She denies him forgiveness and runs home to tell Sam what happened. Outraged, Sam grabs a shotgun and heads to the Baptismal to get Blitch. The town closes in around Susannah after the incident at the creek because they believe her sinful ways and lies brought her brother to commit murder. She repels them with a shotgun and screams for them to leave. After they retreat in fear, Susannah calls Little Bat to approach her. She goads him into a kiss, but when he leans in for it, she slaps him and laughs maniacally. Left alone on the porch with only a shotgun, she laughs and stares out, a crazed and empty shell of the girl she was before.

*Susannah* has been performed more than 800 times since it first opened in 1957 at Florida State University. Despite its apparent popularity, little research exists about the musical drama or Carlisle Floyd. Several articles and dissertations show different perspectives on the performance practice, religious elements, and dialect used in Floyd’s opera. Elements within and effects of McCarthyism on this opera have not been researched. While religious elements in the work have been discussed, an analysis of each character has similarly not been done, nor a perspective of how the music and character development are shaped by McCarthyism and religious zealotry.

The association of fear and persecution in the 1950s to the plot of the drama is apparent, but a lack of character analysis exists in the literature. In *Susannah*, Floyd turns a biblical plot
into a commentary on the political and religious climate of the United States in the 1950s, when McCarthyism and religious fundamentalism created a dangerous climate of unease and distrust.\textsuperscript{2} The analysis attempts to find this commentary of unease and distrust within the musical characterization.

Carlisle Floyd used a biblical story as inspiration for the subject material in \textit{Susannah}. A friend and colleague suggested that he write an opera based on the Apocryphal story of Susannah and the Elders.\textsuperscript{3} A dictionary definition of apocryphal is a myth-like story that is fictitious in nature and usually has some kind of hidden meaning. The story of “Susannah and the Elders” is in the \textit{Book of Daniel}; however the story is an addition to the book, and is not used as part of religious doctrine.\textsuperscript{4}

The opera \textit{Susannah} is described as a musical drama, and while it has become acceptable to refer to \textit{Susannah} as an opera, it is treated differently than an opera. Eyer writes that, “…it is of the greatest importance that the composer has designated this work as a musical drama rather than an opera.”\textsuperscript{5} Carlisle Floyd felt that the text and story, not just the music, were the central element of this work. It is difficult to completely divorce the music from the text of this opera, as the text painting and syllabification govern the melodic lines. Floyd’s two acts, each with five scenes, display the mix of forms that became his customary practice: verses blank and free, with iambic and dactylic stress patterns, and metric feet with four, five, and six beats, tailored to natural speech rhythms. He employs assonance, alliteration, and outright rhyme for the folk like

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{2} Cole, 23.
\item \textsuperscript{3} Ronald Eyer, “Carlisle Floyd’s \textit{Susannah},” \textit{Tempo} 42 (1956-57): 7.
\item \textsuperscript{4} The story of “Susannah and the Elders” is in Appendix A.
\item \textsuperscript{5} Eyer, 7.
\end{itemize}
songs, hymnody, and some scenes with elders and wives—the McLeans, Gleatons, Hayses, and Otts—especially their negative observations and maxims.  

While **verismo** opera is more commonly associated with Italian composition, American opera adopted its own form of the style in the 20th-century. Italian **verismo** opera can be defined as “an impersonal style of narration, a deep interest in lower strata, and a true-to-life approach in dealing with contemporary reality.” No longer do musical forms govern the action in the plot, but rather, define the characters by allowing them to express in song their innermost thoughts and emotions. In this type of story, the hero meets his demise through societal cruelty and injustice.

After World War II, operatic trends shifted with world views. People were beginning to view the “heroes of tragedy” in stories differently. The line between “right and wrong” was becoming blurred. This shift in views had a significant effect on opera of the 20th century. The goal of American **verismo** opera was to make people feel socially responsible for the downfall of the common man. Operas were not mere entertainment, but rather commentary on social constructs and political happenings that were meant to make audiences look inside themselves and learn from their own shortcomings:

[The] jab at the audience, or kick in its shins…is a distinctive quality of twentieth century tragedy. Instead of the audience feeling purged by watching a great hero fail in some ambitious undertaking, it is made to feel engaged in the failure of some quite ordinary man.

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6 Holliday, 119.
It is important to address the dialect used in *Susannah*. From the first words sung, the audience is enveloped in a Southern culture that is unusual for the opera stage. Not only is the opera in English, but it is a “lazy,” and often guttural form of English that is unique to the South. Of course, different dialects occur in different parts of the South, but Floyd was careful to capture the Southeast Appalachian accent in the text throughout the opera.

Similarly, folk elements of the South in the 1950s are presented in several ways. Melodies with modal tonality and compound meters are employed throughout the opera. Arias, duets, and recitatives contain moments of folk-tune qualities that give a sense of Appalachian music of the early 20th century. Regarding Appalachian folk music, Peggy Langrall writes, “The Appalachian songs had a force and ethereal intensity…the mountain people improvised with a skill....” This improvisational aspect of folk music is difficult to capture in an operatic setting, but Floyd skillfully sets several arias, recitatives, instrumental interludes, and ensemble number with mixed meters in order to capture this improvisatory style of folk music. He employs mixed meter and rhythmic devices to give the music a sense of “off the cuff” narration or rawness. These folk elements weave a sense of reality into the opera, bringing a flavor of Tennessee life to the stage. These folk-like musical and textual features shape the characters of the opera.

The denomination of the church in New Hope Valley is unspecified, but the assumption is either Evangelical or Baptist, given the geographical setting, nature of hymns used, and the style of Reverend Olin Blitch’s preaching. Evangelical and Baptist are not the same, but are frequently confused with one another. Foy Valentine, once the head of the Christian Life Commission of the Southern Baptist Convention, was quoted as saying:

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Southern Baptists are not evangelicals. That’s a Yankee word. They want to claim us because we are big and successful and growing every year. But we have our own traditions, our own hymns, and more students in our seminaries than they have in all their own together. We don’t share politics or their fussy fundamentalism, and we don’t want to get involved with their theological witch-hunts.¹¹

In order to understand evangelicalism, it must first be defined. The line between the Southern Baptist denomination and evangelicalism has been drawn, but to sum up evangelical preaching is much trickier. “Evangelical” refers to a specific vision of what it means to be Christian, which includes a fervent desire to make the Bible alive in personal and community life, and understanding of the church as a fellowship of believers, a way of praying, a sense that faith is to be vibrant and central to life, and a specific approach to the telling of one’s life story.¹² Essentially, it is a stretch between reform in the way of worship and piety in Christian faith. The pure Christian values come across quite strongly in practice for evangelicals, and Carlisle Floyd’s opera reveals these values and strict codes in plot, preaching, and hymn singing, as will be discussed in the dissertation.

Evangelism in the 1940s and 1950s in the Southern U.S. was spreading with fervor and force. This positive fundamentalism emerged as what would soon be called “new evangelisms.” National revival was the goal. In the late 1940s new evangelical leaders were talking in term that at the time seemed grandiose—about a national revival, about “Winning America.”¹³ During the 1950s, the spectacular success of Billy Graham gave the whole movement plausibility. His organization allowed his followers to function as a denomination, independent and mobile.¹⁴

¹² Carpenter, 156.
¹³ Carpenter, 34.
¹⁴ Ibid.
Floyd witnessed this movement across the south. Even though he was raised a Methodist, the strong connection to evangelicals and Baptists was present in southern culture. Floyd’s religious experiences shaped his musical compositions and motivations behind choices for plots.
REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The first article written about the opera is Ronald Eyer’s 1957 article in *Tempo*, “Carlisle Floyd’s ‘Susannah’”. This article contains an overview of central themes and a plot summary as well as a description of Phyllis Curtin’s and Floyd’s friendship. Curtin premiered the role of Susannah. Eyer’s article in *Tempo* was a preliminary read for this dissertation topic. The basic explanation of subjects and plot introduced me to the various themes within the opera, but the article did not go into any detail.

Subjective reviews were written after performances of the opera, but no detailed research on the opera continued until Tomas C. Hernandez’s article “A Dialectical Approach To Event And Emotion In Carlisle Floyd’s *Susannah*” was written for *Opera News* in 1984. In this article, Hernandez discusses text-based events versus musically articulated emotion. These terms are his own as he explains that Floyd utilizes a dialectical series of opposing events and resulting emotions. The music is not explored in detail, but these ideas are presented directly from the libretto. He attempts to prove that emotion does not come from only libretto or music—but emotion in Floyd’s opera is drawn from an amalgamation of both. I did not find this article to be helpful in my research. Text is a key element in *Susannah*, but I wish to discuss more specific effects and elements as they relate to the political and religious environment in the plot.

Lisa S. Ramer, a student from the University of Washington, wrote a Master thesis dissertation titled, “A Critical Analysis of Carlisle Floyd’s Opera: *Susannah*” in 1993. Her dissertation has three components: Structure, Literary Themes, and Musical Themes. She includes the biblical story of “Susannah and the Elders”, a plot synopsis, and an interview with Carlisle Floyd. Ramer discusses the opera’s musical motifs and surveys the opera from a
thematic angle. Her general analysis opened the door for further study into the stylistic elements and insights of the opera. The musical themes and literary themes in this dissertation were interesting, but Ramer did not discuss the political and religious aspects of the opera.

Todd R. Miller’s doctoral dissertation from the University of Houston is much more specific than its predecessors. “Religious Elements In Three Operas of Carlisle Floyd” contains a chapter about Susannah and its religious source material through musical features. Miller shows that characters, hymns, revivalist meetings, and traveling evangelists are representative of some people in Floyd’s religious and southern upbringing. Miller makes an important point: the characters are shaped by religious experiences and beliefs in a small community. He surmises that Floyd would have had similar experiences and thus created the characters from personal experience. This discussion regarding the religious fervor of the community in Susannah aids in the research of my dissertation. The religious elements are linked to the political climate of the 1950s, when Susannah was composed. The religious elements and fear instilled by McCarthyism of this time directly affect the characters, both literally and musically.

Most recently, Shannon Cole, a Master’s student at the University of Ottawa in Canada wrote a thesis titled, “Exploring Performance-Oriented Analysis Through An Examination of the Title Character’s Two Arias in Carlisle Floyd’s Susannah.” Cole gives a general historical context of the opera that informs the reader of the McCarthy era. Her research includes Carlisle Floyd’s biography and compositional style, as well as musical output of the 1950s. The majority of the thesis is an analysis of Susannah’s two arias from the perspective of the performer. She uses a form of John Rink’s Performance analysis that allows her to graph the dramatic elements by delving into tempo, dynamics, melodic contour, and rhythmic reduction. This type of step-by-step analysis could be helpful for a singer performing the role of Susannah in interpreting the
dramatic flow, language, and intent of composer. Cole implies further research could be done in regards to characterization and relationships of characters. She suggests further study of the McCarthy era would be necessary in creating links between the historical period and plot of the opera.

In addition to reviews, the previously listed articles and theses, interviews with Carlisle Floyd are documented. These items are in the dissertation along with the sources mentioned to support my analyses, research, and links to different subjects, namely politics and religion. Musicologists and performers have made links between performance and analysis in regards to Floyd’s compositions, but a link between political climate and performance/characterization has yet to be discussed. Broad statements indicating that Susannah was composed in the McCarthy era are mentioned in some writings about the opera, but no further explanation or analysis is involved.

Not many recordings of the full production exist. The 1957 original cast recording with Phyllis Curtin, who originated the title role, is available through iTunes. The Ball State University Library has a more recent recording from 1994 with Cheryl Studer singing the role of Susannah. I own both recordings, but have also watched current productions that are available on www.youtube.com, because there is currently no DVD available for purchase. I am using a 1967 Boosey and Hawkes, Inc. vocal score of the opera for my analysis.
CHAPTER 2

THE McCarthy ERA

Joseph McCarthy, political figure, did not emerge in a vacuum, but as the most prominent in a long line of men who exploited the Communist issue for political advantage, recklessly smearing their opponents with false accusations.\(^\text{15}\) A dictionary definition of McCarthyism is: the political practice of publicizing accusations of disloyalty or subversion with insufficient regard to evidence, and the use of dubious methods of investigation in order to suppress opposition.

The Cold War began in 1917 as a result and catapulting of the Bolshevik Revolution. Two years later, American Communist parties formed and opened their own logistical base for Soviets on American soil. The early 1920s marked the beginning of espionage under the guise of the trade association Amtorg. Russia eventually became America’s ally during World War II, which resulted in the recruitment of government servants who were ideological sympathizers.\(^\text{16}\) Because of the Soviet espionage, we now know the true extent of danger in the 1930s and 1940s.

By the time McCarthy’s exploitations of fear in 1950 were launched, the threat had waned. Senator Joseph McCarthy “charged that the Department of State knowingly harbored Communists.”\(^\text{17}\) After climbing the ranks and conducting aggressive trials against supposed Communists, specifically including his previous foes, he was made chairman of the Senate of Government Operations Committee. With his new power he oppressed and charged any person that he felt was a Communist.

\(^\text{16}\) Morgan, xiii.
In his verbal combat with the State Department and others, Senator McCarthy quickly established the style of contention that was to be admired (or condoned) by his supporters and to be deplored and even feared by his opponents, a style of which the principal elements were recklessness in accusation, careless inaccuracy of statement, and abuse of those who criticized him.\textsuperscript{18}

Finally, in 1954, McCarthy’s methods of charging fellow politicians led to a censure, where his power was quickly drawn away. The removal of the threat of being charged had been in the 1940s, but it was not until much later that the grip of fear on the American people was released. Every American learned that he or she could be charged with little or no evidence, fueling the fire of panic and distrust amongst all citizens. As Carlisle Floyd mentioned in his interview, “We faculty had to sign a pledge of loyalty or lose our jobs.”\textsuperscript{19} Professional and emotional ruin could happen to any person with only a small accusation:

McCarthy capitalized on the fears in American society—fear that the Russians had stolen the atomic bomb, fear of spies in government, fear due to the loss of China, and fear of the Korean War. His party was the party of fear. He mobilized the masses of the alarmed.\textsuperscript{20}

A sense of paranoia is woven into the fabric of the 1950s. Many forms of art were affected, so it is no surprise that a biblical story like “Susannah and the Elders” would have appealed to a composer living in this type of political climate. Over the years, this sense of fear and distrust among Americans has reappeared through various incarnations. It has reappeared in the past decade in the methods that have been applied to counter-terrorism between 2001 and 2005. The punishments for today’s accusations could result in deportation, detention without due process, the targeting of ethnic groups, and alarmist announcements about perils, real or

\textsuperscript{18} Lantham, ix.
\textsuperscript{19} Tommasini, 1.
\textsuperscript{20} Morgan, xiv.
imagined. Floyd’s opera still strikes audiences today. Waves of political upheaval have a direct impact on artistic output and audience reaction. A performer, director, or conductor learning about American *verismo* opera could gain from researching the political climate and effects on musical characterization in this musical drama.

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*Ibid., xiv.*
CARLISLE FLOYD BIOGRAPHY

Carlisle Floyd’s libretti have been taken from American literature or history and were created to show the complexity in the characters. His characters are believable and familiar to anyone who was raised in a small town in America (which is not to say others cannot identify with them.) With this particular opera, he meant to capture the Protestant life of a small Southern American town with themes of God-fearing folk, greed, lust, love, persecution, and isolation.\textsuperscript{22} Separating religious themes from political themes in this opera can be difficult. The over-riding factor in the plot of the opera is fear. Fear drives all the characters’ motivations, except Susannah’s. Her innocence is destroyed by others’ fears and zealotry. Floyd’s life is an important element in understanding his choices of libretti and subject material.\textsuperscript{23} His past experiences give color and life to his stories.

Carlisle Floyd was born in South Carolina in 1926. His father was a Methodist minister. His mother was a teacher at a local Baptist women’s liberal arts college. She was also a pianist and taught her son to play in his early childhood. Once he became more accomplished, she made sure he took lessons from a piano teacher in town. He was closer to his mother than his father throughout his entire life.\textsuperscript{24} One might surmise that this closeness was in correlation with their musical talents and appreciation. Also, his father worked and attended school most of Carlisle’s childhood, so he might not have been in close proximity-emotionally or physically. This separation from his father could have helped shape his views of religion and authority.

In an interview, Floyd explained that he was not close to his father. He believed his father was a good minister, but a strict disciplinarian at home, and almost never let him miss a church

\textsuperscript{22} Todd R. Miller, “Religious Elements in Three Operas of Carlisle Floyd” (DMA diss., University of Houston, 2002), 1.
\textsuperscript{23} Miller, 1.
\textsuperscript{24} Miller, 4.
service, whether on Sunday morning, Sunday night, or special services such as revivals. In the same interview Floyd said, “…he reserved all his sympathies primarily for the church congregation.”

The composer did not consider himself a Christian in the traditional sense of the word. However, he did adhere to what he considered core Christian principles, which he separated from Christian beliefs. He isolated the teachings of Jesus from the institutional rules and doctrines of organized religion. In an interview conducted in 2000, he explained his personal beliefs by saying,

I don’t have any conventional feelings about God. I believe in God, whatever that is. I don’t have a clue; I don’t think any of us does. But at the same time it seems inconceivable to me that there’s not one. I go that far, and that’s a long way. But at the same time the divinity of Jesus and the virgin birth and all of those things—if people believe that, that’s fine. I just find it impossible to swallow; I don’t think they’re important, in terms of my own private belief.”

He divulged his opinions and beliefs openly. His open and honest opinions about the Christian church as an institution play a significant role in his religious plot settings and morals. His disdain for organized religion is what fueled him and interested him. Floyd stated:

Organized religion has no appeal to me. I certainly don’t demean it for other people if that is where they find satisfaction. But I must say that even when I was grown up, and would go back to my father’s church to visit, I became aware, at least among Protestants, of such a rivalry. And I don’t say this to demean them, but it struck me that it was like such a civic club—like being a Rotarian or a Kiwanian, with its emphasis on recreational rules and the like. I have an impossible time reconciling organized religion as it is practiced with the teaching of Jesus, at least the first-century Jesus.

25 Miller, 8.
26 Miller, 8.
27 Miller., 9.
28 Ibid.
29 Ibid.
30 Miller, 10.
The fact that Floyd saw the hypocrisy in his own church, led him to be interested in the Biblical and mythological stories that had much to do with prejudicial treatment of outsiders and the isolation it causes. Most of Floyd’s operas were based upon religious stories that put religion, not faith, in a negative light. As will be discussed later in the dissertation, the character of Sam reveals the truehearted nature of Floyd’s opinions. Floyd’s pity for narrow-minded, sheltered groups comes through in Sam’s aria. The oppressed are generally brought forth as victims who put their faith in God, while the church-going antagonists are not. This viewpoint comes out in various ways in his operas, especially *Susannah*. His writing for the chorus and ancillary characters, such as the church members, are always portrayed as antagonists in his libretti.31

Conversely, although Floyd did not intend to write an opera with political convictions, *Susannah* contains much symbolism that can be linked to the era in which it was composed. The hunt for Communists and sexual deviants exerted influences that were systemic and toxic. Joseph McCarthy and his Florida counterpart, Charley Eugene Johns wielded and misused their power. Charley Johns used his two years (1953-1955) as Florida’s governor, and eleven subsequent years in the state senate, as forums for his crusade, wryly nicknamed the Johns Commission, against Communists, civil rights advocates, and homosexuals.32 Students and faculty at Florida’s universities were targeted in this space of time. The consequences of the “Johns” were extreme. Over a hundred students and faculty members were dismissed. A professor known to Floyd attempted suicide following an accusation of homosexuality.33 The school required its faculty to sign pledges of loyalty. “Florida State (University) faculty had to vow that we did not agree…well, we didn’t advocate ‘subversion of the government.’ I was surrounded by it. In 1955

31 Miller, 10.
33 Holliday, 117.
we actually had an incidence of McCarthyist plotting…it had to do with “Johns” and homosexuality.”

Floyd’s experiences in this time colored his opinions about music and art. All of the fear-induced accusations and pledges reminded him of the pressures at revival meetings.

Carlisle Floyd was living a life surrounded by accusation and negativity. He was in no way, oblivious to the turmoil around him, and his colleagues and friends. When asked about his political ideas and goals in an interview, Floyd stated:

I’m too practical a man of the theater; it just struck me as right. But I did write the work during the McCarthy years, and I lived through the terrors. At Florida State an accusation was tantamount to guilt. It affected me and informed me emotionally. And there it is in the opera. But I can’t say I put it there.

Even though Floyd was not consciously making a statement about McCarthyism, his work was still affected. The opera speaks to the fears of the common citizen struggling to adjust to the new political climate. Connecting Floyd’s religious experiences and political experiences can be important in understanding his drive, purpose, message, and artistic decisions in Susannah.

Carlisle Floyd was introduced to Nathan Samuel “Sam” Blount, an English master’s student at FSU. Blount brought up the idea of an opera based on Susanna and the elders. Floyd knew of the story, despite its omission from the King James Bible. Decades in a church family had given Floyd the gist, and his youth coincided with the rise of literature exposing religious hypocrisy.

34 Carlisle Floyd, interview with author, 3 June 2013.
35 Holliday, 117.
37 Shannon Cole, “Exploring Performance-Oriented Analysis Through an Examination of the Title Character’s Two Arias in Carlisle Floyd’s Susannah” (MA Thesis, University of Ottawa, 2008), 27.
38 Holliday, 117-118.
For Floyd, the story’s human motives and behavior, both good and bad, further reflected
the McCarthy madness. He envisioned an isolated Tennessee mountain setting. Hot summer
revivals and picnic suppers resonated with him as he began to formulate ideas. He decided to
change the plot from the Book of Daniel story. He saw no need for a Daniel-rescuer, but
transformed the male protagonist into a visiting preacher who becomes embroiled in the
community’s friction with Susannah. The revival meeting would be the hinge, culminating in
Susannah’s ostracism and the preacher’s eventual death in that very creek.

The story in the Book of Daniel is considerably more uplifting than Floyd’s operatic
version. Floyd employed more extreme Puritanical characters who are colored with much hatred
and close-mindedness. Floyd’s southern, religious upbringing shines through the plot and setting
of the opera: beware any entity whose “faithful” seem to have all the answers, who don armor
against life and beauty, who practice cruelty and coercion as institutional priorities, and who
make of religion a redoubt from whose ramparts they hurl devastating judgments.

Carlisle Floyd’s contributions to American opera continue to grow. He studied with a
prominent composer early in his life, and has since completed eleven operas, each one well
received. Floyd began studying with notable American composer Ernst Bacon at Converse
College at the age of sixteen. He then followed his mentor to Syracuse university when Bacon
accepted a teaching position there in 1944. There, Floyd completed a Bachelor of Music degree

39 Holliday, 118.
40 Holliday, 118.
41 Hollida, 118.
42 Holliday, 118.
in piano in 1946, as well as a Master of Music degree in composition in 1951. His interests in literature, creative writing, stage direction, and music led to his career as an opera composer:

“I began to think seriously about composing operas after the success of Slow Dusk, not because I knew that much about opera but the idea of fusing music and drama into one art form struck me as very exciting: a single work of art in which I could combine my interests in music, drama, and writing. I also felt that if I had a talent in composing it lay in writing music for the theater.”

Carlisle Floyd has received a Guggenheim Fellowship, a Citation of merit from the National Association of American Conductors and Composer, and a New York Music Critics Circle Award. Susannah was also selected to represent American opera at the 1958 World’s Fair in Brussels, Belgium. In 1959, Floyd received the Ten outstanding Young Men of the Nation Award from the United States Junior Chamber of Commerce. His accolades go further than what is listed. His contributions to American opera cannot be overstated.

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45 Bethnay Kiral, “Character Analyses of the Soprano Roles Created by Phyllis Curtin in the Operas of Carlisle Floyd” (DMA Dissertation, Florida State University, 2010), 4.
Susannah is a complex musical drama that explores many cultural and social themes. The plot of the opera weaves together southern traditions, folk elements, and components of religion, which is guided by the specific political climate. The characters set up the events and underlined literary themes like dominos. Their actions, behavior, text, and implied reactions paint a picture of the community depicted in the opera. The first chapter analyzes the title character Susannah. One could easily focus on how the other characters and events affect her, but this dissertation focuses on all the characters. It is important to gather and synthesize information that reveals her character, dynamic changes, and affect on others in the story.

Susannah’s character is not just a victim, nor a martyr in a morality play. She represents a true living being who is swept up in a culture that she is only beginning to understand. An audience member who was not raised in this Southern culture would be learning the social “norms” of New Hope Valley. Susannah’s character and transformation raises many questions for the observer. Do we, as a people, learn cynicism from experience as a protection against fear and rejection, or are we trained in the ways of distrust as a community? Having a common enemy can draw people together as well as isolate them from one another. In the case of the drama Susannah, evil has become a common thread that holds the community together—against the protagonist. Susannah’s hopeful naïveté frightens the church members. Her unabashed behavior exhibits all that the community fears—lack of order. She does not seem to conform to
the religious ideals of the church, so she poses a threat. The church members eventually fear and hate Susannah because of the chaos and sexuality she represents.

Susannah’s first entrance occurs in the first scene of the opera. A town square dance is taking place in New Hope Valley. Susannah is dancing with all the boys and Elders while the Elder’s wives observe the evening’s events. The ladies comment on Susannah’s good looks and charm, while Mrs. Mclean sneers and contradicts them. They soon agree with Mrs. Mclean in a mindless, parroting tone. Mrs. McLean speaks ill of Susannah and her family. Even though Susannah has yet to sing, the contradiction of her character is immediately apparent through her innocent and lively dancing while the Elders’ wives agree about her evil ways, which goes unnoticed by Susannah.

The following scene is located at the Polk residence, where Susannah and Little Bat are sitting on the porch recounting the events of the night. Through staging and characterization, it can be made clear that Susannah is kind-hearted and youthful. Her friendship with the skittish character Little Bat is an indication that she is open-minded and welcoming to friends. She pays no mind that Little Bat clearly worships her. She laughs about the new preacher stepping on her feet—which is an indication of her oblivion to Blitch’s apparent attraction to her at the square dance. Her innocence is real, and must be portrayed carefully so as to not give any sense of stupidity or ignorance, but actual ingenuousness.

The majority of the opera is comprised of recitatives, which at times is lyric and melodic, and other times disjunct and speech-like. Arias are inserted to draw the audience into the character’s thoughts, personality, and message. Only Susannah, Sam, and Blitch have arias. Susannah’s arias are used to reveal her innermost thoughts and feelings. They seem to serve as a
window into her desires and personality. Whether about her hopes or her sorrows, Susannah sings to release her emotions.

In her first aria “Ain’t it a Pretty Night”, Susannah reveals her hopes and desires to see the big-city life outside New Hope Valley. She seems to be comfortable with Little Bat, because she confides in him in a way that suggests she could be singing to herself. She comments on the natural wonders around her, but still she yearns for life outside of her own small existence. “Believing in a world full of possibilities and new experiences for her, she is excited about what the future holds.”¹ Susanna’s hopeful aria serves to mold her character. It exposes the dichotomous nature of her innermost thoughts—both wonder and worry about her life beyond New Hope Valley.

The text of her aria is stream-of-consciousness and has no rhyme scheme or poetic meter. Susannah is singing to herself, imagining a world far away. Her narrow view of the world is what should draw in the audience. Her naïveté is her charm and appeal, aside from her obvious physical attributes. The first line she sings, “Ain’t it a pretty night,” is repeated several times throughout the aria. Each time she states the line, it seems that she is gathering her thoughts and reflecting on her surroundings. As she sings about the night sky, she tells Little Bat to look at the stars. Susannah later repeats the title line and directs her focus to what lies beyond New Hope Valley—she envisions what the stars can see: “what’s up there beyond them mountains.”²

Through the text and music of her first aria, the audience discovers that Susannah has never left her home and that her only window to the outside world is through mail order catalogues. Both of Susannah’s arias represent private moments of self-expression, and it is

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¹ Shannon Cole, “Exploring Performance-Oriented Analysis Through an Examination of the Title Character’s Two Arias in Carlisle Floyd’s Susannah” (Master’s Thesis, University of Ottawa, 2008), 30.
evident that even when she is happy she is a private person with few people to depend on. Eventually, Susannah stops directing her words to Little Bat and sings to herself in a state of daydreaming. Even though she is happy in New Hope Valley, she still imagines a world outside of the natural beauty. Little Bat may not fully comprehend her feelings, but she does not care. Perhaps the fact that he does not judge her is what prompts Susannah to reveal her inner desires, because she feels safe to do so.

The opening of Act One, scene two foreshadows Susannah’s first aria. The theme is repeated, emphasizing the beautiful melody. The theme from this aria communicates the wonder and freedom of the remote location. Fluttering sixteenth notes in the accompaniment seem to represent two things at once—birds chirping and an ethereal mysterious tone.

Two motives return throughout the aria. One is her opening phrase “Ain’t it a pretty night” which is repeated two more times. The other motive contains a melody that is sung to different lyrics throughout the aria. (Examples 3.1 and 3.2) The first motive is the most recognizable theme of the aria. The first phrase immediately sets up the contour of the aria with its leaps.

Ex. 3.1: Floyd, “Ain’t It a Pretty Night,” mm. 1-3.

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3 Cole, 32.
4 Cole, 38.
The second motive recurs more often and returns thematically throughout the opera. The second motive signals a change of mood or idea when Susannah sings about the night sky, the mountains, and leaving New Hope Valley. These motives indicate her change of thought and create recognizable themes for her character. The large leaps in both motives could also be interpreted as text painting. The images Susannah sees reveal height, stars, mountains, and buildings. She sees the mountains as barriers to the outside world, but she can still see the stars overhead. The stars symbolically connect her to the city life she dreams of seeing. Susannah feels small in a large world full of possibilities and wonder.

Though fear motivates most characters in this opera, innocence and beauty bring about a natural and untainted quality of emotion without any cynical thoughts or actions. Susannah’s first aria is one of those innocent moments. Floyd chose the key G-flat Major for this aria—a key that he felt was the brightest. He was attempting to elicit a happy emotion with her first aria.

The form and tonality of this aria are irregular, in that no prescribed aria form is used to sectionalize it. The sections of the aria are created by way of text, key and tempo changes. In her 2008 dissertation, Shannon Cole explains the form of “Ain’t It a Pretty Night”:

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5 Cole, 41.
6 Floyd, 3 June 2013 interview with author.
Nothing about “Ain’t It a Pretty Night” suggests a familiar form. Stanzas of text as well as key and tempo changes dictate the section divisions, and the result is an irregular number of measures per section.

The aria is tonal, but changes quickly from section to section. Text and emotion dictate the shifts in tonality and tempo. While the bright key of G-flat major opens and closes the aria, shifts to e-flat minor and E-flat major signify Susannah changing her mind in the text. In measures 24 and 39, the keys of E-flat major and e-flat minor represent the sudden change of emotion evidenced in Susannah’s words. Measure 24 begins the transition to e-flat minor as Susannah sings about leaving New Hope Valley. A tempo change to Ancora più mosso (still more motion) signals a similar tempo but with more emotion. Measure 39 begins a transition to E-flat major as Susannah realizes she can come back. As she is working through her torn emotions, the tempo indicates con moto (with movement), which aids in the excitement of her realization. Susannah concludes that she can have a life of excitement and also keep her roots in New Hope Valley.

Though Susannah is optimistic and contented, a menacing interlude occurs in measures forty-four through forty-six, suggesting the potential danger for Susannah’s future. Floyd is foreshadowing the darkness that is yet to come for Susannah. The tempo marking of molto allargando a tempo (very broad in tempo) in measure 43 aids in this eagerness to have her dreams come true. The excitement builds to the short menacing interlude in measures forty-four through forty-six, but quickly dissipates. The melodic motive from the opening of the aria returns as Susannah is brought back to her surroundings and original happy mood. The key returns to G-flat major as she repeats a slight alteration of the opening text.

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7 Cole, 33.
8 Cole, 36.
9 Cole, 36.
As stated before, the aria does not prescribe to a familiar aria form, but instead wanders through sections of text by means of tempo and key changes. Her mind is wandering through possibilities of a new life with connections to her home. The aria seems to move with her in a stream-of-consciousness manner that reveals her realistic character. The audience sees and hears a young innocent woman waking to the world around her in a credible aria. Shannon Cole aptly states, “The conclusion is that the formal irregularity of this piece contributes to the spontaneity of the moment, and allows the audience to recognize this as a sincere utterance on Susannah’s behalf.”

Dynamics play an integral role in this aria. The dynamics layer atop the key and tempo changes, giving the aria life and emotion. Contrast between hushed contemplation and vibrant intensity is guided by the shifts in dynamics. Each sectional change is delineated by text, tempo, key, and dynamic level. For instance, when Susannah begins to sing about leaving the valley in measure 24, the dynamic indication of mezzo-forte directs the singer to change her focus. The intensity waxes and wanes as she becomes excited about leaving and seeing new people. When Susannah has worked through her life goals, the excitement dies down as the opening thematic material returns. (Example 3.3)

Ex. 3.3: Floyd, “Ain’t It a Pretty Night,” mm46-47.

Along with the resolute nature of the text, come the original key, tempo, and dynamic.

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10 Cole, 37.
No stage directions are given for Susannah’s first aria. Floyd left this aria open to interpretation. The stage director and soprano singing the role are left to decide what movement is necessary for the character. The lack of direction from Floyd could also indicate how little movement he expects from Susannah while she sings this complex aria. The action is stopped for this introspective moment in the drama, as Susannah sings to Little Bat and herself. One could surmise that little movement would be natural in this revealing and informative moment.

As Susannah finishes her aria, Sam interjects with the same melody “Ain’t it a pretty night” in measure 53. Sam and Susannah’s close relationship is shown in the recitative following her aria. An in-depth analysis of this scene is provided in Chapter Four. The siblings converse about the square dance and Susannah’s eligibility as a young lady. Before they go to bed, Susannah coaxes Sam into singing a song from their childhood. Together they dance, sing, and laugh. This scene closes with the second motive from “Ain’t it a pretty night.” Sam and Susannah sing the phrase in consonant harmony as they stare into the night sky. Sadly, this moment is the last peaceful one in the drama.

Act One scene three is unique because the action—the catalyst for the antagonism, occurs off-stage. Susannah is bathing in a creek close to the Polk property the following morning. Susannah’s voice can be heard off-stage singing the “Jaybird” melody. The town Elders enter, searching for a baptismal creek. They happen upon Susannah bathing naked. She does not see them and continues to bathe and sing happily.

After the initial shock of seeing Susannah, the Elders’ surprise is replaced by lust. It is Elder McLean who first realizes his sinful feelings and indignantly announces, “It’s an outrage! It’s a blasphemous outrage!” The others agree with him. They decide amongst themselves that they must return to the valley and tell everyone about her abhorrent behavior. They feel that she
is revealing herself to the world with no shame. Elder McLean finally concludes that she is “…the devil. She’s without the saving grace. She must be brought to repentance afore she meet God face to face.” At measure 61, the Elders exit while singing in a four-part homophonic harmony. The use of fourths and fifths in the harmonies might be reminiscent of hymn tunes, but the key, dynamics, and anger-eliciting marcato accompaniment creates a mob-like atmosphere.

Like the opening square dance scene, the audience is presented with the churchgoers’ view of Susannah. Even though she is off-stage, her behavior is explained through text and emotion. The opening and closing of scene three are similar. Susannah is humming the “Jaybird” melody with sixteenth-note sextuplets accompanying her. Running water is heard off-stage as well, signifying the creek. The accompanimental pattern aids in creating the outdoor atmosphere.

At measure 78, the accompaniment is marked at a sempre pp dynamic and does not have a particular key. Bi-tonality creates the uneasy moment that coincides with Susannah’s pleasant melody and demeanor. The ominous tonality is a warning for the audience that something is not appropriate about Susannah’s off-stage behavior.

The duality of emotions portrayed in this interesting scene is an example of this musical drama’s verismo-like (realistic) quality. The audience knows Susannah is unaware of the Elders’ presence. She is innocently bathing and singing, while the other character’s perceptions of her behavior are angry and dark. Both emotions are both musically and textually displayed.

The musical drama is filled with moments like the bathing scene. Most of the drama is comprised of recitative. Susannah has many conversations, which will be explored in other chapters. Her relationships with other characters and emotions are seen through these recitatives.

Act Two, scene three begins with Susannah’s second aria “The Trees On The Mountains.” This scene takes place an hour after the revival where Blitch fights for her soul. She
has run out of the service, unwilling to admit guilt of a crime that she did not commit. Susannah is clearly distraught, standing on the porch singing to herself. She is alone and able to confront her own feelings about the church’s disdain for her, her brother’s absence, and her loneliness. After she finishes singing the aria, she becomes aware of the Reverend Olin Blitch, who has come to talk about the salvation of her soul.

The text of the aria does not function as a gateway into Susannah’s thoughts in this aria. Unlike, “Ain’t It a Pretty Night,” this aria depicts her state of mind through musical style and context. Susannah has changed drastically since the opening of the musical drama. She is no longer the hopeful innocent young girl the audience saw before. The events that took place in one short week have altered her forever. After being accused of sinful behavior, she has fallen. Her energy is low and her guard is down. The aria elicits loneliness and desolation. The audience no longer sees the hopeful girl from “Ain’t It a Pretty Night.”

Later in the scene, Susannah explains that “The Trees On The Mountains” is a song her mother taught her. She sings it when she feels sad or lonely. This folk-singing tradition is common in Southern culture. The idea of singing to oneself to soothe or calm is embedded deeply in southern culture. It seems that Susannah has been raised with this tradition, as evidenced earlier in the opera when she asks Sam to sing the “Jaybird Song.”

While the lyrics of the aria have little to do with the plot, an underlying message is contained in it. Each verse tells about barren trees left to die, a fireplace left cold, and a baby fox left by his mother. (Figure 3.1) All the objects in the song have been left to die. While the lyrics of this folk song would have already been written, Susannah identifies with the desolation. She has lost her parents, her community, her church, her only friend, and even her brother. Though Susannah may not be aware of Blitch’s impending visit, she probably feels a sense of
foreboding, being left alone during the darkest time she has ever experienced. For Susannah, singing a sad song is an outlet—a way to craft her feelings into words. She explains this to the Reverend when he asks her about the song.

The trees on the mountains are cold and bare
The summer jus' vanished and left them there
Like a false-hearted lover, just like my own
Who made me love him, then left me alone

The coals on the hearth have turned grey and sere
The blue flame jus' vanished and left them there
Like a false hearted lover, jest like my own
Who made me love him, then left me alone

Come back o summer, come back blue flame
My heart wants warmin', my baby a name
Come back o lover if jus' fer a day
Turn bleak December once more into May

The road up ahead lies lonely and far
There's darkness around me and not even a star
To show me the way or lighten my heart
Come back o lover I fain would start

The poor baby fox lies all cold in his lair
His mama jus' vanished and left him there
Like a false-hearted lover jest like my own
Who made me love him, then left me alone

Come back o summer, come back blue flame
My heart wants warmin', my baby a name
Come back o lover if jus' fer a day
Turn bleak December once more into May

Come back o summer, come back blue flame
My heart wants warmin', my baby a name
Come back o lover if jus' fer a day
Turn bleak December once more into May

Come back! Come back! Come back!

Fig. 3.1: Floyd, “The Trees On The Mountains” Lyrics.

11 Cole, 65.
The melody of the aria is modal, centering on the key of g-minor. It is tonal and comprised primarily of thirds and fifths, outlining the tonic triad. Closely related keys and more simplistic harmonies comprise the aria, giving much contrast to “Ain’t It a Pretty Night.” The verse-verse-chorus form is yet another aspect of folk style or popular song writing. While the form is traditional, 20th-century compositional techniques are employed, and stray from a typical folk-like form. For instance, the aria has a two-measure codetta (measures 56-58) where Susannah repeats “Come back!” instead of ending on the final phrase of the chorus. Although “The Trees On The Mountains” is a folk song within the opera, Floyd does not borrow anything from the existing folk literature, choosing instead to compose the entire aria from original material. The formal plan of the aria—one of the most important contributing factors to its believability as a folk song—demonstrates a simplicity that is well suited to the idiom.¹²

Tempo and dynamics aid in creating the sad stillness of Susannah’s second aria. Because of her state of mind, the aria does not drastically climax like her first aria. While the tempo moves occasionally indicating differences between the verse and chorus, the first tempo marking of Andante piangendo stabilizes the aria. It is of great significance that Floyd uses the specific wording of “piangendo”, which literally means “crying.” The added word indicates the emotion and temperament to be relayed in this aria. The general dynamic in this aria is piano. A hushed and sad calm is used to reflect her broken spirit.

The stage directions for this aria are minimal. Like her other aria, it is implied that Susannah would not move much while singing. While her state of wonder and questioning in her first aria causes her stillness, her state of emptiness and loss grounds her in “The Trees On the Mountains.” She is standing on the porch of her home, singing to herself. She does not move

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¹² Cole, 66.
until she hears the Reverend sing, “That’s might pretty singin’, Susannah.” Susannah turns to him startled asking, “Who is it?” The stage action quickly changes in this moment.

Blitch appears on stage at the end of her aria. Only a minor-minor seventh chord accompanies his first line. The stark contrast between his questions to Susannah and her responses is brought about by the accompaniment and melodies that they sing. Blitch’s recitative is pedantic, following patterns of speech. At Rehearsal Number 79, Susannah responds to his question about her singing. Her line returns to the aria tempo, and follows a similar modal melody in the same key. (Example 3.4) She is still somewhat lost in her thoughts and sadness as she responds. Blitch’s comment about the sad song is imposed over the answer of the phrase from the aria. He is answering her in a kind and melodic manner now, attempting to win over her friendship.

Ex. 3.4: Floyd, “The Trees On The Mountains,” mm 64-67.

After Susannah explains that her mother taught the song to her, she suddenly recovers from her sad state and turns on him suspiciously. She asks what he is doing there. The music depicts this sudden shift of emotion by way of a tempo change of Andante deciso (walking determined), meter change, and alteration of tonality at Rehearsal Number 80. The stage directions indicate “Susannah takes a firm stance with her back against the post and eyes Blitch
suspiciously.”\textsuperscript{13} The sweeping melodic accompaniment from her aria is gone, and replaced with harsh, accented quarter and eighth notes. A tense conversational tone prevails as the cordial and idle exchange ends with Susannah’s sudden shift in demeanor.

Blitch has come to talk about her soul. He quotes Proverbs 16:18 by saying, “Pride goeth before destruction.”\textsuperscript{14} He asks her to pray with him. She refuses, stating that she has prayed enough for both of them. She presents her final argument that the Lord would have told her if she was wrong. Emotions are rising as they argue over what is sinful behavior. Susannah truly believes that bathing in a creek causes no harm. Blitch, like the church people, still views her bath as exposing herself. She is angrily fighting for her dignity, innocence, and moral character in this scene.

At Rehearsal Number 81, Susannah begins protesting her innocence and explaining the situation from her point of view. The stage direction indicates she sing “belligerently” as she protests. As her anger grows, her vocal line becomes angular, containing octave leaps and chromaticism. (Example 3.5) Blitch genuinely tries to believe her claims of innocence, which only angers Susannah more. An \textit{accelerando} (accelerating) builds alongside a chromatic ascent to her line, “Don’t believe it! Don’t believe it! But it’s the truth!” The word “truth” is accented by a high B-flat and a grouped triplet octave preceding. (Example 3.6)

\textsuperscript{13} Floyd, \textit{Susannah}, 97.
\textsuperscript{14} Floyd, \textit{Susannah}, 97.
Susannah finally loses her temper and begins to “break, lashing out bitterly.” The audience hears clearly how much anguish Susannah is enduring. She finally has her moment to express herself to her perceived mob leader—Susannah sees Blitch as a leader of her ostracism. While it is the Elders that saw her, it is Blitch to whom the church turned to for guidance. As Susannah opens herself up to Blitch and explains her plight, a tempo marking of *Andante molto cantabile* (walking tempo, very lyrically sung) indicates a more melodic and steady tempo. At rehearsal 82, a recurring theme is played in the accompaniment, supporting her melodic recitative. The theme is brought back from Sam’s Act One aria. (Example 3.7)

In his Act One aria, Sam explains human nature in a simple, yet poignant way. In this moment, this theme is used to supply plaintive truth for Susannah’s case. She is finally seeing an
ugly world that for her has never before existed. The harsh truth that Sam tried to explain has become abundantly clear to her. “The world is short on lovin’ kindness.”


After Susannah divulges her experiences of torment and ostracism from the past week, she openly states her feelings. She admits she may never again know happiness. She ends her diatribe with the stark finality of her pain: “And if I thought this was the way the rest o’ my life was gonna be, I’d kill myself right now!” At measure 114, a *più stringendo* (much quicker) tempo marking leads the emotional response from Blitch, “It’s the sin in your heart!” Susannah’s last plea is “It ain’t!” She sings these argumentative and strained words on an octave leap. Another accompanimental theme returns while she sings her repeated octaves. At the height of Susannah’s sadness in Act One, she begs Sam to sing her the “Jaybird Song.” She heard the truth

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in Sam’s aria after asking why the church people had shunned her. In measure 114, Floyd uses the same repetitive motive to underscore Susannah in this moment with Blitch.

After her emotional outburst, Blitch seems defeated. His intentions turn from saving her—to using her. He sings an aria, explaining that he needs a woman because he is lonely. He asks her if Sam will be home. Susannah’s short answer of “no” indicates she does not have fight left in her. The stage directions indicate that Susannah stand lifelessly as Blitch puts his arm around her. She shakes her head with her eyes closed, surrendering all resistance. The accompaniment is a slightly more static alteration of Blitch’s aria. Susannah sings to herself, “I’m so tired. I jes’ cain’t fight no more” in measure 153. The pitches she sings in this line are much lower than her typical tessitura in the drama, another indication of her lifelessness and lack of strength.

Susannah is no longer in control of the scene as she walks into the house alongside Blitch. This moment is yet another that the audience must draw their own conclusions. The assumed sexual acts taking place off-stage leave the audience members to their own imaginations. Like Susannah bathing in the creek, the sins being committed are not witnessed by the audience, but explained later and constructed through context.

Act Two scene four takes place at the New Hope Church. Blitch sings an electrifying aria where he begs the Lord for forgiveness. For after his sexual relations with Susannah, he can see she was innocent. He now believes himself to be the true sinner. Susannah enters during his aria and stands in the back unwavering. The Elders and their wives enter after his aria. Blitch tries to make them understand that Susannah has been wrongly accused. They do not care nor take heed to his words and genuine dismay. They believe he is under the spell of the devil himself. After they exit, Blitch turns to Susannah who begins laughing to herself—a cold and unusual response
to the trauma. Susannah has given up trying to persuade anyone of her innocence. It appears that she has lost hope and even finds some cruel irony in the situation. Of course the moment is not humorous, but she bitterly laughs at Blitch’s naïve belief in people.

Then end of the scene is the chilly depiction of Susannah’s lack of response to the disturbing situation. Blitch says that he tried and swears he will make it up to her. In this instant, Susannah does not sing. She asks him “How?” in measure 103. He moves forward with no response and tries to touch her shoulder. She jumps away and venomously speaks the line, “Don’t tech me.” Blitch, broken, sings after her, “Fergive me, Susannah…” and Susannah turns as she is leaving, “Fergive? I’ve forgot what that means.” Not only are her words devoid of hope and Christian morality, but are spoken. Her lines are written over the same accompanimental figures that have recurred since Blitch’s aria. The fact she speaks the lines, and does not sing them, indicates her resignation. Susannah has been brought to an emotional low, so passionless, that she cannot sing. This marks an important point for her character development. Even when she was extremely emotional and distraught, she sang with fervor. She is now a broken, albeit grown up girl from the opening of the drama. After she exits the church, Blitch sobs and continues to pray.

The following scene takes place at the Polk residence. Susannah’s brother Sam comes back from his hunting trip inebriated. He sobers quickly as she angrily tells him what happened during his absence. Not all her anger is aimed toward the townspeople or at Blitch. She is clearly angry with Sam for leaving her alone after she begged him to stay. She is charged with energy, stemming from fury and hurt, as depicted by the stage directions. When the audience last saw Susannah she was at her lowest emotional state. We see the passion of her character return as she harshly explains the details of the night she spent with Blitch. She shows no shame or remorse
for her actions, but instead refers to them as consequences of Sam’s actions. She could also be seen as lashing out, regardless of correctness, because she has lost her own moral being. She sings, “He stayed near all night, an’ where was you? You was out gittin’ drunk!”

Sam asks her what Blitch did to her. She explains to him what happened and why. This is an important moment for the audience, because up until now her reasons for giving up have been made clear, but her reasons for giving in to Blitch have not. She explains she was tired of fighting and didn’t care. In that moment, Susannah did not care because there was nothing left for her to do in the community’s eyes. No one believes her anyway. The victim mentality Susannah faces causes her to behave recklessly, altering her once moral view of the world.

Musical aspects of this scene are explored more thoroughly in the Chapter devoted to Sam. A brief treatment of the scene will suffice for this Chapter’s material. The themes and musical elements aid in the intensity of the scene as the opera reaches its climax. Sam becomes livid, calling Blitch a hypocrite and threatening to kill him. Susannah sarcastically responds to his threats, “That’d do a lot o’ good” in measure 42 of scene four. She enters the house leaving Sam on the porch stewing in his hatred. He grabs a shotgun and disappears off-stage. Susannah calls Sam in for dinner. Her voice is heard off-stage as the stage has “been left empty for some time,” as specified by the stage directions. The eerie sound of the hymn-tune “Come Sinner” is heard offstage in measure 57. The recurrence of this hymn from the “Hinge Scene,” as Floyd calls it, is an indication of the baptisms taking place offstage. One might also consider this recurrent alter-call as a dark invitation for Sam to exact revenge. The cruel irony of the church members being washed of their sins while Sam attempts to eradicate evil, is understated, but not lost.
As the theme to the hymn-tune is repeated in rehearsal 98, Susannah continues to call for Sam. She eventually walks to the porch still calling his name. Her vocal line is slowly descending in measures 65 through 70 as she senses something is amiss. At this moment in the drama, the accompaniment has taken over the action. Susannah is given specific stage instructions that correspond to the dramatic alterations in the music.

“Susannah walks slowly onto the porch, trance-like, her whole attitude revealing growing terror. She pauses at the steps and screams. Her body stiffens, and her face becomes mask-like. She stands immobilized and rooted, awaiting with a terrible certainty, the inevitable.”

The hymn theme continues, altered rhythmically as Susannah stands on the porch, dismayed and horrified. At rehearsal 99, she sings “Sam” on a high A, portraying a scream of terror. A gunshot is heard off-stage as Susannah stands rigid. She slowly turns to see the gun rack on the porch, now empty. She brings her hands to her face and sobs. After the gunshot is heard, the tempo changes and the dynamics are brought down to a ppp marking. The music quickly builds by way of a molto crescendo (getting much louder) in a five-measure interlude that brings Susannah to her final ruin. As she falls to her knees, she prays, “Lord, I never meant him to do it!...Fergive me, O Lord...for whatever I’ve done to bring this misery on us all...I never meant to harm nobody.” A tempo change to Andante molto appassionato (moderate and very passionate) at rehearsal 100 underscores the emotional climax. The passionate plea for forgiveness quickly dies as the vocal range in her line descends and a poco a poco diminuendo (little by little growing softer) brings the dynamic from a fff to mp. Susannah’s cries to the Lord elicit fear, distress, and panic.

Little Bat enters and claims that Sam shot Blitch in the baptismal creek. He explains that Blitch’s last words were prayers for Susannah. He warns Susannah to leave because the

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16 Floyd, Susannah, 118.
townspeople are coming to her get her. The townspeople are threatening to hang Sam for what he has done. Just as Little Bat begins singing about the townspeople, humming is heard off-stage at Rehearsal Number 102. The humming soon turns into demands that Susannah get out of the valley. The theme that they sing will be explored in the chapter devoted to Mrs. McLean and the Chorus. As the mob enters, Susannah shrieks with laughter. She sings, “Git out!...You cain’t run me off my place till I’m ready to leave, an that’ll be some time to come.” The stage directions indicate that she runs into the house and returns with a shotgun. She points it at the townspeople, still demanding that they leave unless they “don’t care nothin’ ‘bout livin’.” Mrs. McLean warns her that there will be a judgment day for her actions. As the crowd leaves they continue to hum the theme they had been singing while Susannah continues to laugh.

Susannah notices Little Bat has sneaked upstage, so she leans seductively on a post. She goads Little Bat, beckoning him to come to her in a *quasi parlando* (almost spoken) style. She sings:

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 Susannah calls him, Little Bat moves tentatively toward her. Fighting revulsion, Susannah continues to call him as the mob theme from the chorus continues to accompany her seductive invitation. Once Little Bat puts his arms around her, she slaps him across the face and laughs until she sees he is gone. The stage directions reveal that Susannah turns around and stands in the doorway, “and inviolably and inexorably lonely prisoner of a self-imposed exile.” The curtain falls, signaling the end of the drama.

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17 Floyd, *Susannah*, 130.
Each character of the opera undergoes dynamic change, with the exception of Mrs. McLean. While every character is symbolically touched by fear, hatred, anger, and shock, Susannah undergoes the most alteration. She is shunned because of false accusations. The weakness of the Elders, the jealousy of their wives, and the lies of Little Bat lead to the alienation of an innocent woman.\(^{18}\) Although Susannah understands that sexual misconduct is considered sinful in her society, she does not feel she has committed any crimes. She truly cannot comprehend the controversy of her actions. Her resistance to admit guilt is what ostracizes her from the community. Susannah loses her friends, acquaintances, church, and community-life in one instant.

Susannah becomes depressed, lonely, and fearful. A once happy character that dreamed of a life full of possibilities has been changed. She attempts to find solace in Blitch, but realizes that his friendship comes at a cost. A sexual encounter with him indeed proves her innocence, but also contributes to her distress. Blitch begs the Elders to believe in her innocence. He, however, does not admit his own guilt.

After a week of torment, ostracism, loneliness, and depression, Susannah undergoes a complete change in personality. Bethany Kiral explains:

Susannah undergoes remarkable transformations as a result of her public disgrace and expulsion from the community. Her concepts of fairness and truth are shattered as she tirelessly works to restore her reputation. Shedding her idealistic view of life, Susannah adopts a survivalist mentality.\(^{19}\)

Susannah’s character faces much distress and hardship as she faces the ignorance and intolerance of a sheltered community. The McCarthy era in which Floyd composed elicited fear, doubt, and

\(^{18}\) Kiral, 12.  
\(^{19}\) Kiral, 14.
mistrust. Susannah’s character is a victim of these principles. False accusations and anxiety lead to the demise of an innocent youth.

Text, plot, and dramatic stage direction aid in creating an extreme dynamic change in Susannah’s character, but it is the musical devices that carry the drama. The use of sudden tempo changes, key relationships, themes, and harmony are reflected in the plot as motivation, action, and development of each character. The historical and musical context of the title character constructs her realism and believability as a possible human. Her trials and genuine reactions to fear, stress, and loss are what make Susannah a viable character.
While all the characters display fear in the opera, only Little Bat outwardly expresses and embodies fear as part of his character throughout the show. His childlike qualities make his character seem more transparent. Unlike the other characters, his fear is presented visibly—not channeled through another medium, such as religion, social norms, or seclusion. Little Bat’s actions, words, and demeanor are portrayed as a “shifty-eyed youth, not too strong mentally…a feline quality of movement which, coupled with his eyes, gives him a constantly expectant and alert air.”\(^1\) These qualities are explained in the stage directions and character description. Floyd seems to depict Little Bat with so much description that an actor or director is left with little room for self-interpretation. Little Bat is to be sung by a tenor, but because of his age and characteristics, a younger, lyric tenor is the most common casting choice.

Even though the part is smaller than the others, his role is important. His fearful reactions and weaknesses aid in Susannah’s downfall. Little Bat is Susannah’s only real friend in the town. He enjoys her kindness and beauty with a sense of wonder, despite his parents’ wishes not to fraternize at the Polk residence. Little Bat is in a precarious position—his parents are the McLeans. The McLeans are elders of the church, and Mrs. McLean is the harbinger of doubt and disdain for Susannah. Without the elders’ angry impetus of hatred toward Susannah, the story would not exist. Little Bat becomes a pawn in their witch-hunt. He represents a link to her and her personal life that the townspeople cannot access.

Little Bat makes his first entrance with Susannah in the second scene. He has walked her home from the square dance. Susannah is commenting on the fun she had at the dance as Little Bat silently agrees. As they enter the scene on the Polk’s lawn, Little Bat is looking about furtively—already fearful of something. Even though the audience has no context for his behavior, it becomes immediately clear that he is worried. Despite his trepidation, his demeanor should show that he worships Susannah. After Susannah finishes her thoughts about dancing, there is a brief musical pause. Little Bat asks, “Where’s Sam?” at rehearsal 17, as a cluster chord is played beneath his short question. This tonality depicts an ominous tone that is new to the scene, for when Susannah was singing, the music was light and reminiscent of the dancing tune from the square dance. The opening of the scene has a tempo indication of Allegretto giocoso (fairly quick, joyful) This tempo and mood marking indicates Susannah’s attitude. Little Bat’s question suddenly shifts the tone.

Susannah explains to Little Bat that Sam is not home nor in bed. This explanation does not allay his fears. He admits that he is scared of Sam. After Susannah inquires why, Little Bat explains that his parent have told him that Sam is a drunk. At this point, we see that Little Bat is responding to information relayed to him by his family, and not from his own experiences. The fear instilled through social media and context is displayed through his character almost immediately. Even after Susannah defends her brother by saying, “He don’t never hurt nobody, and’ he’s awful good to me.”² Little Bat remains frightened. Susannah’s anecdotal proof is no match for the southern traditions: his parents’ words.

Southern values are deeply embedded in his statement, “My ma says they’s bad blood in yo’ family…”³ The concept of “bad blood” is damning for someone in the South.⁴ While

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² Floyd, Susannah, 23.
³ Floyd, Susannah, 23.
traditions can be difficult to explain, the actions of the townspeople are presented with “southern ideals” that Carlisle Floyd implemented in his operas. In interviews with Floyd, he explained that he set the opera in a remote location where Fundamentalism and Evangelicism could hold supreme. These strict social codes bleed into community life and interaction. Little Bat is an example of a simpleton who becomes a product of his own environment. The small-minded character soon becomes a weapon against Susannah.

In Little Bat’s statement about Sam, the mood changes quickly. A key change from E-flat major to f-sharp minor aids in this move to a different conversation. The tonality in this 10-measure recitative is comprised of bi-chords. An ostinato pattern accompanies the bi-chords (measures 22 through 30). It can be interpreted that most of Floyd’s use of key signatures are employed to give musicians and listeners a tonal center. The key changes do not necessarily depict typical western functional harmony, but rather help illustrate a tonal center. Tonality is fluid in this opera, as it is used to change mood and direction for the characters. For example, the chordal make-up of an F-sharp major and f-sharp minor triad combined creates an ominous and confused emotion that continues as Little Bat and Susannah sing angular and choppy vocal lines that reflecting speech patterns. For example, the vocal melodies in measures 29 and 30 generally outline the f-sharp minor triads. Anxiety-inciting tonality and descending melodic lines in the accompaniment help produce the fear in Little Bat’s character and the confusion in Susannah’s reaction.

As Little Bat abruptly changes the subject, the tempo quickens with the *Più mosso* at rehearsal 18. The accompaniment suggests the square dance theme. The syncopated rhythm in the strings harkens back to the theme from the dance and Susannah’s earlier recitative. Little Bat’s vocal line is also more melodic and syncopated like the original fiddle tune from the square

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dance scene (Act One scene one). The Scottish snap rhythm returns, as in his line, “I seed ‘em every one.” Little Bat is complimenting Susannah and noting how the men were positively reacting to her beauty and dancing, so the music reflects the topic of conversation. It is important to address how Little Bat’s mood and tone brightens when he speaks about Susannah’s beauty. He is clearly enamored with her.

Each time Little Bat comments about her dancing and beauty, Susannah always shrugs off the attention with a joke. When Little Bat brings up the preacher and her obvious attraction to him, she makes a joke about his poor dancing skills. They laugh about her “feet…bound to turn black n’ blue.” As Susannah looks up at the night sky, she begins her aria “Ain’t it a Pretty Night.” At the end of the aria, Sam arrives home. Little Bat is startled and scurries away—still obviously frightened of him despite his conversation with Susannah.

Little Bat’s pinnacle moment occurs in scene five, after Susannah is shunned from the church. The Elders have seen her bathing in the creek and want nothing to do with her. He sneaks up to the Polk residence to talk to Susannah. The introduction to this scene sets the mood instantly. Because Susannah is sitting in silence, the orchestra must convey her thoughts of sadness and confusion. In measures 1 through 4, a drone in the bass underlines a repeated pattern in the accompaniment—an alteration of minor and augmented triads aids in the static movement of the opening of the scene. (Example 4.1) Once she sees Little Bat and asks what he is doing there, the tempo is altered. The first thing Little Bat asks is, “Is Sam here?” His fear of Sam is still present, even though he has more important things to discuss with Susannah.

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5 Floyd, Susannah, 24.
6 Floyd, Susannah, 25.
7 Floyd, Susannah, 51.
Susannah is bewildered and upset. She has no inclination of what she has done to deserve the cold treatment from the elders, so she asks Little Bat. His response is to be sung “with a certain mysterious relish.”\(^8\) Recounting Susannah’s actions as she was bathing in the creek seems to give him a sort of sexual satisfaction. He explains that the elders saw her bathing nude in the creek and “exposin’ y’self without no shame.”\(^9\) The elders have found her actions to be scandalous. Little Bat even goes so far as to warn her that “they’re gone run you out’-n the church an’ maybe the valley, too.”\(^10\) Susannah is distraught and confused at how they saw her bathing because she believed she was alone. She explains that she had been bathing there all spring and that they should not have spied on her. Even after her explanation and plea of innocence, Little Bat continues to let her know that the preacher has prayed for her soul and that the whole valley knows.

He informs her that the townspeople believe that there is no man safe with her around. The accusations of a woman’s sexual indecency is detrimental to her reputation. The Southern traditions meld with the apocryphal story in this moment. In the Book of Daniel, Susannah is considered evil for luring men with sexual prowess; the same holds true in 1956 rural Tennessee.

\(^8\) Floyd, *Susannah*, 52.
\(^10\) Floyd, *Susannah*, 52.
Naturally, Susannah is aware of this social standard and becomes even more upset. She asks who “they” are that Little Bat refers to in his stories. Little Bat responds dramatically with one word, “Everybody!” The devastation Susannah feels is dramatically crafted by an interlude in the orchestra. She seems to have nothing to say, so the instrumental interlude carries her emotions as the stage directions indicate that she puts her hands to her face and “shudders visibly.”

Little Bat still seems frightened as he admits that there is more she does not know. When Susannah asks him to explain, he immediately becomes agitated and emotional. Little Bat is immediately defensive as he sings multiple times “They made me say it! I swear they did!” He confesses that he lied to his parents and the preacher that Susannah “loved him up and down…and in the worse sort of way.” The audience must interpret the idiom as sexual conduct. Susannah responds angrily by telling him that it is a lie. Little Bat agrees and says, “I did an’ I know it’s a lie. You was allers good to me.” He tells her that they made him say it and that he was “scairt to death.” His pleas are unheard and unrecognized by Susannah. She screams for him to leave and never return. Little Bat scurries away wailing and crying.

The recitative in this scene is of high importance. Here, the audience grasps the true depth of pain that fear can bring. Little Bat has been used as a weapon against Susannah. (The author notes the poetic irony of his name, “Bat”) It is because of fear and worry that he is easy to manipulate. His parents seemed to have pushed him into admitting guilt to a fabricated offense. As mentioned in Chapter Two, McCarthyism was a backdrop to social and political life in the 1950s. Even though Floyd may not have purposely used this theme, he admitted that he was influenced and directly affected by it. This element of fear and distrust without proof or appeal is

1 Floyd, *Susannah*, 55.
2 Floyd, *Susannah*, 56.
3 Floyd, *Susannah*, 57.
4 Ibid.
5 Floyd, *Susannah*, 58.
illustrated through Little Bat’s lies and anxiety. He knows what he did was wrong, but terror affected his judgment. Unlike Sam Polk, Little Bat is a stimulus and pawn for the drama and deprecation of Susannah’s character. The townspeople only needed “proof” of her wrongdoing, so they acquired it through fear tactics.

The themes of paranoia, fear, and anger are brought forth through the use of tempos, dynamics, tonal shifts, ostinato patterns in the accompaniment and text. After the short introduction to the scene, Susannah asks Little Bat a question and he responds with another question. A glissando is used in measure 6 to indicate emotion between their lines. This quick musical spurt could be interpreted as Little Bat’s surprise at how Susannah saw him. The musical motive could also depict stage movement as Little Bat comes out from hiding. As the first section of recitative takes place, a repeated descending eighth-note pattern occurs on the downbeat of each measure. Each time this motive is repeated, it perpetuates the menacing tone and stressful mood.

At rehearsal 41, Little Bat begins to explain what the elders saw. The tempo marking is *L’istesso tempo* (same tempo). The same rhythmic pattern repeats every measure in Little Bat’s story. Each time, the tonality shifts, but the accompanying orchestral line remains similar. One could analyze this harmonic and rhythmic repetition as a theme for Little Bat. Each time he sings and alternates lines with Susannah, the motive returns. The most logical interpretation would be a motive of anxiety and stress. Susannah’s accompanimental figures differ, because her emotion in this scene is indignant, anger, and confusion.

The pitches on which Little Bat sings seem to outline typical speech patterns until emotions change. In measure 15, the word “exposin’” in the sentence “a bathin’ without a stitch
on, exposin’ y’self without no shame"\textsuperscript{16} is emphasized by the use of a large interval of a tenth. He is most likely quoting things he has heard from the townspeople and his parents. Because he is reciting what he heard with childlike characteristics, it seems natural that he would use the same inflection he heard. His voice rises as he becomes more upset and fearful. For instance, in measure 16, when he tells Susannah that, “They said it were a scan’alous thing,”\textsuperscript{17} the tessitura is suddenly much higher, as if to portray raised speech. The pitches would innately cause a louder volume as well as a more frantic tone.

As the scene continues, the alternation of Susannah’s recitative accompaniment and little Bat’s accompaniment resumes. The same rhythmic pattern in the orchestral line returns after Susannah sings about the elders having no right to spy on her. Little Bat tells her the preacher has been praying for her all day and that the whole valley knows. The word “valley” is another high point. He accents that word to display the gravity of the situation. Another large interval of a fifth displays the excitement in his tone in measure in measure 17. Another example of how tone and pitch content demonstrate the emotion of fear and tension is Little Bat’s response to Susannah’s question, “Who’s they?”\textsuperscript{18} The rhythmic pattern disappears from the accompaniment, and is replaced by a \textit{sforzando} (forceful) minor-minor seventh chord on the first beat of measure 32 as he loudly proclaims, “Everybody!”\textsuperscript{19} with an octave leap to a b-flat. This high tessitura and large downward leap in pitch suggests yelling.

After the delivery of this line, Susannah is distraught and weeps. The music is suddenly broadened by way of a \textit{Più mosso, ma largamente} (more movement, but broadly) tempo and crescendo marking. The accompaniment carries Susannah and Little Bat’s emotions as action

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\item \textsuperscript{16} Floyd, \textit{Susannah}, 52.
\item \textsuperscript{17} Floyd, \textit{Susannah}, 52.
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\item \textsuperscript{19} Floyd, \textit{Susannah}, 55.
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takes place on the stage, indicated by Floyd. While Susanna weeps, Little Bat slinks away, watching her carefully. Dramatic accents are placed on the first three beats of the short six-measure section. As the drama dies down, so does the music. Tentative, short sixteenth notes are repeated as Little Bat gathers the courage to tell her the worst part. His unaccompanied line “They’s more what you don’t know” in measure 39, is eerie and worrisome. The two-measure interlude following his line has a marking of misterioso (mysterious), while the right hand piano accompaniment provides a trill on the same motive as the Più mosso, ma largamente. Susannah asks what she doesn’t know and starts to move toward him as he backs away. The same trill pattern in the orchestra repeats as this continues for four measures until Little Bat explodes with terror.

At the tempo change of Allegro agitato (fast agitated) and the quickening of rhythmic figures to sixteenth notes, Little Bat’s line is angular and full of large intervallic leaps. He is pleading with her to understand what he has done, before informing her of the crime. The tension in the orchestra builds as he explains what he told his parents and the preacher. The large leaps in his vocal line continue, as the accompaniment remains full and dynamically charged.

At rehearsal 46, Little Bat repeats the line “plum’ scairt to death!” and brings the emotion to its high point with his highest pitch of a B-flat. As Little Bat declares that he told them a lie about sexual deviance, the accompaniment echoes a motive from earlier in the opera when the elders had seen Susannah bathing in the creek and decided to tell the valley. A tremolo pattern with a stinging staccato pitch initiates the return of the motive in measure 57. This same motive is played as Little Bat tells of his lie in measures 57 through 60. When Susannah sings “You didn’t…It’s a lie! You know it is!” a foreshadowing melody counters her exclamations at

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20 Floyd, Susannah, 55.
21 Floyd, Susannah, 56.
rehearsal 47. A theme from Susannah’s second aria, “The Trees on the Mountain,” is used to portray the lonely, helpless, and betrayed emotions in that moment. As Little Bat sings his admittance of the truth, a countermelody illustrates his similar emotion of helpless guilt and shame. (Example 4.2) As the countermelody continues, Little Bat pleads with her to understand that they made him lie, but she does not care. She screams for him to leave, so he exits while audibly crying.

Ex. 4.2: Floyd, Susannah, Act I, Scene 5, mm. 62-64.

Little Bat’s next entrance occurs immediately after Sam murders the Reverend Olin Blitch in Act Two scene five. Susannah is praying to God after she realizes what has happened. Little Bat is heard “shrieking from off stage.”22 He runs to Susannah screaming her name and telling her that, “Sam killed him!”23 Each time Little Bat repeats her name, the pitches accent the second syllable of her name just as if he were yelling and not singing. A fermata is placed over the word “killed,” as Little Bat sings a high A-sharp in measure number 103. This panic and

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22 Floyd, Susannah, 120.
23 Floyd, Susannah, 120.
hysteria is depicted through his voice, and not accompanimental figures. The word “killed” is not met with accompaniment, as to accent it.

A tempo marking of *Meno mosso sempre affrettando* (less moved, always hurried) implies a hurried intensity as Little Bat sings this recitative. The same motive from Little Bat’s last scene returns, now in a different register in measure 104. Little Bat describes the murder to Susannah. This motive of fear and paranoia seems to have been associated with Little Bat and his emotions. Many of the transgressions that have occurred in the opera are off stage and described as a narrative to other characters. It seems that Floyd was more interested in the social conformity and hypocrisy of the situation. The focus is on the town people’s reactions to the alleged evil acts. Once again, as the stress levels heighten, so do the pitches he sings. An example of heightened speech and excitement occurs on the word “blood” in measure 110. Little Bat sings a high A to accent the word and give it prominence. His horror at the situation is only trumped by his disturbed reaction to the preacher’s last words. Blitch apparently prayed for Susannah’s soul before his death. Little Bat is most distraught by this fact. His emotions are explained when he says, “It was a terrible thing to hear.” His vocal line, once again, reaches a higher register on this line. The word “terrible” in measure 116 is emphasized.

After Little Bat’s last comment, a male chorus is heard off stage as he tells Susannah that the townspeople are coming for her. They blame Susannah for Blitch’s murder and want vengeance. As he sings his recitative, the orchestra plays a homophonic accompaniment that is stylistically similar to the hymns in the revival scenes. Little Bat becomes more agitated and worried as he asks Susannah, “What y’gonna do, Susannah? Y’better run…They’re gettin’ close!” 

Intervals of a fifth and octave signal the urgency and fear in his voice. At the end of the opera, Susannah calls to Little Bat. She seductively beckons him over, inviting him to “love her

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up some.” He hesitantly walks over to embrace her, but she slaps him across the face. He runs away and she is left on the porch as the opera closes.

Once again, Little Bat has been caught in the middle of a social storm that he cannot quell. While Susannah is the heroine of the story, each character is victimized in some way. In Little Bat’s case, he is a victim of circumstances and religious zealotry. His fear is learned through social interaction and religious fervor. Little Bat’s feline qualities are associated with his fear. His parents have sheltered him, engraining in him intolerance and a fear of God.

The stage directions explain Little Bat as being slow, but his character is only considered “slow” because he lacks independent thought. His only self-motivated acts involve Susannah. He is warned to stay away from the Polk residence, but Susannah’s beauty and kindness draws him to her side. It is evident he cares for her when he cautions her to leave the valley after Sam commits murder. Little Bit is a character entirely motivated by terror. He is surrounded by intolerance. Floyd used stage direction, text, and compositional techniques to portray this skittish, yet powerful character. His friendship with Susannah angers his mother. Without his explanation, Susannah (and the audience) would not understand why the church has shunned her. Little Bat plays an integral part in the drama, embodying the phenomena of fear and betrayal.

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SAM POLK

Sam Polk, Susannah’s brother, could be considered the medium through which the composer expresses his views. Even though his character is tragically flawed, he is the voice of reason and assurance, as explained in the stage directions: “Sam, the uncomprehended [sic] poet and recluse, is gentle by nature and tragically passive, until the one thing of beauty left in his life is attacked.” His character is challenged by a conflict he cannot ignore, which forever changes him.

Sam, an outsider, is known in the town as an alcoholic and loner. Little Bat even states that he is afraid of Sam, but Susannah reassures him that Sam is good and sings, “He don’t never hurt nobody, an’ he’s awful good to me.” Little Bat’s parents instilled fear in him by telling him that Sam is an alcoholic. Little Bat’s fear illustrates the mentality of Sam’s community. Sam has seen New Hope’s social interactions, and has separated himself from them.

Sam’s reputation differs greatly from his warm presence. The duality of this characterization is immediately apparent once Sam appears on stage. He displays love and kindness for his sister, taking care of her after the death of their parents. At this point in the drama, the audience has heard mostly negative accusations against Sam, but his behavior and kindness reveals a gentle character with simple motivations. Sam is a victim of circumstances, like many of the characters in the drama. The actions and intolerance of others causes Sam much psychological disturbance—he violently lashes out to protect the only thing of importance in his life.

Sam’s first entrance occurs in Act One scene two. As Susannah finishes her first aria, “Ain’t it a Pretty Night,” Sam enters and comments to himself in the same unaccompanied

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27 Floyd, Susannah, 23.
melody, “Ain’t it a pretty night.” Susannah is pleasantly surprised to see him, but Little Bat is clearly frightened. The stage directions indicate the stark contrast between Susannah’s and Little Bat’s reactions by explaining:

“At the sound his voice Susannah looks up, surprised, while Little Bat leaps to his feet, ready for immediate departure. It should be immediately apparent that the bond between the brother and sister is one of loyalty, warmth, and tenderness.”

Once Little Bat exits, Susannah and Sam discuss the square dance. Even though Sam teases and suggests that she should be getting married soon, he compliments her cooking and her presence in the home. The recitative gives the audience a glimpse of their sibling bond. Susannah pleads with Sam to sing her the “Jaybird Song,” a fictitious folk song composed by Carlisle Floyd. She reminisces about “Pa” singing the song before their bedtime. The folk tradition of singing songs to lighten a mood or to console is used frequently in this opera. Susannah states, “You ain’t sung it fer me in a long time now, an; it always makes me feel real happy.” He puts his arm around her shoulders and sings the song. Like most children’s songs, the lyrics are nonsensical and playful. (Figure 4.1) Even though Susannah is no longer a child, Sam still appeases and dotes upon her as if she were.

Oh, jaybird sittin’ on a hick’ry limb, he winked at me and I winked at him. I picked up a brick-bat and hit him on the chin. “Look-a here, little boy, don’t you do that agin!”

Fig. 4.1: Floyd, Lyrics to “Jaybird Song”

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28 Floyd, Susannah, 29.
29 Floyd, Susannah, 29.
30 Floyd, Susannah, 32.
31 Floyd, Susannah, 33.
The melody of this folk tune is in D Major. The tune is mainly triadic, with leaps of thirds and fifths, and follows a stylistic practice of folk music. The performance indication is *Scherzando*, or a light-hearted style of performance. The accompaniment of the “Jaybird Song” is thin and light. A performance indication of *marcato, pizzicato* (each note plucked with heavy accents) indicates the eighth notes on the downbeats, to be emphasized, placing accents on rhymed words of the song. The song is child-like and “off-the-cuff” in its nonsensical lyrics and crude accented downbeats. The oral tradition of this style of music implies that each performance of song be unique. Floyd composed the “Jaybird Song” to provide the audience with the economic, cultural, and social setting of 1956 small-town Tennessee life.

Even though there is no meter marking, the tune is felt in Common Time. The melody is a four-line prose—a one measure per line. The last line should be sung with a *rubato* (or a stretching of the note value) nature, as indicated by the *ritardando* (slower) marking. Susannah joins Sam in an exact repetition of the melody. Only the accompaniment changes during the repeat of the melody. The same rhythm occurs in the accompaniment, but now the strings are no longer using pizzicato (plucking), but rather playing on the string (*arco*, or bowed) starting at rehearsal 26.

After Susannah and Sam finish the last line, they leap to their feet and dance wildly in the yard. This playful scene is unfortunately the last light-hearted and carefree moment in the opera. As they dance, the orchestra plays a square dance rendition of the “Jaybird” melody in a G Major tonality. Complete with Scottish snap rhythms and a triadic melody, the music is still in the folk style tradition. The “Jaybird” theme never returns in the opera. This duet can be interpreted as an expression of the relationship between Susannah and Sam. It demonstrates the folk singing tradition of the South.

A 6/4 meter marking and performance indication of Adagio tranquillo (slow tranquil) announces an abrupt mood change at the end of the scene. A key change to E-flat Major rounds out the entire scene, as we are brought back to the introduction of Susannah’s aria “Ain’t it a Pretty Night.” As the music changes, Susannah and Sam, worn out from dancing, sit on the porch steps and sing Susannah’s line, “Ain’t it a pretty night” in thirds and sixths. A postlude from Susannah’s aria ends the scene calmly and beautifully. One might describe this brief moment as “the calm before the storm.”

Sam sings a pinnacle aria later in the first act of the opera. Sam’s gentleness is displayed in this recitative and aria. He is Susannah’s only comfort after the townspeople have shunned and dismissed her from the church dinner. Susannah and Sam have no other family, so their close relationship is apparent. Floyd uses recitatives, dynamic contrasts, folk melodies, and stage directions to portray this bond.

Sam returns home to find Susannah speaking with Little Bat. Little Bat has explained that his parents have frightened him into saying that he has a sexual relationship with Susannah. She screams at him and tells him to leave and never return. Sam has heard the entire conversation and appears from a doorway as he sings, “Feeble-minded idjet!”33 Susannah begs him with the question, “What’s it all about, Sam? What’s it all about?”34 Susannah is completely lost and heart-broken, as she does not understand what she has done wrong.

Sam sings an aria that is meant to both explain the harsh realities of the world, and soothe poor Susannah. Sam’s lyrics are deep, poetic, and at the same time, simple.

33 Floyd, Susannah, 59.
34 Floyd, Susannah, 59.
He states (Figure 4.2):

It’s about the way people is made, I reckon,  
An’ how they like to believe what’s bad.  
How short they are in lovin’ kindness,  
It must make the good Lord sad.  
They don’t know it ain’t what you feel that counts,  
But what you do about it.  
So instead they take it out on you.  
It must make the good Lord sad.

Way out yonder somewhere,  
The Lord’s great heart must break  
At seein’ how men treat one another,  
An’ sayin’ they’re doin’ it all for His sake.  
It’s a hard, hard thing fer you to realize, I know  
That people want to believe what’s bad  
An’ how short they are on lovin’ kindness.  
It must make the good Lord sad.35

Fig 4.2: Floyd, Lyrics of Sam’s aria.

The truthful insight into this character’s words is sad, tragic, and ironic because Sam stands in stark contrast to the self-righteous townspeople who practice a religion devoid of compassion.36

Even though it is not marked as an aria, the text is meant to be sung that way. In a 2001 interview, Carlisle Floyd explained that he had to convince the late Jerry Hadley to sing it as a true aria and not recitative for a 1994 recording session. Floyd told him, “That’s the way I set it up!”37 Floyd wished to feature this aria because of his own beliefs and opinions.38 Sam is a messenger for the moral of the opera. One of only three characters in the drama that sings an aria, Sam closes the First Act with haunting words.

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35 Floyd, Susannah, 59-61.  
37 Miller, 52.  
38 Miller, 52.
Susannah begs him to sing the “Jaybird Song” as she sobs hysterically as the Act comes to a close. Sam now has the responsibility of being her guardian, consoler, confidant, and mentor. The audience is led to believe that this relationship has been close, but is now changing. Susannah is learning the harsh reality of adult life. Her caretaker has become the harbinger of dark truths and wisdom.

The somber atmosphere in Sam’s aria is created through the use of dynamic contrasts, compositional devices, lyrics, tempo markings, and the use of minor keys. All these tools aid the singer in creating drama through the music. Sam’s aria has no introduction, but rather, it transitions straight from the recitative. The aria is forlorn and emotional, indicated by a Largo semplice tempo marking at rehearsal 49. The dynamic marking at the beginning of the aria is pp con tristezza (very softly, with sadness). Dynamic and performance indications direct the singer to gently approach the melody. While the dynamic marking is soft, the singer should treat the aria with tenderness, not carefulness. The dynamic marking could be interpreted as a mood, rather than a volume indication. Though the aria appears to be in a 4/4 meter, it relies heavily on a subdivided beat when performed at the indicated tempo (quarter note=50). The simplistic accompaniment of quarter notes remains the same throughout the aria. Floyd wants the lyrics to be heard, and the action stopped. Dense accompanimental writing could take away from the compassionate message, so the tender and thin texture Floyd composed makes sense.

A descending quarter-note pattern in the orchestration of the aria is similar to a ground bass and is a common device used in opera to depict grief, sadness, or pain.39 The mood of the aria is strikingly different than the preceding recitative. The ground-bass pattern repeats throughout both sections of the aria. Sam’s aria is in a two-part form, divided by new lyrics, keys, and a change in the accompaniment. The aria begins in the key of c-minor, but changes to

39 Miller, 52.
f-sharp minor in the second section. Floyd uses a third relationship between measure 89 and 90 to modulate from the end of the first section by using a D chord to transition.\textsuperscript{40}

The lyrics “Way out yonder somewhere, the Lord’s great heart must break…”\textsuperscript{41} bring about the key change. The new text and key creates the impetus for a shift in focus. Sam is now referring to God’s view. He can only imagine what the Lord sees from a distance; and this thought is carried through by the changes in the orchestration and key. A lyrical, yet mournful melody in the accompaniment counters Sam’s melody in the B section, creating more drama in this section (measure 90).

The rhythm of Sam’s vocal line follows the natural speech patterns of the text. His melody follows a basic contour shape in each phrase. For example, the first vocal line of the B section (measures 90 through 93) has an arc that begins and ends on the pitch F-sharp. The lines are broken into four-measure phrases, with lifts every two measures. The melody, like much of the music from this opera, is syllabic. The syllabic nature of the simple melody can be attributed to his character, a simple, uneducated hunter. Though he is a simple character, he is not ignorant or stupid, but rather deep and poetic. His aria is said plainly, but contains great words of wisdom and insight into a world that he sees before him. Complex text is set to a simple melody, which only shows the dynamic of Sam’s dual character. The act ends dramatically with Susannah crying hysterically while Sam comforts her.

The second act opens with Susannah and Sam sitting on the porch in silence. The stage directions indicate that a “static helplessness must be established”\textsuperscript{42} through staging and attitude. Their discussion is set to \textit{accompagnato recitative} (accompanied recitative), like the majority of the text in this through-composed opera. The atmosphere is created not only by stage direction,

\textsuperscript{40} Miller, 52.
\textsuperscript{41} Floyd, Susannah, 60.
\textsuperscript{42} Floyd, Susannah, 59.
but also by musical figures in the accompaniment. The tempo marking is *Molto sostenuto* (very sustained). A pedal tone of a C continues through the first 16 measures as Susannah asks “How long’s it gonna last, Sam?” She is referring to the ostracism and mistreatment she is enduring from the townspeople. The pedal tone musically represents the standstill of the action and mood. Cluster chords with *messa di voce* (increasing and decreasing of volume) markings in the accompaniment create an eerie sense of tension and stillness, as in measure 1. By the third measure of the opening scene, the chords descend in an oppressive manner, which elicits sadness and grief.

Tempo changes aid in emotional shifts and dramatic interpretation in this intense portion of recitative. The scene begins with a *Molto sostenuto* (very sustained) tempo marking. When Susannah asks Sam how long it will take until conditions improve, the vocal lines remain static and non-melodic in measures 7 through 16. The intervallic content is comprised mostly of intervals of a fifth and a second. As the mood in the conversation shifts, Susannah’s recitative becomes more melodic and the accompaniment changes. The new tempo marking at rehearsal 52 indicates *Andante non troppo* (walking, but not too slow). A countermelody and moving bass line in measures 17 through 24 accompany her vocal line as the chords change more rapidly than in the earlier recitative.

Susannah’s melody within this section of recitative has a folk-like quality. Following the tradition of 20th century Appalachian folk music, the tune is mournful and haunting with many open intervals of a third and fifth. The text reveals her feelings on the subject: confusion, sorrow, and indignation. She does not feel she has done anything wrong. Susannah is plagued with the moral dilemma of admitting guilt to a crime that she did not commit, but also does not

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43 Floyd, *Susannah*, 63.
comprehend. Her folk-style recitative melody establishes the mood and plaintive tone in which Sam replies.

Sam’s subsequent melody answers her musical phrase. He is trying to console her, so his response is kind and melodic. A musical marking of “patiently” indicates that Sam is not upset or irritated. He refers to her by her nickname “Little Robin” and says, “The Lord, he knows what’s in yer heart, so jes’ don’t fret no more.” His melody is the transition to a new tonality. Susannah’s melody at rehearsal 52 is in a-minor, while Sam’s response quickly moves to c-minor through the use of B-flat, E-flat, and A-flat accidentals. A countermelody accompanies Susannah while she sings at rehearsal 53. The melody is reminiscent of the thematic material in Sam’s aria. Once Sam responds at measure 23, the countermelody is strengthened with more dense melodies, creating a more powerful repetition.

Susannah is so distraught she begins to believe what the townspeople are saying. Now that the tonality has changed, the mood follows. The beautiful countermelody is no longer heard, as the accompaniment becomes static half notes. The new tempo marking at rehearsal 53 is Allegro non troppo (not too quick). Her emotional outburst is met with “sharp” anger as Sam tells her to “shut up talkin’ like that.” He is convinced that her admission to guilt is what they want. He does not want her to give up. Susannah is more agitated and bitter, so her speech quickens. She sings about the boys in town treating her poorly and shaming her. At this point, Sam finally seems to show anger and agitation as he admits that he would kill them all if it would do any good. A crescendo marking in measure 43 aids in building the emotional swell as Sam’s vocal line ascends. His anger and empathy have finally gotten the best of him as he

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44 Floyd, Susannah, 65.
45 Floyd, Susannah, 65.
46 Floyd, Susannah, 65.
displays his true feelings on the matter. His high A-flat in measure 45 creates musical tension and tonal clashes against the ascending accompanimental orchestra parts.

The performance indication of “sudden intensity” and new tempo marking of Allegro molto cantabile (lively and sung very lyrically) creates even more drama as Susannah responds in anger and confusion at rehearsal 54. She is unsure of what she has done to deserve the poor treatment. Sam is suddenly calm as he assures her that faith will lead them in this unfortunate circumstance. As he states his line, the music also calms by means of thinner texture, decrescendo markings, and lower tessitura for both the orchestra and him. A quick key change to d-minor in measure 51 continues the thought and musically shifts the focus to a more subdued emotion. Susannah is meant to consider this notion during a four-measure interlude that begins at measure 53. The performance indication marks this interlude as a “long, helpless pause.” It seems Floyd is indicating that there is nothing to be done.

Sam tries to change the subject with his next line, “That meetin’ preacher must be a pwr’ful one. I never seed so many people gittin’ baptized.” A cluster chord with the value of two whole notes is Sam’s only accompaniment for this line. The lack of accompaniment could be construed as a dramatic alteration in the conversation. Both characters have reached a peek of emotional distress. This moment of quiet lasts only a brief moment before Susannah responds sadly that the “crick must be plum’ spoilt.” She explains that she ran into the preacher and that she was met with kindness. Her positive outlook gives Sam an opening to help her. He suggests that she should go to the revival meeting that night. His newfound hope and desperation to comfort her is indicated by a slower tempo marked by a Meno mosso (less movement) and key

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47 Floyd, Susannah, 67.
48 Floyd, Susannah, 68.
49 Floyd, Susannah, 68.
50 Floyd, Susannah, 68.
change to C-Major at rehearsal 56, though the tonality is filled with cluster chords. He believes that Susannah should face the problem head-on by showing no fear. It appears later that he has ulterior motives for urging her to attend the meeting.

Susannah immediately begs him to understand that she does not want to go. He says that no harm will come to her and that he needs to go hunting. He indicates he will return the next day and that he will even leave a gun for her protection. The tension is slowly building as they sing. Susannah is alarmed as the tempo changes *L’istesso tempo* (same tempo) and dynamics build by way of a crescendo at rehearsal 57. The accompaniment becomes much more agitated as more accidentals and cluster chords are presented. After Sam’s last line “An’ I’ll leave you a gun to boot,” the accompaniment calms and Susannah asks Sam if he is going to get drunk. Her pleading introduces another folk melody similar to one used earlier in this scene (rehearsal 58). The same haunting countermelody from Sam’s aria returns and accompanies their recitative and aids in projecting Susannah’s emotional state. (Example 4.3) Each time she feels alone and sad, a folk-like tune is present. Sam’s reassuring words seem appropriate for this folk tune. He tells her not to fret and that he will be back soon.

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Ex. 4.3: Floyd, *Susannah*, Act II, Scene 1, mm. 99-102.

A *subito piano* (suddenly soft) marking and sudden change in musical accompaniment give way to Sam’s final question, “An’ will ya go to the meetin’ tonight?”\(^{52}\) in measure 107. Susannah responds, agitated, and begs him not to ask her to go. Sam repeats his reasoning for her to go. An eight-measure interlude provides an emotional reaction for Susannah. In measure 114, the tempo marking of *Più mosso, molto affrettando* (much faster, very rushed) and thicker accompaniment creates drama while Susannah struggles with her decision, as indicated by the stage directions.

The interlude dies away dynamically and texturally as Susannah sings another folk melody with simple accompaniment. The tempo change to *Molto adagio* (very slow) aids the dramatic emotional shift. She says she will try but cannot be made to stay. Sam once again

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\(^{52}\) Floyd, *Susannah*, 71.
answers with a similar tune and accompaniment. The similar use of intervallic content is meant to reassure her. The scene ends with Susannah’s sad line “I cain’t wait til things looks pretty agin.” in measure 130. Stage cues indicate that they return to the same mood as the beginning of the scene. Naturally, the postlude contains the same harmony and accompaniment from the opening, only now it is in a lower register.

Sam’s next entrance is in Act Two, scene five. He has returned after a hunting trip to find Susannah sitting on the porch looking distraught. The introductory music is a variation of Susannah’s aria “The Trees On the Mountains.” The melody elicits a more somber tone than the first time it was presented. The tempo and tone is changed abruptly as Sam enters. An Allegretto giocoso (a little joyful) marking and text help Sam exhibit his pleasant mood. He cheerfully announces that he has caught food as he kisses her on the head. Sam’s mood is jolly, but Susannah sits motionless and unaffected. Playful quarter notes on each beat seem to indicate his every step starting at rehearsal 93. The same playful music plays each time he sings.

Sam’s good mood lasts only a short time once he notices Susannah’s body language and tone of voice. He teases her by asking if she missed him. She is not amused, and flatly responds, “You’re drunk, Sam.” The same accompanimental figure plays as she sings her line in measure 14, which depicts two different emotions at once. Generally, in the drama, the music alters quickly to depict the emotion of the character singing. In this instance, Sam’s music underscores her exasperation and resignation. The dual emotional portrayal is powerful because of its rarity. (Example 4.4) He admits that he is slightly drunk, but it is nothing to “fret your pretty head about.” After he asks her if anything happened, he sees that she troubled. She shudders and backs away from his touch, so he shouts and asks her what is wrong. Susannah seems to be very

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53 Floyd, Susannah, 73.
54 Floyd, Susannah, 112.
55 Floyd, Susannah, 113.
angry with Sam—she feels neglected and alone. Her heated words reveal her feelings about being left in the Valley. While she does not outright blame Sam for her plight, she resents his absence and decision to drink.


Susannah angrily tells Sam what has taken place in his absence. She explains that she gave in to the Reverend Blitch because she was tired of fighting and living where no one believed her anyway. Immediately, Sam blames Blitch for what has happened. He threatens to kill him. The stage directions explain that Sam should be “Abruptly sobered, his voice low” as he asks her what is wrong. During this exchange, the jovial accompaniment quickly changes. The moments of silence between brother and sister are filled with forte-volume sextuplets, starting in measure 19. The tempo marking of *Più mosso* indicates momentum. The characters’ lines have less time between them, which builds the tension and urgency.

While Susannah tells Sam of the turmoil he missed, the theme from his first act aria returns at rehearsal 95. The tune is similar, but the tempo is quicker and the rhythmic values are shortened by means of diminution. (Example 4.5) The *Andante ed agitato* (walking and agitated) marking urges the tempo forward and aids in building tension. Sam’s theme could be used to

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show the cruel irony of Sam’s words. Susannah seems angry and indignant. She knew something terrible would happen, but Sam left her anyway. Sam fiercely asks, “What did he do?...Did he lay a hand on y’?”57 A strong rhythmic motive is played each time he speaks, delivering his lines with more passion and strength. His anger is surpassing Susannah’s. The symbolic foreshadowing of a gunshot could be considered as Sam’s anger rising. In measure 34, he shakes Susannah and shouts, “…Why did you let him do it?”58 The same rhythmic feature underscores his line.

Ex. 4.5: Floyd, Susannah, Act II, Scene 5, mm. 24-28.

57 Floyd, Susannah, 114-115.
58 Floyd, Susannah, 115.
While Susannah takes her anger out on Sam, he is directing his anger toward Blitch, calling him names and accusing him of hypocrisy. “The bastard…The sneakin’ hypocrite,” he says, as he turns away and Susannah returns to the door. Sam’s last line is no longer accompanied by melodic figures, but now distinct percussive sixteenth-note patterns at rehearsal 96. He threatens to kill the Reverend for what he has done. His emotional climax occurs with the last two words he sings: “Day’s through.” in measure 42. Fermatas and high notes for the tenor emphasize both words. The performance indication is “wildly,” which indicate Sam has reached an angry state that goes beyond reason.

Susannah does not take his threats seriously. She responds sarcastically, “That’d do a lot o’ good.” She enters the house while Sam remains on the porch, fuming. Sam suddenly grabs the shotgun and runs off stage. He is on a mission to kill Blitch. The fatal gunshot in measure 89 is heard off stage while Susannah screams and cries.

Sam’s character has a wide emotional contrast. Little Bat’s first fearful line of the opera indicates the possibility of Sam’s nature. His actions, however, show the contrary. Sam treats Susannah well. He consoles her, cares for her, and loves her. His anger is in response to the preacher’s disturbing behavior. When Susannah was first tormented by the townspeople, Sam’s first reaction was to drink. When drinking did not solve the problem, he retaliated against the preacher by taking his life. His aria is interpreted as insight into Carlisle Floyd’s opinions. It seems that Sam is the only character in the opera that can see the truth with objectivity. Sam is Susannah’s only caretaker and true friend. He takes his responsibilities to care for her seriously, so when Susannah is violated, he can no longer think or behave objectively.

59 Floyd, Susannah, 116.
60 Floyd, Susannah, 116.
61 Floyd, Susannah, 116.
62 Floyd, Susannah, 117.
While all the characters are affected by fear, Sam is affected and *reactive* to fear. Each character’s reaction and turmoil plays differently in the opera. Sam takes responsibility for Susannah, so his negative reaction seems to have the most immediate consequences. He does not live in fear the same way the townspeople do, but instead hides from it—and shelters Susannah from it. His failure to protect her from the perils of the world triggers his response of hate and anger. Each character of this opera is a victim and a product of the environment. Olin Blitch may be the “bad guy,” but Sam Polk is the murderer. Evil deeds can be committed by anyone if the conditions are right. Sam’s character exploits this angle of social interaction.
CHAPTER 5
REVEREND OLIN BLITCH

The Reverend Olin Blitch is a complex character. He can be perceived as a villain or a victim of circumstance. As mentioned in the biographical information, Carlisle Floyd attended revivals in his youth, so he was familiar with many kinds of evangelical ministers and preachers. Drawing from his past, he created a believable character who falls from grace and loses his righteous indignation because of lies and misjudgments. It is important to note that Floyd’s experiences helped shape all characters in the drama, but none like the shaping of Olin Blitch. Blitch’s drive, mistakes, pride, and overwhelming guilt create a multi-faceted humanistic character. His motivation to save souls is sincere, and his downfall is authentic. He believes what he preaches, so when his sins bring about pain and misery, he is truly repentant and fearful as any of his followers.

To first understand Blitch’s character and his affect on other characters, a contextual view of 1950s Southern religious climate must be explored. While many denominations were prevalent in the South in the 1950s, Southern Baptist and Methodist churches were considered most affluent. Floyd was raised Methodist, but attended Evangelical tent revivals with his family. He had years of anecdotal experience with which to conjure his religious characters.

Carlisle Floyd insists that he did not model Blitch’s character after his own Methodist-minister father.¹ Floyd did admit that he used personal aspects of several other preachers he met throughout his life. He described his creation of Blitch, thusly:

Ultimately he is my own creation but he is a composite of several ministers, especially one very Messianic-type minister. He was a friend of my father’s—one of my father’s classmates, I think. He was, as I look back on it, enormously serious, austere, and severe. And I got the line that Blitch uses in the first scene that he never ate before he preached—he always fasted, because this preacher didn’t. When my mother asked if she could get him something to eat; instead of saying ‘no thank you’ or ‘that is very nice of you’ he said, “I always fast before I preach.” In retrospect, there was always an air of self-importance about him. I think Blitch is a lot more collegial than that because you know that’s part of his trappings—being engaging and being the personality of the particular occasion. So that’s why I think he is difficult to play—in blending in the used car salesman aspects, which are simply accoutrements of the trade, with the real earnestness of the man.2

In the 1950s, a theologian named Friedrich Heiler wrote that prayer is “the central phenomenon of religion, the hearthstone of all piety.”3 For ministers, preachers, and Christians, prayer can be considered the cornerstone of faith. Prayer meetings in the 1950s were common, usually taking place in a church, home, or at a picnic. A 1957 Tennessee Methodist journal called prayer meetings “the practice of pious persons, who are striving to be conformed to the divine image.”4 Those following any Southern Christian religion in the 1950s were quite serious about their faith and salvation. The minister was considered responsible for guiding the lost souls to salvation with sermons and prayer. Even a saved soul might need “refreshment” or a “revival” of spirit. John Broadus, a nineteenth-century Baptist minister from Virginia wrote that the minister who leads in prayer “takes on a very heavy responsibility.”5 The expectation of Blitch’s arrival to New Hope Valley is an essential reflection of his character. The townspeople of New Hope are anticipating a man so strong in his convictions that he can make all sinners repent during the revival and prayer meetings.

Floyd describes Blitch as a “powerfully built man” wearing a plaid shirt and ten-gallon hat in the stage directions. Blitch’s first entrance occurs in the opening square dance scene of the opera at Rehearsal Number 8. His introductory aria is stylistically haughty and powerful. The lyrics show assurance. He explains that he will, “bring sinners to repentance” in measure 86. The syncopated melodic line contains large intervallic leaps that place accents on weak beats. For example, Blitch’s melody in measures 83 through 85 displays this powerful, yet receiving demeanor. (Example 5.1)

Ex. 5.1: Floyd, Susannah, Act I, Scene 1, mm. 83-85

The Elders introduce themselves and pray for Blitch’s visit to bless them. In measure 96 an altered version of Blitch’s aria underscores their welcome, harkening back to the jovial mood of the square dance fiddle tune. Blitch finishes their prayer by adding, “And I’m proud to be in your midst…let’s pray that the lost shall be found.” The chorus enters at rehearsal 10 with a hymn-like version of the aria, while Blitch repeats his original text. The tempo marking indicates Energico e marcato (energy and accented)—slightly more march-like than his original verse. Blitch is already assuming his leadership position in the town, bringing them together in song. At rehearsal 11, the stage directions explain that Blitch assumes his role as the moral mediator of the church. He tells the dancers to resume their step, but warns them to stay chaste, because the Lord can see all.

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The dance resumes and Susannah becomes the center of attention. Blitch notices her and asks the Elders about her. The Elders explain that the Polk’s are poor and orphaned. Sam is described as a drunk. When told about the Susannah and her brother, he concludes that they should pray for their souls. Mrs. McLean cuts into the conversation to “counteract any sympathy” by saying, “Susannah an’ Sam is evil, I say…. She’ll come to no good, mark my words.” Once again, Blitch offers to pray for her. Blitch makes his way to the dance floor and eventually makes his way to Susannah. At this point, his interest in her is portrayed as curiosity and possibly lust. The audience must make judgments of Blitch’s motivations, whether pious or lascivious.

Blitch’s next scene takes place at the revival, after Susannah has been shunned from the church. The chorus is singing an original hymn composed by Carlisle Floyd. The boisterous atmosphere is created by the Allegro deciso (brisk determined) tempo marking and forte dynamic. The hymns are further explored in the chapter devoted to Mrs. McLean and the Chorus.

Blitch is shouting over top the congregation, asking for an offering for the Lord. He informs the congregation that he “don’t want to hear no sound of pocket change in them dishpans…Remember the widder’s mite, brethren. She gave all she had…The Lord knows what you made on last year’s cotton crops. So don’t try to short change the Lord.” The evangelist knows what scripture to quote to elicit a favorable response—for his payment is in this offering.

Floyd was familiar with the pacing and dramatic nature of southern revivals. He was exposed to them as a child and adolescent. His experiences color the revival scene in Susannah with vivid realism. In an interview Floyd explained:

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7 Floyd, Susannah, 18.
8 Floyd, Susannah, 75-76.
9 Miller, 40.
First of all they’re (revivals) frightening—especially for children, but even for grown ups who buy into the violent mysterious life-and-death proposition. It’s mass coercion to conform, whether people are really convinced of the doctrine or not. You simply bend the knee without question, which is the basis for any totalitarian society.10

Each portion of the revival is carefully planned. The emotional peaks and valleys are used to manipulate the crowd in a moving performance. After the hymn is finished Blitch prays over the offering. The Elders bring the dishpans to the altar as the choir resumes humming the same hymn tune. Blitch’s counter-melody is imposed over the hymn, a reminiscent theme from his opening aria. The leaping interval is likened to his introductive melody from Act One, scene one. (Example 5.2)

Ex. 5.2: Floyd, Susannah, Act II, Scene 2, mm. 26-27.

![Ex. 5.2](image)

After the “Amen” the choir becomes silent, ready for Blitch’s final, and assuming powerful sermon. Blitch’s voice is low and ominous as he states that he will preach without text, for this sermon comes directly from the Lord. Blitch explains:

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The lord spoke to me this afternoon, an’ He said: “Blitch, there’s gonna be lost souls at that meetin’ tonight. Don’t take no text: I’ll put the words in yer mouth. This week’s drawin’ to a close, an’ there’s still some to be brought to salvation. So close yer Bible an’ speak through me.”

An octave pedal tone with tritone alternation accompanies his words. This motive is re-used from earlier in Act One when Blitch spoke about “lost souls.”\textsuperscript{12} (Example 5.3) The tempo marking of \textit{Ancora meno mosso, quasi largo} (still less moved, somewhat slow) at rehearsal 63 aids in creating a somber atmosphere, less jovial than the one created by the hymn. Blitch has saved the most emotional and terrifying sermon for his last revival night in hopes to save the most stubborn souls.\textsuperscript{13}

\begin{center}
Ex. 5.3: Floyd, \textit{Susannah}, Act II, Scene 2, mm. 46-47.
\end{center}

Fear is elicited through his sermon both textually and musically. Blitch tells a personal story about a man who had riches and youth, but gave no thought about his own soul or salvation. The man, frightened and alone, called Blitch to his deathbed. Though he had not lived an indecent life, he was afraid of dying. The rich man died, unsaved and terrified. Blitch explains that his soul went to the depths of Hell. He poses a question to the congregation, “Where would your soul be tonight if you was suddenly took away? Where will you spend eternity?”\textsuperscript{14} His

\begin{footnotes}
\item[12] Miller, 41.
\item[13] Miller, 41.
\end{footnotes}
A horrifying description of Hell is colored with images of screaming, wailing, and gnashing of teeth. The emotional climax of his sermon reaches its height as he screams, “Is that where y’d be?”\(^{15}\) The lyrics incite fear and dread among the listeners. The congregation would hopefully be moved to beg the Lord for forgiveness so that they might be spared an eternity spent in Hell. Floyd demonstrates that fear is used as motivation for repentance in revival tradition.

The music gains momentum as Blitch tells his story. Musical devices such as dynamics, high tessitura, and dense accompaniment build excitement and fear to a climactic finish of the sermon. Blitch begins the sermon “half spoken, half sung, gradually using more vibrato, working into full singing voice,”\(^{16}\) as directed in the score. The tempo at rehearsal 64 is marked *Moderato, molto deciso e con anima* (moderate, very determined and with animation) directing that the tempo remain steady, but with animation. The passionate story guides the tempo as Blitch’s emotions rise. Specific words are accented, for example, in measure 57 the word “soul” is emphasized with a leap in the vocal line and a fermata placed above it. In measure 76, the lyrics “soul went to eternal fire” are accentuated by high tessitura and a triplet figure. The word “fire” occurs on a lower pitch approached by a large leap down as if to portray the depths of Hell. As Blitch tells the story, the accompaniment become dense accompanimental patterns, like in measure 68 through 70 as Blitch explains, “I ain’t lived sich a bad life. I ain’t drank, nor smoked, nor swore, but I’m all a-feared o’ dyin’. I’m sure they’s somethin’ more.”\(^{17}\)

\(^{15}\) Floyd, *Susannah*, 81-83.
\(^{16}\) Floyd, *Susannah*, 80.
\(^{17}\) Floyd, *Susannah*, 81.
Ex. 5.4: Floyd, *Susannah*, Act II, Scene 2, mm. 76.

After his story, Blitch’s attention is immediately turned to the congregation as he speaks to their souls and fears. A tempo marking of *L’istesso tempo* (same tempo) and key change to G-flat minor elicits a different mood. Provocative Biblical references and text painting in measures 83 and 84 conjure the images of Hell when Blitch refers to the screams and “…wailin’ an’ gnashin’ of teeth.”\(^{18}\) Descending-note patterns are coupled with dissonance as Blitch invokes images of Hell. The word “gnashin’” is emphasized for dramatic effect. Blitch is, in a sense, putting on a show for the congregation. He is a vivid storyteller with lofty goals of bringing people to salvation. Sixteenth-note triplets on accented beats in measure 77 build the intensity to an eventual climax in measure 88 when Blitch screams, “Is that where y’d be?”\(^{19}\)

Blitch’s excitement wanes, but his intensity remains as he sings in a lower vocal register. His menacing tone is more personal as he drives his point with the text, “They ain’t a one of us what couldn’t be took at any time. Not one of us includin’ myself…Tomorrow might be too late.”\(^{20}\) Adding his own salvation in the statement adds a personal and fearful truth: no one is above reproach. Blitch’s earnestness can be seen in that harsh truth—he himself buys into the fear and warning. The repeated words “Tomorrow might be too late” in measures 100 and 101

\(^{18}\) Floyd, *Susannah*, 83.
\(^{19}\) Ibid.
\(^{20}\) Floyd, *Susannah*, 84.
are pitched low, giving them a seriousness that warns the congregation that salvation is imperative. Blitch reveals himself as a seasoned preacher who might have told the same story a hundred times.\textsuperscript{21} The highs lows of the sermon are planned, each terror-inducing question strategically placed.

As Blitch “calls” the congregation forward to the altar to be saved, the chorus sings the invitational hymn again. He speaks over the chorus, begging the congregation to leave their sinful ways and meet God at the altar. He continues to beckon them, raising his voice and warning once again that “tomorrow might be too late!”\textsuperscript{22}

Blitch turns his attention to Susannah, holding his hand up to stop the choir. He singles out Susannah, informing the congregation that he has fought for her salvation; but still she does not heed his warning. “It is the public humiliation and emotional manipulation that Floyd finds so offensive, and his portrayal of this scene artfully captures the essence of what these service typically are like.”\textsuperscript{23} Blitch requests that Susannah publicly confess her sins and ask for forgiveness. As he asks this of Susannah in measure 160, the octave pedal tone from measure 103 returns in a different key and register, underscoring the tense and frightening atmosphere. (Example 5.5)

Ex. 5.5: Floyd, \textit{Susannah}, Act II, Scene 2, mm. 160.

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\begin{footnotes}
\textsuperscript{21} Miller, 42.
\textsuperscript{22} Floyd, \textit{Susannah}, 88.
\textsuperscript{23} Miller, 44.
\end{footnotes}
At rehearsal 73, the choir begins singing another original hymn by Floyd, “Come Sinner,” while Blitch sings a countermelody. He alters the text and directs it to Susannah:

Come, dear sister, it’s a short piece to walk to find rest for yer weary soul. The Lord will receive you with open arms an’ hold y’ fast, fast in His grace...Come, dear sister, an’ jes’ let go. Meet God and I right here.\(^\text{24}\)

His cajoling tone is depicted musically in moments like measure 176, where a glissando connects an octave leap down on the words “Come, dear.” Susannah, bewitched in a trance-like state, moves forward to the altar. Blitch’s triumphant smile breaks the spell. She suddenly realizes that she is caught in the drama of the moment, and sings, “No! No!” Susannah looks around the church terrified and flees the revival. Her fearful escape shocks Blitch for only a moment. He cries a benediction after her.

Blitch follows Susannah home after the revival. He listens to her sing “The Trees On the Mountain” and comments on the sadness of the song. Susannah quickly turns to anger as she asks why he is at her home. Neither of them is willing to admit defeat as they argue over her “sinful” behavior. When Blitch realizes that she will not repent, his lustful feelings for her take over. Susannah has fallen to the ground, exhausted from the final fight for her innocence. In a slow, plodding interlude that is an elongation of the eerie tritone motive from the revival and square dance scene, it is evident that Blitch is struggling within himself what to do next.\(^\text{25}\) The combination of both motives represents the battle between Blitch’s opposing desires. He eventually gives in to the less noble desire—sexual desire. Measures 131 through 136 serve as Blitch’s conscious struggle and short aria introduction to “I’m a lonely man, Susannah.” (Example 5.6)

\(^{24}\) Floyd, Susannah, 91.
\(^{25}\) Miller, 45.

The aria Blitch sings to Susannah reveals his humanistic side. He freely admits his shortcomings and weaknesses. The triumphant and charismatic qualities that Blitch possesses are now replaced with hunger and longing. This disheartening aria offers a stark contrast to the boisterous and engaging sermon from the previous scene. At this moment, Blitch’s human frailty is revealed. Believing the rumors, Blitch gives up his battle for Susannah’s soul because to him she is a “fallen woman.” He no longer feels it necessary to remain composed. Floyd explains Blitch’s sudden dynamic character change by saying:

> When we did the recording somebody asked me if I thought that Blitch did this routinely. It is a good question and I think I finally put it to bed for myself. I said, “Yes, I think he does it from time to time, but not routinely.” Nor does he do it in every town. But the important thing is that the woman is already a fallen woman.²⁶

The lyrics of the aria are plaintive, and elicit pity for his lonesome state of being. He gives in to temptation, using his gifts of manipulation to goad Susannah into feeling sorry for him. Both characters are lonely as they search for a human connection—solace away from internal struggles. Blitch admits his weakness as a man and uses it as a tool for seduction. The lyrics suggest that Blitch has fought this battle before: “…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

²⁶ Floyd, 17 June 200 interview with Todd R. Miller.
a woman so." It appears that Blitch does not want to give into temptation, but is powerless to stop his body’s urges.

“I’m a lonely man, Susannah” maintains the same tempo, Lento mesto (slowly sad) from beginning to end. The through-composed aria does not conform to any typical aria form. The opening line, “I’m a lonely man, Susannah” returns once, as he restates his case. The last time he sings the line in measure 146 the rhythm is diminuted and stated with less conviction. The aria is only 14 measures long. Little dynamic contrast occurs, providing a solemn atmosphere. Blitch is not faking his sadness, but instead giving into it. The music depicts this genuine unhappiness. A sighing motive, as in measure 142, is repeated throughout the aria: a downward interval plodding somberly until the end of the scene. These descending thirds evoke feelings of sorrow and defeat. (Example 5.7)

Ex. 5.7: Floyd, Susannah, Act II, Scene 3, mm. 142.

As stated in the introduction of the chapter, Blitch is not the villain of the drama. His poor choices and manipulations are indeed woven into the fabric of his character, but he falls prey to the accusations and rumors. He truly believes his own religious propaganda and truly fears God. Balancing faith and human faults is what makes Blitch’s role challenging and three-dimensional. In an interview with Todd R. Miller, Floyd went as far to say, “Over the years there

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27 Floyd, Susannah, 103.
have been people who have insisted that Blitch came to the seduction scene with the purpose of getting Susannah to bed. It is a total misunderstanding of the role.”

Act Two, scene four opens in the New Hope church. Olin Blitch is on his knees praying with a “terrible earnestness and anguish in the sound of his voice as well as an element of fear.” In this moment, Blitch’s character is again revealed—he is not a monster or a representation of evil, but rather an authentic human. He is terrified of his own perception of God. He sings a prayer at the end of the aria that is reminiscent of Psalm 51, the psalm King David is said to have written after committing adultery with Bathsheba.

The confession aria “Hear Me, O Lord” is zealous, impassioned by Blitch’s desperation to be forgiven. After sleeping with Susannah, he knows that she was a virgin. He feels guilt for taking advantage of a young girl and for falling prey to gossip. In an interview, Floyd explained Blitch’s complexity:

Otherwise he would be a pasteboard character that isn’t very interesting. I see him as multi-dimensional, and he has a very severe ethic of his own that he ultimately can’t live up to. And also his image of God is a very frightening God.

The musical aspects of the aria help express the raw emotion of the text. Floyd uses a through-composed form that is driven by text and emotion. The melody follows the contour of his speech, rising and falling in moments of excitement and despair. Dynamics generally range between \textit{mf} and \textit{ff}, powerfully charged by strength in volume. The tempo of the aria is marked \textit{Moderato con moto} (moderate with motion) with performance indications of \textit{pesante e ben ritmico} (heavy and strict rhythm) and \textit{sempre con angore e poco forte} (always with anger and a little loud). The heavy rhythms of the aria evoke torture and supplication.

\begin{footnotes}
\item[28] Floyd, \textit{Susannah}, 103.
\item[29] Floyd, \textit{Susannah}, 105.
\item[31] Floyd, 17 June 2000 interview with Todd R. Miller.
\end{footnotes}
After he finishes his aria, Susannah, the Elders and their wives enter the church. Susannah sits in the back, unnoticed by the group. At rehearsal 89, the same motive from the revival scene returns. (Example 5.8) This motive returns to perhaps acknowledge that it is now Blitch who must convince the church of Susannah’s innocence. He is now on the other side of the fence. Another interpretation of this returning motive is that Blitch feels he is now ostracized from God, the congregation, and Susannah. It is at this moment, shortly before his untimely death, that he is totally alone in the world.\(^{32}\)

Ex. 5.8: Floyd, *Susannah*, Act II, Scene 4, mm. 55-59.

Blitch has asked them all to the church to convince them of Susannah’s innocence and beseech them to forgive her. Elder McLean asks him how he knows of her innocence. Without hesitation, Blitch lies and says, “The Lord spoke to me in the night while I was a prayin’ fer her soul.”\(^{33}\) The group does not believe him. They shake their heads in pity as they exit the church. Mrs. McLean sings, “The devil works in queer ways.”\(^{34}\) It seems that the Elders and their wives believe Susannah has turned him as well. Blitch is left bewildered and unable to understand why he could not convince them. He begs Susannah for forgiveness and promises to make it up to her. She denies him the forgiveness he so desperately desires. Blitch watches as she leaves the church. He falls to his knees crying. His last line quotes Jesus’ prayer to God the night before his

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\(^{32}\) Miller, 50.


\(^{34}\) Floyd, *Susannah*, 109.
crucifixion, “O Lord, if it be Thy will, let this cup pass from me.” This moment is the last time the audience sees Blitch in the drama, for he is murdered in the next scene. The line foreshadows Blitch’s imminent death. Little did he know his own blood would soon be shed in the water used to cleanse sinners.

Blitch’s devastation and remorse is relayed to Susannah immediately after his death. Little Bat runs to tell Susannah that her brother Sam shot Blitch in the baptismal creek. Blitch’s last words were a prayer for himself and Susannah. Even in his last moment, Blitch clung to the belief and fear of the Lord.

Like the title character of Susannah, Olin Blitch undergoes drastic transformation. His character is introduced as strong, engaging, and pious. His weakness lies in his inability to ignore gossip and accusations, and loneliness. He mistakes Susannah for a fallen woman, believing all he is told by the congregation. His entertaining qualities soon disappear after the revival scene. Once the dramatic and impassioned fervor of his convictions are stripped away, a lonely desperate man is revealed.

The audience cannot know what could have happened if Blitch would have explained the whole truth about Susannah’s innocence. Would admitting fornication have made any difference, or worsened the situation? These questions are left to the observer to contemplate.

Olin Blitch is driven by fear—it is a motivation for not only his own salvation, but also everyone he meets. His fear holds fast throughout the drama. His dying words are fearful prayers for his and Susannah’s salvation. The stage directions, text, and music combine to create a realistic human being. Floyd creates a powerful, flawed, sinning, well-meaning character—an embodiment of authentic human behavior. Blitch is confronted with fear, ostracism, and

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35 Floyd, *Susannah*, 111.
36 Miller, 50.
loneliness. It is no doubt he seeks solace from Susannah, likely sensing her similar emotions.

Intolerance, rumors, accusations, and fear destroy three characters in this drama. Blitch is as much a victim as an antagonist in *Susannah*.
The character of Mrs. McLean leads the crusade against Susannah. Even though there are other minor characters in this opera, she demands attention because of her leadership position in the community. The elders and their wives each play a role in the town, but Mrs. McLean’s opinions and hatred toward Susannah help shape their views in several instances, because she does not approve of Susannah, no one else can—for fear of their own social ostracism.

Matriarchal positions in the South hold much social power over the community. Many believe the South is a matriarchal society due to the persuasive nature of women. While men hold positions of authority, it is women who form a pack and pull the strings quietly and effectively.¹ In the context of the opera, women decide Susannah’s punishment for being wicked. Men are the tools and impetus, but the leader behind Susannah’s ruination is Mrs. McLean—a true villain. Carlisle Floyd views Mrs. McLean as someone to fear. In an interview with the author, he stated, “We should all be afraid of her (Mrs. McLean)…She is someone to fear. All her decisions and actions are based on emotion…she is to be played stone-cold, serious, unmoving.”²

Floyd was raised in an atmosphere similar to the church portrayed in this opera. He would have been observing the congregation’s behavior. His musical and textual vessel for the close-minded, religious zealotry of southern culture is elicited through Mrs. McLean’s character. Though the plot of “Susannah” is inspired by the story from the Book of Daniel, there are many

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² Floyd, 3 June 2013 interview with author.
differences. Floyd’s version of the story, though full of American folk elements and the flavor of his own religious upbringing, retains the same theme of hypocrisy demonstrated by the pious elders of the original story—particularly where issues of sexual or even sensual behavior are concerned.³

The opera opens with a square dance scene. The four elders’ wives are observing the festivities and commenting on the evening. Each wife makes a statement and the other three comment. Mrs. Gleaton comments first—“It’s a hot night for dancin’, ain’t no breeze a-stirrin’. Them trees ain’t moved all day.”⁴ The other elders’ wives agree in three-part harmony, “It shore be still.”⁵ Small talk and comments about the night set up the scene and tone for the Southern social gathering.

The first indication of religious snobbery occurs almost immediately. At Rehearsal number 2, Mrs. Ott mentions that the weather is hot and dry, and Mrs. Hayes finishes the thought: “Seems like it’s always this way at meetin’ time.”⁶ Mrs. McLean is the first to make a judgmental comment: “Seems like the Lord is bendin’ sinners to His will, like smokin’ a fox out-n his hole.”⁷ She implies that God sends rain on everyone; the just and unjust. The other ladies finish her thought in harmony, “and us as is saved has got to suffer.”⁸

Religion, nature, social circles, music, and conversation are intertwined in this scene and other scenes. Since the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, evangelical Protestant religion has permeated southern politics, education, society, and culture.⁹ Floyd conveys the

⁵ Floyd, Susannah, 5.
⁶ Floyd, Susannah, 6.
⁷ Floyd, Susannah, 6-7.
⁸ Floyd, Susannah, 7.
Southern culture he knew using only a few sentences. The close-minded tradition of an isolated community is instantly brought forth through the town matriarchs. Mrs. McLean soon comes forward as the leader of the group when she continues to sing about the visiting preacher. The square dance fiddle tune accompanies throughout their conversation. The light and pleasant mood is still underscoring the banter.

While Mrs. McLean sings about the preacher, a countermelody foreshadows Olin Blitch’s entrance music. (Example 6.1) As the topic of conversation changes to the new preacher, the tempo and melody also change. This new section of recitative is marked *Meno mosso* (less rapid) and becomes more serious. She is now talking about the business of saving souls. Where she has heard about his reputation is never explained, but the other wives believe her and agree as they say, “They say he shore hates sin.”\(^{10}\) The trio of wives sings in three-part harmony while Blitch’s tune counters.


\[\text{\includegraphics[width=0.5\textwidth]{ex6.1.png}}\]

A sudden tempo change at Rehearsal number 4 signals Mrs. McLean’s next thought. She mentions the many lost souls that need to be saved. She makes her intention to help Blitch “smoke ‘em out,”\(^{11}\) recalling her earlier foxhole simile. A new theme is introduced while she sings this line. Each time a group of townspeople seeks retribution for ungodly behavior, a dark

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\(^{10}\) Floyd, *Susannah*, 8.  
\(^{11}\) Floyd, *Susannah*, 8.
and angry theme presents itself. (Example 6.2) This short moment in Mrs. McLean’s conversation reveals the anger and fear that underscores the religious zealotry. The fear of God’s wrath keeps each church member in acquiescence. The conversion experience makes a person new and whole, which then leads to the spreading of the good news and the redemption of other lost souls, thus creating an unbroken circle of salvation.\textsuperscript{12} If a person strays from good, it is the duty of every church member to take charge of the situation. This theme portrays a sense of leadership and later possesses a mob-like characteristic.

Ex. 6.2: Floyd, \textit{Susannah}, Act I, Scene 1, mm. 45-47.

According to the stage directions, the elders each attempt to dance with Susannah, but are unsuccessful. Mrs. McLean’s husband, Bat, stops resisting the urge to try and announces that he will dance. Mrs. McLean looks up sharply and says, “‘Y’got a puny heart, Bat.”\textsuperscript{13} Mrs. McLean is irritated by her husband’s behavior. Mrs. Hayes comments on Susannah’s beauty and laments her mother’s inability to see it. The tempo is abruptly altered after Mrs. McLean’s powerful and unaccompanied line: “It’s a blessin’, you mean”\textsuperscript{14} The line is pitched at an octave from D2 to D1. This rapid shift in vocal range is highlighted by a measure of sudden unaccompanied singing. In Measures 61-70, her recitative is agitated and full of emotion. Large leaps in the

\textsuperscript{12} Westmoreland, 14.
\textsuperscript{13} Floyd, \textit{Susannah}, 9.
\textsuperscript{14} Floyd, \textit{Susannah}, 10.
melody and dissonances in the accompaniment elicit a sinister and angry emotion. Mrs. McLean’s disdainful commentary about Susannah is shocking, even to the other characters (as indicated in the stage directions).

In Mrs. McLean’s emotional outburst, she states that Susannah is evil and shameless. By the end of her jealousy-fueled diatribe, the other ladies are nodding in agreement, as indicated in the stage directions. The text and the music create a dramatic shift in the atmosphere immediately. Her tirade in full attacks Susannah’s character, upbringing, and innocence:

She’s a shameless girl, she is. Showin’ herself to all the men. “Look at her throwin’ her head back and look at the cut of her dress, but what could you expect but a wench of a girl who was raised by a drunken brother? That pretty a face must hide some evil. They’s evil in that one you’ll see. She’s a shameless wench, Susannah, And it’s a blessin’ her ma cain’t see her.”15

Fear is instilled in the town elders with only a short, but commanding statement from Mrs. McLean. In southern culture, it is common for the town matriarchs to govern what is accepted socially. Suddenly, the ladies sitting near Mrs. McLean view Susannah as a threat. With no proof nor investigation, Susannah is slowly ostracized.

Mrs. McLean’s statements about Susannah must be sung with contempt to counteract any sympathy from the other wives. She seems to show no pity for Susannah’s life, but rather anger and hostility. The tempo livens with a marking of *Meno mosso* in measures 161-163 as Mrs. McLean states that the Polks are evil and “…they’s bad blood in that family. It’s too pretty a face an’ wicked them eyes, she’ll come to no good mark my words.”16 She is implying that attractiveness is linked to evil.

A poem by Peter Porter entitled “Susannah and the Elders,” compares a modern-day peeping tom to the elders who spied on an unsuspecting woman bathing in the original tale. One

line in this poem states that, “attractive creatures are their own dilemma.”17 This line is just one way to understand how the “physical” and the “sexual” are demonized in the story. Susannah was pretty—and unaware of her own power. Her sexuality and fun-loving personality posed a threat to the community. In a Puritanical culture such as the one portrayed in Susannah, anything contradicting the social norm would be deemed “evil”. In a non-questioning society where piety reigns, Susannah’s lack of self-control and modesty would not have been tolerated. Mrs. McLean represents the voice of intolerance.

She mentions Sam’s lack of parenting skills to the elder’s wives earlier in the scene, but with no proof. The audience and other characters do not know where she has obtained her information, but the other characters instantly believe her. Mrs. McLean’s authority in the church and town must be established through her voice and behavior. Other characters in the opera follow her blindly, paying no mind to her opinionated observations.

Later in the evening, the Reverend Olin Blitch asks the elders about Susannah. He had noticed the boys dancing with pretty Susannah. Mr. McLean reveals more detail about Sam, Susannah’s brother:

Susannah Polk, who was raised by her brother what don’t draw a sober breath. He’s a triflin’ one, that Sam. (Sam Polk, that’s the name was give.) He just hunts an’ traps an’ fishes all day an’ is allers drunk at night.18

During the conversation with Blitch, the square dance music continues to play, keeping the conversation light and jovial. Like their wives, the elders seem to show compassion and worry about the Polks. Not until Mrs. McLean’s interjection does the mood return to tense anger.

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18 Floyd, *Susannah*, 16-17.
Mrs. McLean has been listening to the conversation between the elders and Blitch. She cannot let an opportunity go by without scandalizing and accusing the Polks of evil. After Gleaton’s display of sympathy, she continues to explain Susannah and Sam’s demonic ways.

Susannah an’ Sam is evil, I say. They’s bad blood in that fam’ly. It’s too pretty a face an’ wicked them eyes, she’ll come to no good, mark my words. She’ll come to no good, mark my words.\(^{19}\)

Mrs. McLean is the first to state that Susannah is “bad blood.” She sings a powerful and important line: “She'll come to no good, mark my words”.\(^{20}\) The concept of “bad blood” is damning for someone in the South.\(^{21}\) Her vocal line is musically portrayed in a harsh and angry manner each time she sings about Susannah. The text carries much weight, as in southern traditions; lineage could dictate a person’s fate. Other writers have used this idea of lineage and “bad blood” to denote negativity. The concept of “clan” versus “class forms” is a common theme in southern culture and literature. William Faulkner wrote several plays that exploited this culture. In his Master’s thesis, Neil T. Phillips concluded that Faulkner, like other southern authors, exploited a cultural phenomenon that could be hard to define. Phillips explains:

Faulkner places great weight on Southern precepts of lineage, and the perpetuation of wrongs passed down from generation to generation. Patterns of familial behavior and the effects forbears have on the present, and future, are extremely important in these novels, where each character seems to exist, or whose subconscious becomes fully elucidated, only within the framework of his family and the values in place therein. On a macro level, family values and individual actions act as a guide towards the overarching mores of the Old South.\(^{22}\)

Southern traditions, passed down through generations, have been used for literary, musical, and cinematic entertainment. Floyd’s assumption that the American audiences would understand

\(^{19}\) Floyd, Susannah, 18.

\(^{20}\) Floyd, Susannah, 18.


this phenomenon is deeply embedded within the lyrics. Even for audience members not raised in the south, the plot unfolds such that they could potentially learn about the southern culture in which Floyd himself was raised.

An abrupt change of tempo (Meno mosso) in measure 163 underscores Mrs. McLean’s condemning tone and text. The once upbeat square dance theme is completely gone as an accompaniment of cluster chords and dissonances accompanies her lines. Mrs. McLean’s vocal line is disjunct and non-melodic. Equating attractiveness with evil is not a new concept. Even in ancient Greek culture beauty was considered a paradox. Possession of beauty can symbolize a disturbing experience in some cultures. “Erotic desire induced by physical perfection embodied the bestial side of human nature.”

Mrs. McLean’s last outburst is countered by Blitch’s offer to pray for her soul. The music continues as Blitch joins the dancing. He makes his way to Susannah and eventually dances with her as the church members watch. The scene concludes with Mrs. McLean’s repetition of her previous line, “She’ll come to no good, mark my words.” The stage direction indicates that she sings this line “ruefully,” or with regret or thoughtfulness. At this point, she is no longer persuading anyone. This line is sung to herself. Mrs. McLean’s motivation and intent has been made clear already, but her true feelings about Susannah come through in this moment of realism. Once her anger is stripped away, and she need not convince anyone else of what she “sees,” the audience can see the sorrow and fear in her character. Like most of the characters in the opera, Mrs. McLean is also affected and motivated by fear.

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24 Floyd, Susannah, 20.
Once the seed of doubt is planted, the church is, perhaps, more likely to believe Mrs. McLean’s accusations. The church member’s next scene occurs after the elders witness Susannah bathing in the creek. The stage directions indicate that the scene is the same as the square dance. The church members are located in the same positions, but now it is the setting of a pitch-in dinner. In the directions, the scene is depicted as:

Several women are at the table languidly keeping the flies away with fans of paper-streamers tacked to broom handles. There are people in knots of twos and threes pantomiming intense gossiping at the curtain’s rise. The Elder’s wives are once more downstage right, the Elders standing at stage left. There is a frail attempt at conviviality on the part of the young people who are oppressed by the hushed atmosphere of the church ground.26

It is assumed that the church and town know about Susannah’s indecent display and are gossiping about it. The church ground is set up for a party, but it seems Susannah’s behavior has become a bigger issue than a pitch-in. Her conduct has suddenly become a scandalous epidemic that has spread fear, anger, and shock throughout the community. Because the chorus does not sing, as an entity is this scene, an analysis of it will be provided from the perspective of the audience and Mrs. McLean, based upon her leadership in the previous scene.

The social duality of the scene is portrayed not only by staging, but also by musical themes. Two separate musical ideas are presented in the scene’s introduction. A disconcerting and languid atmosphere is produced by the tempo, Largo con moto (slowly with motion). The performance indication of misterioso (mysterious) guides the bass instruments as they play a portion of the mob theme referenced earlier in Mrs. McLean’s diatribe. (Example 6.3) The low-pitched walking bass line occurs in the previous scene as the Elders turn back to tell the Valley what “shameful sight” they saw. The lower pitches create a foreboding and tense character.

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26 Floyd, Susannah, 44.
Another theme appears two measures after the first is stated. The performance marking of *cantabile* (sung) indicates the melodic and pleasant nature of the tune. Unlike the eerie and chromatic bass line, this tune is amiable and familiar. The melody is a slower version of the opening fiddle tune from the square dance. This second theme is pleasant when played alone, denoting a party-like ambiance, but when paired with the somber theme, it gives an unsettling impression—as if someone died.

Floyd uses different keys to further divorce the two themes. One theme is in b-flat minor, a dark key that is seldomly used. Some theorists and musicians believe this key too obscure and cold, leaving the listener feeling uneasy. Floyd used this key purposely. When asked about his choices for keys in the opera, he responded, “Yes. I absolutely did that purposely. I believe that to be the darkest key. Just as I used G-flat major in Susannah’s first aria because I think of it as the brightest key.”

The other theme is in the brighter key of G Major, like the original fiddle tune. The church members and Elders are, in a sense, committing a sin—gossip and slander. Without inquiry, they have tried and sentenced Susannah to a punishment. She must confess publicly, or she will be excused from the church and social functions, in other words, exile.

McCarthyism ideals can be understood as accusatory actions with no sign of proof. Some people will believe the accusations for fear of the unknown. A “What if they are right?” mentality is created from a deep-seated fear within each person. A powerful and well-established

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27 Floyd, 3 June 2013 interview with author.
leader can instill fear. In the case of this opera, Mrs. McLean planted a seed of fear, and the Elders cultivated and supported it. A shred of “proof” was all they needed to condemn Susannah.

Mrs. McLean opens the conversation with a “smug and gloating” manner when she says, “I ain’t surprised, I ain’t a bit surprised. It’s jest as I was sayin’ last night. ‘Cept she was caught afore I’d a-thought. It jes’ goes to prove I was right.” Her line brings about a different key change and tempo change (Più mosso). Bi-tonality still prevails, but now there is no hint left of the pleasantries the square dance theme provided.

Mrs. Hayes agrees with Mrs. McLean, adding that Susannah is a “threat to the valley.” Mrs. Ott now refuses to let Susannah tend to her children anymore. Lastly, Mrs. Gleaton shows a glimmer of sympathy and weakness as she states, “She always seemed such a sweet girl an’ pleasin’ to have around.” Her disbelief is met with a tensely and sharply stated reminder that Susannah’s pleasurable personality was “the cloak of the devil…that sweetness an’ pretty face. Don’t let that fool you, sistern’. It’s just the devil’s way.” Mrs. McLean takes another moment to solidify Susannah’s hidden perils. As the ladies sing, the tempo moves until a stringendo occurs for Mrs. McLean’s last line. Each line feeds another as the ladies are worked into a frenzy of fear and hatred toward her. To them, Susannah is no longer a person, but rather, the devil himself.

The scene changes to the men of the church and their conversation. Similar tense, thematic material persists throughout the men’s exchange. They have deemed Susannah as being a hazard for the young men. Her sexuality is a constant temptation that must be extinguished. One Elder mentions that the new preacher is wishing to save her soul through prayer. Mr.

28 Floyd, Susannah, 44.
29 Floyd, Susannah, 44.
30 Floyd, Susannah, 45.
31 Floyd, Susannah, 46.
Gleaton, like his wife, exhibits some pity for Susannah, mentioning that the preacher is home praying for her soul to be saved. He offers some optimism, still seeing her as a person.

Mr. McLean counters Gleaton’s line with, “She’s a pow’rful one, Susannah Polk, my son she’s lured away. From all the things that he’s been teached. For that she’s gonna have to pay.” Elder McLean has no interest in saving Susannah. He wasn’t to exact revenge. At this point, the audience is unaware of the severity of the situation. Up until now, Little Bat has been Susannah’s friend, but it is soon discovered that Little Bat has admitted to having sex with her.

Susannah enters with food she has prepared. She apologizes for being late and continues to talk nervously, not understanding the ominous mood. The music abruptly changes for Susannah’s entrance. A plaintive melody underlines her recitative. Finally, Elder McLean’s stern voice halts her actions and voice, as he tells her she not welcome. She is emotionally distraught and confused as she quickly excuses herself from the church. Even throughout Susannah’s recitative, the bi-tonality continues, creating an innocence underscored by a sinister bass line.

The melodic phrases that counter Susannah’s lines vaguely shadow the tune of the “Jaybird Song” she was humming while bathing in the creek. The innocence represented in this tune aids in the characterization of Susannah in this moment. She truly does not know what has caused the community’s odd behavior. After she exits, the music swells and becomes more dramatic—the church folk and Elders have finally relayed the message to Susannah. Once she is gone, the music dies down by use of a diminuendo and thinning of texture. Mrs. McLean’s clipped voice cuts the silence as she sings, “I wouldn’t tech them peas o’ her’n.” Mrs. McLean’s last line seals Susannah’s fate, with regards to being a social outcast. The power in her line cannot be overstated. While it is Elder McLean’s duty to boot Susannah out of the church, it

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32 Floyd, Susannah, 47-48.
33 Floyd, Susannah, 50.
was Mrs. McLean’s opinions and social ostracizing that started and eventually completed the task.

In Act Two, Reverend Blitch begs for the Elder’s and their wives to beseech Susannah’s forgiveness. They do not believe Blitch’s pleas. He attempts to explain that Susannah is innocent, but they do not listen. As they exit the church, Mrs. McLean says, “The devil works in queer ways.”  

Mrs. McLean’s last line explains what the group is thinking: Blitch is being taken over by Susannah’s charm.

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34 Floyd, _Susannah_, 109.
The chorus as an entity serves as a medium for Susannah’s judgment, as well as religious fervor and fear. Hymn tunes play a large role in the work, functioning as atmospheric, plot, and textual backdrop for the storyline. Floyd came by this modal, folkloristic, and hymn-like heritage honestly, aided by a fine ear for its subtleties as well as its essential characteristics. He was raised in the South, so his uses of these musical forms were natural.

Floyd was exposed to revivals and church meetings. Though he was raised a Methodist, revivals occurred in many different denominations in the South. The name “revival” conjures up the idea that anyone can be granted grace, but even the “saved” require a refreshing of faith. In the Baptist culture, once a person is saved, he will always be saved. One can never lose salvation. This rule is stated in the Baptist doctrine called *Eternal Security*. In contrast, Methodist theology dictates that a person can be saved again if he has sinned too much, so revivals would be necessary. Each summer, Floyd would attend revivals and church meetings.

In an interview with Todd R. Miller, Floyd stated:

Such meetings, I knew from my childhood, provided these rural, remote people their meager allotment of excitement for one week of each year, usually in the stifling-heat of midsummer. I think they are very theatrical. The whole order of the evening is preplanned, leading up to the sermon and the altar calls, which can ossify into ritual.

The cruelty and hypocrisy of the church members contain so much realism, it seems that Floyd used real experiences to color the characters. He stated in an interview from 1962, “In *Susannah* the chorus is the real antagonist in the piece, and in a true sense both Susannah and

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36 Miller, 28.

37 Floyd, 17 June 2000 interview with Todd R. Miller.
Blitch are destroyed by it.” Floyd was honest in his compositions, attempting to stay true to the real situations without dramatizing to the point of disbelief.

Hymn-like chorus parts are presented almost as soon as the opera begins. In the opening square-dance scene, the Reverend Blitch enters and introduces himself by way of a short aria. The chorus sings a four-part choral repetition of his melody in 6/8 meter (further explored in Olin Blitch’s Chapter), which is considered a typical cadence of the English language. The homophonic, diatonic part writing unifies the chorus and immediately sets the tone for the power that the church wields over its citizens. Together, the church members are a force that cannot be broken.

The chorus functions as an entity throughout the opera. A grand, march-like quality sets the tone for the opening of the Revival scene. Floyd refers to the revival scene as the “hinge scene.” His intention, it seems, is to create a precipice on which Susannah stands—she must decide to confess or turn her back on everything she knows. The church members are giving up an offering in the July heat. Even though the hymn is stylistically triumphant, an air of fear still remains. Floyd’s stage directions explain the events of the revival:

- The scene is in no way a parody but, instead, at all times should aim at projecting the tension, effrontery and, above all, the terror implicit in the revival meeting of this nature.

In the Act Two, scene two Revival, Blitch preaches while the chorus sings an original hymn tune composed by Carlisle Floyd. As Blitch starts speaking, a syncopated, driving rhythmic motive underscores the vocal parts. (Example 6.4) This juxtaposition of melodic hymn writing and eerie orchestration reveals the impure motives and isolating effect of the revival.

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39 Floyd, 17 June 200 interview with Todd R. Miller.
40 Floyd, Susannah, 74.
(Example 6.4) Floyd’s personal experiences and negative feelings about this type of religious ceremony bleed through the music in several ways. The text would be considered invitational, but contains elements of fear. “Get down upon your knees, accept the saving grace. Are you ready to meet your Savior face to face?” These lyrics are demanding and strong, but not full of graceful invitation.

Ex. 6.4: Floyd, *Susannah*, Act II, Scene 2, mm. 6-8.

Floyd’s writing elicits fear and persecution from the audience. His original hymns are reminiscent of traditional hymns heard in Southern Methodist and Baptists hymnals, but have some significant differences. The vocal ranges in Floyd’s hymn are wider. Also, the music composed for these original hymns is harmonically and rhythmically more challenging than a typical hymn.\(^{42}\)

\(^{41}\) Floyd, *Susannah*, 74-75.
\(^{42}\) Miller, 32.
In his dissertation about the religious elements of Floyd’s operas, Todd R. Miller likened the hymn-like tune “Are You Saved From Sin” to the actual hymn “Revive Us Again” from the *Cokesbury Hymnal*. Even though there are some similarities between the hymn tune and lyrics, the meters are different, and the rhyme schemes are not in the same patterns. (Example 6.5) The lyrics and messages of the two hymns are strikingly similar. It could be assumed that Floyd was adhering to the style and meaning of the revival hymns.

Ex. 6.5: “Revive Us Again,” *Cokesbury Worship Hymnal*, mm. 1-3.

The choir sings the first hymn “Are you Saved from Sin” *a capella* (without accompaniment). In a traditional revival or prayer meeting, hymns would have most likely been sung without accompaniment—especially if the service was help outdoors where no instruments could have been present. When the orchestration begins, it has little to do with the hymn melody, but rather, supplies harsh chordal bursts that occur in a syncopated fashion. The *marcato*

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43 Miller, 22.
(marked, with accent), rhythmic pulses in the accompaniment represent the anxiety generated by the revival. Phrases or words like, “Yes, Lord” and “Saints” are brought forth by way of a high tessitura. These words create the triumphant excitement of the hymn, but the text still warns the listener to be cautious.

Another important thematic feature of the scene is theme Todd R. Miller coined the *Fate/Tension* motive. Miller’s interpretation of the motive is accurate, but the use of “anxiety” or “fear” can also be associated with this motive. In some aspects, this motive could be understood as something characterized. In this opera, emotions seem to take on a character, creating a oppressive veil over the characters and the plot. This somber and foreboding motive could be referred to as a theme because of its significance. It seems to depict doubt, fear, worry, and even nervous terror. It occurs in the first and second hymn in the revival scene.

As the events of the meeting continue, the music is treated as a backdrop to Blitch’s preaching and praying. The chorus hums the hymn tune while Blitch prays over the offering. The moment of prayer is treated with reverent importance as the accompaniment rests. After the prayer, Blitch gives his sermon and invites the church members to come forward for the Altar Call. He nods to the choir to begin singing—it is clear that the order of events is planned; they seem to occur with an organic flow.

As the sermon concludes, Blitch’s showmanship fades into a plaintive stillness. As the choir starts singing the second hymn, young teens, that have appeared terrified during the sermon, come forward. He lays his hand on their heads and prays over the choir. It seems that his sermon accomplished what he intended: sinners are terrified of damnation and are now begging repentance. The term “altar call” refers to the practice of the minister asking persons to publicly

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44 Miller, 32.
come forward near the end of a worship service, either to pray, confess, or be “saved.” The courage and willingness to overtly admit guilt and publicly ask for forgiveness is a key element in gaining a saved soul. For a character like Susannah, it is a terrifying moment. She is not guilty of anything, so admitting fault and asking for forgiveness is a sin in itself—in Susannah’s mind, coming forward is lying.

The second hymn, “Come, Sinner” is in the parallel minor key to the first hymn. Just like the other hymn in the opera, this hymn has four-measure phrases. The text is much less forceful in this tune, but the crowd becomes more worked up within the Altar Call. To bring more intensity to the scene, the key changes from c-minor to e-flat minor. This key change creates a dramatic tone and a sense of urgency. Throughout the scene, the chorus writing becomes more fervent and powerful, until finally the chorus is singing the same tune an octave higher than before. The penultimate verse contains a countermelody for Blitch as he sings a similar melody, but with lyrics directed to Susannah, who has been cowering in the back throughout the service. Miller’s Fate/Tension motive also returns for the last verse of the hymn, adding one more layer of fear and anxiety.

Floyd’s second hymn has also been compared to a pre-existing Methodist hymn. In the 1905 *Methodist Hymnal*, the hymn “Come, Humble Sinner” can be found in the section entitled “The Gospel: Warnings and Invitations.” Miller explains in his findings that both hymns contain similar messages and intervalllic content. (Example 6.6) The invitation to come forth and resolve one’s own fears and oppression tends to be the theme in most invitation hymns.

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45 Miller, 28.
46 Miller, 35.
47 Miller, 34.
Musically, Floyd’s invitational hymn does not project a convivial atmosphere. A pedal tone supports the hymn at the start. As more people move to the altar, the pedal tone changes. The rhythmic values continue to get shorter as the music grows by means of a *sempre crescendo* (always growing). The homophonic chorus part continues in a similar fashion, but the accompaniment differs greatly, seemingly straying far from the original tune. The instrumental portion of the composition is communicating the underlying emotion. The anxiety church members and Susannah are feeling is represented by the dense and highly rhythmic accompaniment. Dramatic shifts in musicality and text bring the religious fervor to its complete climax as Blitch repeats the same phrase, “Tomorrow might be too late!” at rehearsal 71. At this point, Floyd imposes the *Fate/Tension* motive, or “Anxious Theme,” again.

The last scene of the opera, the chorus sings a homophonic version of the same theme that occurred in the Elder’s scene from Act One. Miller refers to this theme as an “angular motive” because of its descending and disjunct motion.\(^{48}\) While several components of a hymn tune emerge, nothing in the emotion or presentation of the chorus part is reverent. They are demanding that Susannah leave the valley. Each of the Elders makes a statement about the sins she has committed. They blame her for Blitch’s murder and threaten to hang her brother. To

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\(^{48}\) Miller, 38.
the church, her soul is beyond saving. After Susannah threatens the mob with a shotgun, McLean’s sings his last line: “You cain’t settle ev’rything with a gun, wench. There’s a higher court o’ justice!” 49 It has become clear that Susannah can do nothing—all hope is lost. The opera reaches its dramatic climax as the hatred of the chorus causes and witnesses Susannah’s complete destruction. Dense accompaniment, musical accents and sforzandos (sudden strong) help create the emotional distress of the scene.

The chorus in Susannah serves two purposes: antagonist and commentary. While they are the lynch mob come to exact justice, they are also the harbinger of a religious message. Many interpret the chorus as Floyd’s homage to the religious zealots from his youth. The church people from Floyd’s past would “talk as if God and the church were the most important thing in their lives, yet treat other people viciously at times, especially in beliefs or social status.” 50

Like several characters in the drama, the chorus can be considered villains and victims. The church people fall prey to idol gossip and false accusations. It seems each member fears ostracism and damnation. The McCarthyism-like fear of unknown threats is displayed through the chorus’ staging, music, and text. The sociological phenomenon of following a strong leader is a common theme in literature and music composed in the 1950s. Carlisle Floyd was certainly influenced by these phenomena, so this theme of accusation and social ostracism occurs naturally in the drama. Assumptions and anger fuel the chorus’ actions, and then light a fire of hatred toward their perceived villain—Susannah.

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49 Floyd, Susannah, 128.
50 Miller, 39.
CHAPTER 7
CONCLUSIONS

The characters in Carlisle Floyd’s musical drama *Susannah* are affected by many social and musical themes. This dissertation examines the drama’s characters and relationships from a musical and historical perspective. Each character analysis reveals a dramatic and musical manifestation of Floyd’s experiences regarding to southern traditions, religion, emotions, and politics of the 1950s. Text, plot, and stage direction create dynamic changes in the characters, while musical devices carry the drama. The use of tempo, keys, thematic material, and harmony are reflected in the plot as motivation, action, and development of each character. Music drives the drama, but the plot and text elicit emotion in *Susannah*.

Each character is affected by fear. The impetus of fear might be different for each character, but it is certainly a motivation. While some of the characters’ motivations do not change in the drama, the underlying emotions of the plot seem to be fear, anger, and loneliness.

The chapters devoted to analyses chronologically chart the motivations and emotions of each character in relation to his/her behaviors and musical depictions.

The information in chapter 2 provides historical context for the composition. Many have agreed that Carlisle Floyd’s experiences serve as a basis for the drama. In several interviews, Floyd has stated that this it true. In order to create believable characters, he based them on people from his past. The political climate at the time he composed colored the plot and drama. The McCarthy era affected Floyd and his colleagues greatly. While he did not consciously intend to
write an opera about this phenomenon, his experiences crept into the plot. The southern traditions and religious zeal that Floyd witnessed also give the drama a truthful voice.

It is of most importance that performers, directors, and conductors are aware that fear instilled by McCarthysim and religious zealotry is paramount for performing the opera. Performers, directors, conductors, and historians gain knowledge from a detailed perspective of character analysis through the music and plot. While Floyd did not consciously make a political statement with this opera, he was admittedly influenced by his own religious past and the political climate of the 1950s.

In Chapter 3, Susannah’s character is explored using musical, textual, and historical means. Her trials and genuine reactions to fear and loneliness make Susannah a sincere character. Floyd created a true-to-life girl whose tragic fall is displayed through musical devices, stage direction, and text. The exiled woman at the end of the drama is a complete contrast to the youthful, innocent girl at the beginning of the drama.

Little Bat is a character entirely motivated by terror. He is surrounded by intolerance. Floyd used stage direction, text, and compositional techniques to portray this skittish, yet powerful character. Sam is affected and reactive to fear. Each character’s reaction and turmoil is portrayed differently in the opera. Sam takes responsibility for Susannah, so his negative reaction seems to have the most immediate consequences.

Olin Blitch is driven by fear—it is a motivation for not only his own salvation, but also everyone he meets. His fear holds fast throughout the drama. His dying words are fearful prayers for his and Susannah’s salvation. The stage directions, text, and music combine to create a realistic human being. Floyd creates a powerful, flawed, sinning, well-meaning character—an embodiment of authentic human behavior.
The character of Mrs. McLean leads the crusade against Susannah. Even though there are other minor characters in this opera, she demands attention because of her leadership position in the community. McCarthy’s ideals can be understood as accusatory actions with no sign of proof. Some people will believe the accusations for fear of the unknown. The chorus can be considered as both villains and victims. The church members fall prey to idol gossip and false accusations.

Like many artists of this era, Carlisle Floyd was moved by the concept of *verismo* stories. He chose this plot because he felt its powerful statements could resonate with audiences of the time. Even today, audiences can relate to this 1950s adaptation of a biblical story about wrongful persecution, fear, and fanaticism because of our current political upheaval. Social ostracism and religious zealotry are common themes in literature, art, and music. Carlisle Floyd successfully composed a musical drama based on these common themes. He used many compositional devices to convey how false accusations, fear, social hypocrisy, and doubt can destroy a society.
My research of this opera and time period opened avenues for further research. A topic of interest is the southern traditions and culture presented in the plot of *Susannah*. This non-musical topic would involve inter-disciplinary studies, as well as a strict interpretation and dissection of the plot. The manner in which the townspeople and elders are presented in the opera suggests a style of life that is framed by Floyd’s experiences growing up in the South. An intensive study of the Reverend Olin Blitch would also be interesting. Each of his offenses and mistakes causes his honest repentance. His confident righteousness is immediately stripped away when he sleeps with Susannah. A psychological study as it pertains to traveling evangelists would be fascinating. Both of these topics could be useful for directors, conductors, and performers of this opera.

In her 2008 thesis, “Exploring Performance-Oriented Analysis Through An Examination of the Title-Character’s Two Arias in Carlisle Floyd’s *Susannah,*” Shannon Cole discusses an interesting topic of research. She suggests that the two most integral parts of the opera take place offstage. When Susannah is caught bathing in the creek and has sex with the Reverend, the audience is expected to assume the actions. Researching and understanding why Floyd chose to use this offstage action for the work would be helpful for directors and singers studying the opera. A question raised from this topic is: does the offstage action become more effective because the audience does not see it, or because the imagination is better than what can be staged?

Hymn tunes and folk music offer a wealth of topics in context of this opera. Floyd composed hymn tunes and folk melodies for this opera to set the “mood” of rural Tennessee in 1950. What elements of these compositional styles did Floyd use more often/less often? A non-musical topic about the folk traditions implied in the plot would serve a musicologist and
anthropologist. Susannah tells the Reverend that she sings “Trees on the Mountain” to herself when she feels sad, lonely, or upset to cheer herself. This form of individualistic and private performance is an important element of folk singing in Appalachia. The folk singing in the south has been researched, but not in terms of this opera. Some historians have attempted to refer to *Susannah* as a “folk opera,” but further research concluded that it is more easily categorized as American *verismo*. A study of these two differences would be interesting. What makes something a “folk” opera vs. a “verismo” opera? Also, it could be interesting to compare and contrast other 20-century operas like Aaron Copland’s *The Tender Land* and Douglas Moore’s *The Ballad of Baby Doe* with Floyd’s *Susannah*. Each of these operas explore American themes of economic issues, sociological happenings, and culture.

A study of the 1950s economic, social, and political climate as it pertains to the effect on artistic output stems from this dissertation. Others have attempted to pull cultural elements of the 1950s together in terms of art. The McCarthy era could be studied alongside this piece of music with other factors of sociology. While there is no mention of finances or politics in this opera, it is assumed that the community is not wealthy. A study of the socio-economic ideals of the town could be a fascinating topic of research for directors, performers, and researchers alike.
APPENDIX A

“Susanna and the Elders” from Book of Daniel, Chapter 13

1 In Babylon there lived a man named Joakim,

2 who married a very beautiful and God-fearing woman, Susanna, the daughter of Hilkiah;

3 her parents were righteous and had trained their daughter according to the law of Moses.

4 Joakim was very rich and he had a garden near his house. The Jews had recourse to him often because he was the most respected of them all.

5 That year, two elders of the people were appointed judges, of whom the Lord said,

“Lawlessness has come out of Babylon, that is, from the elders who were to govern the people as judges.”

6 These men, to whom all brought their cases, frequented the house of Joakim.

7 When the people left at noon, Susanna used to enter her husband’s garden for a walk.

8 When the elders saw her enter every day for her walk, they began to lust for her.

9 They perverted their thinking; they would not allow their eyes to look to heaven, and did not keep in mind just judgments.

10 Though both were enamored of her, they did not tell each other their trouble,

11 for they were ashamed to reveal their lustful desire to have her.

12 Day by day they watched eagerly for her.

13 One day they said to each other, “Let us be off for home, it is time for the noon meal.” So they went their separate ways.
14 But both turned back and arrived at the same spot. When they asked each other the reason, they admitted their lust, and then they agreed to look for an occasion when they could find her alone.

15 One day, while they were waiting for the right moment, she entered as usual, with two maids only, wanting to bathe in the garden, for the weather was warm.

16 Nobody else was there except the two elders, who had hidden themselves and were watching her.

17 “Bring me oil and soap,” she said to the maids, “and shut the garden gates while I bathe.”

18 They did as she said; they shut the garden gates and left by the side gate to fetch what she had ordered, unaware that the elders were hidden inside.

19 As soon as the maids had left, the two old men got up and ran to her.

20 “Look,” they said, “the garden doors are shut, no one can see us, and we want you. So give in to our desire, and lie with us.

21 If you refuse, we will testify against you that a young man was here with you and that is why you sent your maids away.”

22 “I am completely trapped,” Susanna groaned. “If I yield, it will be my death; if I refuse, I cannot escape your power.

23 Yet it is better for me not to do it and to fall into your power than to sin before the Lord.”

24 Then Susanna screamed, and the two old men also shouted at her,

25 as one of them ran to open the garden gates.

26 When the people in the house heard the cries from the garden, they rushed in by the side gate to see what had happened to her.
27 At the accusations of the old men, the servants felt very much ashamed, for never had any such thing been said about Susanna.

28 When the people came to her husband Joakim the next day, the two wicked old men also came, full of lawless intent to put Susanna to death.

29 Before the people they ordered: “Send for Susanna, the daughter of Hilkiah, the wife of Joakim.” When she was sent for,

30 she came with her parents, children and all her relatives.

31 Susanna, very delicate and beautiful,

32 was veiled; but those transgressors of the law ordered that she be exposed so as to sate themselves with her beauty.

33 All her companions and the onlookers were weeping.

34 In the midst of the people the two old men rose up and laid their hands on her head.

35 As she wept she looked up to heaven, for she trusted in the Lord wholeheartedly.

36 The old men said, “As we were walking in the garden alone, this woman entered with two servant girls, shut the garden gates and sent the servant girls away.

37 A young man, who was hidden there, came and lay with her.

38 When we, in a corner of the garden, saw this lawlessness, we ran toward them.

39 We saw them lying together, but the man we could not hold, because he was stronger than we; he opened the gates and ran off.

40 Then we seized this one and asked who the young man was,

41 but she refused to tell us. We testify to this.” The assembly believed them, since they were elders and judges of the people, and they condemned her to death.
42 But Susanna cried aloud: “Eternal God, you know what is hidden and are aware of all things before they come to be:
43 you know that they have testified falsely against me. Here I am about to die, though I have done none of the things for which these men have condemned me.”
44 The Lord heard her prayer.
45 As she was being led to execution, God stirred up the holy spirit of a young boy named Daniel,
46 and he cried aloud: “I am innocent of this woman’s blood.”
47 All the people turned and asked him, “What are you saying?”
48 He stood in their midst and said, “Are you such fools, you Israelites, to condemn a daughter of Israel without investigation and without clear evidence?
49 Return to court, for they have testified falsely against her.”
50 Then all the people returned in haste. To Daniel the elders said, “Come, sit with us and inform us, since God has given you the prestige of old age.”
51 But he replied, “Separate these two far from one another, and I will examine them.”
52 After they were separated from each other, he called one of them and said: “How you have grown evil with age! Now have your past sins come to term:
53 passing unjust sentences, condemning the innocent, and freeing the guilty, although the Lord says, ‘The innocent and the just you shall not put to death.’
54 Now, then, if you were a witness, tell me under what tree you saw them together.” 55 “Under a mastic tree,”* he answered. “Your fine lie has cost you your head,” said Daniel; “for the angel of God has already received the sentence from God and shall split you in two.”
56 Putting him to one side, he ordered the other one to be brought. “Offspring of Canaan, not of Judah,” Daniel said to him, “beauty has seduced you, lust has perverted your heart.

57 This is how you acted with the daughters of Israel, and in their fear they yielded to you; but a daughter of Judah did not tolerate your lawlessness.

58 Now, then, tell me under what tree you surprised them together.”

59 “Under an oak,” he said. “Your fine lie has cost you also your head,” said Daniel; “for the angel of God waits with a sword to cut you in two so as to destroy you both.”

60 The whole assembly cried aloud, blessing God who saves those who hope in him.

61 They rose up against the two old men, for by their own words Daniel had convicted them of bearing false witness. They condemned them to the fate they had planned for their neighbor:

62 in accordance with the law of Moses they put them to death. Thus was innocent blood spared that day.

63 Hilkiah and his wife praised God for their daughter Susanna, with Joakim her husband and all her relatives, because she was found innocent of any shameful deed.

64 And from that day onward Daniel was greatly esteemed by the people.¹

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