Fall, Redemption, and the Spaces in Between: 
Depicting Transformations of the Johnny Cash Persona in *Walk the Line*

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# Table of Contents

1. Introduction—Between Rock ‘n’ Roll and Country ................................................................. 1

2. The “Correct” Representation of a Person(a) .................................................................................. 3
   2.1. Biographies and Autobiographies ................................................................................................ 4
   2.2 Biographical Film ...................................................................................................................... 5
   2.3. Making Their Lives Real to Us ................................................................................................... 7
   2.4 Closing Shot ............................................................................................................................... 9

3. Scope and Limitations of *Walk the Line* .................................................................................... 10
   3.1 Rock ‘n’ Roll + Melodrama = Success ..................................................................................... 12
   3.2 The Great Man Biopic .............................................................................................................. 14
   3.3 The Country Music Biopic ......................................................................................................... 16
   3.4 The “Zoomed-in Approach” ...................................................................................................... 17
      3.4.1 Focus on Early Career ......................................................................................................... 17
      3.4.2. Excursus: A Different Painting - Focus on Late Comeback ............................................. 18
      3.4.3 The Chosen Focus .............................................................................................................. 19
   3.5 Closing Shot ............................................................................................................................... 22

4. Fall and Redemption - Analyses of the *Walk the Line* Johnny Cash Picture Puzzle .................. 23
   4.1. Falling Into the Man in Black .................................................................................................... 26
      4.1.1. Introducing the Circular Saw Amphetamine Blues ............................................................. 26
      4.1.2. Sex, Drugs, Rock ‘n’ Roll and Young Love ..................................................................... 32
      4.1.3 Big Old Expensive Tractor Stuck in the Mud ...................................................................... 45
   4.2 Redemption in Black .................................................................................................................. 54
      4.2.1 True Love Is the Key ........................................................................................................... 55
      4.2.2 Fully Baked at the Prison Concerts ...................................................................................... 64
   4.3 A Side Note on Country Music Tropes ...................................................................................... 69

5. Final Closing Shot: A Portray of a Bigger-than-Life Persona ..................................................... 71

6. Sources ............................................................................................................................................. 75
   6.1 Primary Sources ......................................................................................................................... 75
   6.2 Secondary Sources ..................................................................................................................... 75
   6.3 Table of Figures .......................................................................................................................... 80
1. Introduction—Between Rock ‘n’ Roll and Country

Famous musicians are seemingly never-ending sources of fascination. Many people not only love and appreciate their music but also are very much attracted to their way of life. Particularly, musicians of the (post) rock ‘n’ roll era are often assumed to have lived a pretty fast-paced life. The public seems to be mesmerized by their glorious lifestyles of “sex, drugs and rock ‘n’ roll” as well as their addictions, psychological problems, familial issues, and early deaths. Biographical films of young rock ‘n’ rollers adhere, therefore, to these assumptions and tend to dramatize the subject’s life. Johnny Cash is mostly associated with country music, but his life’s narrative fits the rock ‘n’ roll mold. This poses the question of how close the Johnny Cash biopic *Walk the Line* conforms to the familiar and profitable pattern of popular music biopics.

This thesis aims to investigate the composition of the *Walk the Line* formula. The focus lies hereby on the filmic construction of Cash’s rock ‘n’ roll rebel-outlaw persona and its strong bond of affection with social pariahs. Thus, I will explore the biographical crossroads between dramatized downfall and clear-cut redemption which function as an explanatory narrative for this connection. Furthermore, I will discuss how well *Walk the Line* integrates into the overall structure of Cash’s complex (stage) persona. To achieve that, I will compare the biopic’s representation with the Johnny Cash persona(s) found in his (auto)biographies and other writings inspired by his legacy. I chose this approach because of Cash’s active participation in crafting his (stage) persona by undergoing relatable transformations and living up to the expectations of his fans. Consequently, I am also interested in how *Walk the Line* manages to align with Johnny Cash’s “[…] attempt to put J.R. Cash in a framework the public would understand” (Lindahl-Urben and Taliaferro 23).

To answer the questions raised, I will provide in the first chapter a theoretical background as to why biopics are not to be read as an accurate representation of someone’s life. This includes approaches of Bourdieu and Depkat, which express the difficulties of capturing somebody’s “essence”. Secondly, I will analyze the film with

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1 for example *The 27 Club*
regard to my thesis and show how the public persona is scripted and put on screen by employing fitting biopic formulas to further the subject’s character transformation. In the third chapter, I will perform a close reading of representative scenes and analyze these transformation triggers by paying close attention to their effect on Cash’s fall and consequent redemption. In the conclusion I will summarize my arguments of how these metaphorical puzzle pieces carve out the desired “Man in Black”.
2. The “Correct” Representation of a Person(a)

To illustrate and explain the past, historians gather information by interpreting primary sources. At some point, the interpretation may be turned into a coherent documentary, filling possible gaps and inconsistencies with visually attractive clips and interviews with so-called “experts” who verify this “correct” view. Finally, the findings are presented to a large audience of, for example, the History Channel. Although this process is knowingly exaggerated and simplified, it nevertheless illustrates a central question: will we ever see a “correct” version of a person’s life on screen? In this chapter, I have discussed theories addressing these questions in terms of biopics based on biographies and autobiographies.

The production of a biopic is in certain aspects similar to the production of a historical documentary. The resemblance grows even stronger as recent documentaries even tend to include a main character who is influenced by particular historical and social circumstances. In general, this development mirrors the current cultural approach to the past. Depkat describes this approach as being “to some extent, evolved as the critique of social history exclusively privileging anonymous structures and processes, the subjective dimension of history experienced a powerful comeback” (43).

This change seems to have triggered the recent enthusiasm in biographies (Depkat 43). With biographies and autobiographies experiencing a powerful comeback, filmmakers have enough “authentic” primary sources to draw from and create their version of an individual’s “entire” life or focus only on a significant period of it.

Similar to historians who try to reconstruct a historical event or a persona, filmmakers usually aim to create an “authentic” representation of a person’s life; the toolkit available to a filmmaker is, however, somewhat different. The historian’s job is to critically analyze and compare the primary sources and pose questions, such as: who was the person that produced the source? What is the social context of the text’s production and for what reason was it made? An excellent historian might even ask himself/herself the same questions in critical self-reflection during the research.
Therefore, as a first step to produce “authentic” biopics, filmmakers, concerning their source materials, would have to work in a similar vein as the historians.

2.1. Biographies and Autobiographies

Many stories make up the narrative of one’s life. We describe events, fellow people, or even ourselves using stories. A globetrotter returning home with a backpack full of stories will have, for example, interesting characters, plotlines, turning points, and, most importantly, they will all represent his or her self-image—the stories will adhere to the adventurer’s identity. This is usually the case if the person conforms to the diachronic theory of personal identity. Here, the adventurer sees himself as an “[entity] that move[s] through time in a unified narrative” (Lindahl-Urben and Taliaferro 18–20).

When using autobiographies as sources, as it is the case with Walk the Line, filmmakers might consider that the stories one encounters are forged together by this unifying narrative. Autobiographies are composed to create a proper legacy. Pierre Bourdieu explains this focus by stating that “[..] the most sacred duties to oneself take the form of duties toward one's proper name” (300). He defines it as:

The proper name is the visible affirmation of the identity of its bearer across time and social space, the basis of the unity of one’s successive manifestations, and of the socially accepted possibilities of integrating these manifestations in official records, curriculum vitae, cursus honorum, police record, obituary, or biography, which constitute life as a finite sum through the verdict given in a temporary or final reckoning. (300)

Thus, the source material chosen by filmmakers to represent a life depends on their subject’s proper name, which, according to Bourdieu, “conveys no information [...] since biological and social properties [undergo a] constant flux, all descriptions are valid only within the limits of a specific stage or place” (300). In other words, the constantly changing social reality shapes the individual’s perception of himself/herself and how he/she is perceived. In the case of the globetrotter, he might think at some later point in his life that his times of thrilling adventures would have been better spent earning some good money because he now identifies with the societal norm of being a decent family man.
Additional problems arise by taking into account that “[i]t is the [autobiographer]/biographer who decides on beginnings and endings, about periodization and turning points, about linear or non-linear patterns of narrative, about what he tells and what he chooses not to tell” (Depkat 40). Furthermore, these biographical standards are constantly changing, with biographers increasingly experimenting with new narrative patterns that capture the “essence”—the abilities and experiences that stick out, that make a person who they “truly” are. However, the piece still needs to sell, be read by an audience interested in the person(a)—ergo, the narrative must work within the boundaries of the proper name. Biography is, as Depkat describes it, “[a] multilayered and complex relationship between the biographical subject, the biographer, the narration and the reader” (41). Depkat speaks only of biographers in his text; however, these observations can also be applied to autobiographers. As mentioned before, they might be even more interested in the creation of a proper legacy.

2.2 Biographical Film

With these theories in mind, we move on to the case of biopics. When this narrated “reality” is scripted and turned into a film, the representation of a person’s life is additionally altered by the lens of the filmmaker. The common structure of the biopic is to tick off seemingly important events of a person’s life (Hoad); the events that mirror the proper name. Thus, the audience is presented with a chronological chain of events that aim to explain how the character gained his/her proper name—in other words, what occurrences triggered the transformations that finally turned him/her into the human being that is remembered “across time and social space” (Bourdieu 300). Bourdieu metaphorically explains the fault in representing a life in the form of chronological events:
Trying to understand a life as a unique and self-sufficient series of successive events (sufficient unto itself), and without ties other than the association to a ‘subject’ whose constancy is probably just that of a proper name, is nearly as absurd as trying to make sense out of a subway route without taking into account the network structure, that is the matrix of objective relations between the different stations. (302)

Nonetheless, this rhetorical illusion is a cornerstone of biopics adhering to the classical formula.

Even though it is a concept that still seems to work well in terms of sales figures and awards\(^2\), filmmakers try to distance themselves from the old-school formula of the studio era and the associated term “biopic” (Custen 3). Steven Spielberg, for example, supports this statement by refusing to label Lincoln a biopic: “I sometimes refer to it as a portrait, meaning that it was one painting out of many that could have been drawn over the years of the president’s life” (qtd. in Hoad). This so-called new-school high-definition biopic claims to “[go] for the essence, rather than a chronicle of events, focusing on a galvanizing incident or episode in the life of our chosen luminary” (Hoad).

Despite the noticeable evolution of the biopic, this new generation biopic did not actually break away from the tradition. First, the galvanizing-incident approach is not new\(^3\). Second, the neoclassical biopic, as Bingham describes it, still tries to capture the “essence” of a person by telling a “truthful” story of successive events. Even though, to use Bourdieu’s metaphor, fewer “subway stations” (302) are dealt with, the network structure is not properly presented, and it probably never will be by focusing on a chain of “real” events aspiring to fit a prefabricated narrative. Although it is notable that there is a tendency since 2000 to try to show “the subject in all his aspects, [negative episodes still need to fit the overall representation and] will be worked out within the course of the narrative” (Bingham 380). Furthermore, additional inventions to successfully dramatize certain aspects of an individual’s life are, in any case, a component of the old and new biopic (Hoad).

\(^2\) “A total of 14 out of 26 principal acting Oscars since 2000 have gone to people playing real-life figures” (Glibey)

\(^3\) “Bonnie & Clyde is one earlier example” (Hoad)
Bingham confirms this by saying:

If, however, historians are overcoming their misgivings about the ‘invention’ that dramatic film invariably brings to the visualization of histories, then those who deal with history might want to consider Rosenstone’s idea that invention does not necessarily violate historical truth (Visions 67–69). Indeed, since historical fiction stems from the desire to see biographical and historical figures living before us, there are instances where the filmmakers see the need to ‘complete’ history, to fill in what didn’t happen with what a viewer might wish to see happen. (8)

Professor Kathleen Coleman, the consultant for the historical epic Gladiator (2000), even argues that “when an individual detail is false, but the overall atmosphere in a scene is authentic” (49) alternative details are acceptable (Inglis 84).

2.3. Making Their Lives Real to Us

Alternative details are clearly used to manufacture a coherent storyline out of a complex human life. Does this circumstance affect the proper name of the depicted personality? In the field of popular music biopics, for instance, “it is often assumed that popular music fans are distinguished by relatively high levels of preparation or investment” (Inglis 86). They might have seen the musician several times live on stage and spent countless hours listening to their music while drawing their own conclusions of what the intended meaning of the musician’s songs might be and the personal associations they might have; some might even pick up a biography or autobiography to better understand the artist’s work. All these factors might make them a rather critical audience. Inglis, however, argues that the bulk of fans increasingly gain their knowledge and view of the past from the various forms of film and TV productions (81). This especially applies if the fans were too young or unborn to paint their pictures of the musician’s life through the current media at the time and now have to experience their life in retrospect. Additionally, I side with Brost when she argues that spotting familiar phrases, such as, “'based on a ‘true story’ [or based on the (auto)biography of ‘famous person x’ moviegoers] tend to assume, rightly or wrongly, that the movie they are about to watch will deliver more significance than a pure fiction and will, therefore, require a
heightened level of attentive engagement and respect” (Brost 11). If one takes Depkat’s “biographical pact”, based on Philippe Lejeune’s “autobiographical pact”, one could even argue that an audience enters into a more or less valid “biopic pact” (43).

Even a well-prepared popular music biopic audience might be willing to read these types of films as referential texts and that inevitably affects the artist’s proper name. Inglis supports this view by asking:

[I]n the absence of the real Elvis Presley or Frankie Lymon or Richie Valens or Brian Jones, will the biopics of their lives inevitably add to the stock of knowledge that audiences have about them? I think they must. Of course, there are other texts, other sources, other accounts. But movies, presented and perceived as pseudo-histories, possess a particular prestige, a visible public presence, and are likely to be consumed by much larger audiences than, for example, a book. (85)

Inglis mentions another important point about the sheer public range of biopics. In the case of a musician biopic, such as *Walk the Line*, the record sales are highly affected. One month after it opened in the United Kingdom, Cash’s record sales went up 676 percent; at one time, 8 of Amazon’s top 25 albums were Johnny Cash records (Inglis 90). One can easily imagine that fans, particularly those who were merely familiar with Cash’s comeback as a rock idol in the 1990s, must have images of the biographical film in their minds while listening to Cash’s early records.

As biopics “complete” the story by filling in the gaps of their narrative with, if necessary, plain inventions, some post-modern biopics accept the probability of not ever being able to represent reality and embrace the fictional part of their depictions “[...] using invention and even lies to tell their stories” (Glibey). Todd Haynes’s *I’m Not There* is a wonderful example: seven performers, including Cate Blanchett, were cast to represent the diverse facets of Bob Dylan. In contrast to the usual “based on a true story” that would lure many viewers into a biopic pact, this biographical film defines its goal from the start, opening with “Inspired by the music and many lives of Bob Dylan” (Brown and Vidal 227). The film makes it clear that there is no fixed interpretation of Dylan’s life, and I agree with Glibey when he argues that “[i]t’s important for biopics to challenge the idea” (Glibey) that there is one. This approach might actually bring us
closer to the essence of the represented individual (Glibey). Even the historian Rosenstone, a leading scholar on the relationship between history and film, confirms this in *Visions of the Past: The Challenge of Film to Our Idea of History* by differentiating condensation and invention: “[i]sn’t creating character and incident different from condensing events? Is it not destructive of ‘history?’ Not history on film. On the screen, history must be fictional in order to be true!” (70).

### 2.4 Closing Shot

At the beginning of this chapter, I asked if one ever sees a “correct” version of a person’s life on screen. The answer already lies within the question. In light of the discussion of the important theories, we find that there are always versions of the truth. Even autobiographies, which are or should be written by the actual person who lived this particular life and are, therefore, at first glance, the essence of truth, might be far from “correct”. By comparing biographies to historical sources, it becomes evident that (auto)biographies are always written for a reason and are influenced by the subject's and biographer's current social reality. What seems to be quite timeless though are “the duties toward one’s proper name” (Bourdieu 300) if one thinks of oneself as moving “through time in a unified narrative” (Lindahl-Urben and Taliaferro 19), mirroring the diachronic theory of personal identity. I would argue that every (auto)biography is, besides the omnipresent goal of earning money, written to reflect the subject's proper name in the mirror of the current social reality. By basing a film on an (auto)biography, the same process is basically repeated, with the difference being that a complex human life has been already scripted before the biopic formula is applied to squeeze out the aspired “essence”. This leaves the moviegoer with a product of fact and fiction, but to cite Rosenstone again, “On the screen, history must be fictional in order to be true!” (70). If the audience only knew! However, if we enter the cinema to see the life story of a great adventurer, do we really need to know that he now actually disapproves of his former life? Box office figures show that we apparently prefer a good dramatized story in the realm of the subject’s proper name. This method of assembling the story around all the well-known cornerstones may give us what we desire, but it limits the creative scope of filmmaking.
3. Scope and Limitations of *Walk the Line*

Does country sell? (Brost 75)

When director James Mangold approached studios with the idea of making a film about Johnny Cash, this was the question he was confronted with. Popular music has been gaining popularity on screen in the last decades; recently, especially the number of films dealing with pop/rock stars have increased significantly. Therefore, the skepticism about a country music biopic was, to some extent, understandable. Initially, one may think of today’s young, attractive, and always good-humored country stars as musicians who increasingly step away from critical darker themes in their music. This may not seem compatible with the common discourse within the popular music biopic culture of “sex drugs and rock ‘n’ roll”, considering that this framework is clearly used by filmmakers to differentiate popular music biopics from other biopics. However, rock ‘n’ roll and country music are more closely related than one might assume. Both were influenced by African American musical characteristics (Kerschbaumer 23–24), their representatives share the general assumptions of their (stereo)typical struggle in life (Inglis 89), and the first biographical films about rock ‘n’ roll and country music artists were created in the same years: late 1970s and early 1980s (Brackett 266). Thus, it is not too far-fetched to assume that Mangold’s Jonny Cash film works within the set of generic boundaries and conventions of the popular music biopic.

With Johnny Cash, Mangold additionally chose a country musician who is meaningful in a rock ‘n’ roll context. With his diverse musical career, his life is adorned with countless contradictory episodes. Cash represents many different things for many people. Thus, one’s opinion about the “Man in Black” depends on where one encountered him. The ever-changing and transforming persona of Johnny Cash is probably best summed up by Edwards in *Literary Cash*:

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4 Inglis named the following potential subjects (some are already produced): Janis Joplin, Keith Moon, Iggy Pop, Bob Dylan, Nico, Kurt Cobain, Michael Hutchence, Freddy Mercury, Joe Meek, James Brown, Milli Vanilli, Motley Crue
From rockabilly rebel to country music’s elder statesman, Johnny Cash embodied paradoxical or contradictory images. There was no one single Cash. He was always multiple, changing, inconsistent. He was the drugged rock star trashing hotel rooms and the devout Christian touring with Billy Graham. He was the Man in Black, a progressive voice for the disenfranchised, but also the Southern patriarch performing at Nixon’s White House. Cash embodied the rebel outlaw hillbilly thug and later symbolized the establishment. At the heart of all these ambiguities lies Cash’s appeal. (159)

To successfully portray Cash’s ambiguous persona, Mangold had to choose a particular period in Cash’s life and, in terms of melodramatic material, he chose wisely. The biographical journey of the rock ‘n’ roll rebel-outlaw who eventually hits rock bottom and receives redemption at the end is definitely enjoyable for a large audience. The story Mangold tells is one of fall and redemption. This is already signified in the first scene, where the viewer is introduced to the fully baked *Walk the Line* Johnny. The spectator sees a man who successfully fought his demons and transformed into a better version of himself. During this process, however, he did not banish his former self—he rather absorbed it to rise as this great man. A man who, through his dramatic downfall, earned a special bond with social pariahs and was only then able to fulfill his destiny—to play a concert in the maximum security prison of Folsom.

In addition to the obvious exploitation of rock ‘n’ roll stereotypes, elements of the Great Man biopic and the country music biopic are identifiable; the complex stage persona of Johnny Cash can, therefore, also be considered a valuable source for the creation of the desired *Walk the Line* Cash (Brost 75). In the following chapter, I have brought together these influences and unscramble the, as Vognar described it, “monolithic biopic mush” of *Walk the Line*. 
3.1 Rock ‘n’ Roll + Melodrama = Success

Biopics materialize out of a filmmaker’s desire to create drama out of the lives of someone he or she finds interesting. (Bingham 377)

In November 2018, thirteen years after *Walk the Line*, film critics still seem to have every reason to attack the genre. The latest example is *Bohemian Rhapsody* (2018), the Queen biopic. One just needs to google “biopic formula” and the first four out of five search results bring you straight to comments such as the following:

You can take notes at *Bohemian Rhapsody*, or you can keep score. Hero rebels against family? Yep. Band experiences creative breakthrough? Roger that. Rise to fame and fortune captured through glitzy concert montage? Of course. Hero descends into drugs and despair? Book it. (Vognar)

Film critics, evidently, are well aware of the filmmakers’ procedure of dramatizing the subject’s life, but the audience still seems to enjoy this practice of mixing all of the seemingly most important aspects of a celebrity’s life available to the public for dramatic purposes (Bingham 3). If one compares these movies to the previously introduced creditable experimental biopic *I’m Not There* in terms of box office figures, the result clearly shows the contrasting views of moviegoers and critics. According to the *Internet Movie Database* (IMDb⁵) the developmental biographical film earned only $11.5 million (“I’m Not”), despite its potential for being a “crowd puller”, as it was a Bob Dylan biopic. One cannot compare the success, in terms of sales figures, to productions following the biopic formula, such as *Walk the Line* with almost $186.5 million (“Walk”) or *Straight Outta Compton* with $201.5 million (“Straight”). High sales figures are, therefore, an obvious reason why the vast majority of biopics adhere to the “cookie-cutter-template”.

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⁵ www.imdb.com
Vognar introduces an additional plausible explanation:

Look at the credits on *Bohemian Rhapsody* and you'll find surviving members of Queen listed as producers. This kind of participation is not uncommon. It ensures that no one is going to get too creative with the subject's legacy. It's a reminder that the music biopic is hagiographic by nature.

After reading this observation, I took a closer look at the credits of *Walk the Line* and found the name John Carter Cash, the only son of June Carter and Johnny Cash, listed as the executive producer. It is quite evident that John would not be willing to let the biopic show aspects of either June’s or Johnny's life, which do not mirror their proper name. This is an understandable decision, considering the public range a biopic potentially has. In the case of Johnny Cash, the typical rock ‘n’ roller story (of suffering) plays a huge role in his cinematic character formation, but *Walk the Line* manages to depict Cash’s conflicts in a relatable and necessary way by conforming to melodramatic practices.

The expected melodrama within the “sex, drugs and rock ‘n’ roll” discourse in *Walk the Line* is created by foregrounding Cash’s period of familial issues and self-inflicted pain (i.e., through drugs). This constructs an effective dramatic struggle that facilitates the cliché of a celebrity, haunted by his abusive childhood, who now cannot deal with his sudden fame. To watch Cash’s transformation from a family-oriented door-to-door salesman with a tough past into a “bad-ass pill-popping rock star” who inevitably hits rock bottom, but then, in the end, takes a shot at redemption, dramatically reshaping his life, becoming a family-friendly version of his former self, and finally marrying the woman he loves is, simply put, a sellable story. One gets to see the highlights and the lowlights, the fall and the redemption. Melodrama seems to appeal to a large audience because we would like to overcome our own obstacles in life in a similar and clear fashion. In Smith’s monograph, *Melodrama*, one finds a fitting description:

Characteristically, melodrama presses its own extreme conflicts to extreme conclusions. Only three are possible, for when an undivided protagonist opposes a hostile world [...] (namely) victory or defeat. [...] Such clear-cut endings offer an audience emotional
pleasures equally clear-cut and extreme. We rejoice at [the protagonist's] luck, share victoriously in his triumphs and leave the theatre ready to tackle the world single-handed and win. (8–9)

*Walk the Line* is, however, more than a dramatized feel good story of triumph. The audience also leaves the cinema with the feeling of getting closer to a man bigger than life; they witness the cinematic creation of the legendary “Man in Black”.

### 3.2 The Great Man Biopic

“The Life, Love and Faith of an American Legend” (Turner) is what one finds on the book cover of *The Man Called Cash*, Johnny Cash’ biography. It clearly signifies that the reader deals with the life story of a Great Man. The cinematic representation of Great Men have changed since the studio-era (Bingham 36). A Great Man has a dream or a special ability, but the world does not see the greatness from the beginning. The question that lies in this area of conflict is this: who is more foolish? The world for not recognizing his potential right away or the subject who is not able to properly adapt? Here, the studio-era biopic will always side with the subject while modern biopics will at least try to illuminate the other side (Bingham 36). In *Walk the Line*, the opposing world is represented by Cash’s father, Ray, and his first wife, Vivian, who are both not fond of his dream of becoming a musician. While the audience may relate to their resistance, the film still clearly sides with Cash. Both are rather necessary obstacles to overcome in his path of showing the world (and, in the end, his father) that he is indeed a Great Man (Bingham 36).

In his study “Whose Lives Are They Anyway?” Bingham presents this unitary plot of male Great Man biopics of the 2000’s in his conclusive chapter and names films, such as *Ray, Kinsey, The Aviator, Life and Death of Peter Sellers, Capote, Infamous, Talk to Me, Breach* and, of course, *Walk the Line*, as examples (380):

A young subject has a remarkable gift; he enters into the world to share his great talent and becomes established as an icon. The icon begins to be overwhelmed by the whirl of celebrity, the demands of fans, the temptation of sex and drugs; he veers out of control and self-destructs. The protagonist also enters into a romantic life with one
woman, whom the film portrays as long-suffering and cast in the role of helpmeet and support. Eventually, she leaves him and he must see how hollow and unfilled his life has become. Finally, he faces the future and his legacy; will his art outlive him? Will it transcend his earthly life? What contribution does the subject make to culture? How does his art live on and how does the drama coexist in memory and culture with the actual subject? (379–380)

Although the description is quite fitting, I would argue that one major keyword is missing: “destiny”. In the case of *Walk the Line*, the gift clearly is Cash’s musical talent. One can assume that the audience already knows this when entering the cinema. The audience is well aware of the subject’s destiny to live an exceptional life, which is going to leave its mark in cultural memory. How that memory coexists with the actual subject might be generally hard to answer, but the aggressively marketed Johnny Cash persona makes it even harder to find the actual Cash. What the audience gets is the life story of his stage persona, which might or might not overlap with his “true” self. Additionally, Cash was certainly drawn to the general idea of seeing himself as an outcast, a person who could relate to criminals, a public persona who misbehaved according to social norms and rules. Lindahl-Urben and Taliaferro even argue that “[p]erhaps he did so because he was aware that we can all relate to this feeling of alienation, and he wanted to make his stage persona—Johnny Cash—easy to relate to for his audience” (21). One can only guess to what extent this observation is true or false. *Walk the Line*, however, plays with this aspect of “[o]nly someone who has been there, who felt the pain, can think in terms of surviving or transcending it” (Lindahl-Urben and Taliaferro 24). This definitely plays a huge role in Cash’s Great Man narrative. He was destined to get knocked off the path, pick himself up, and get back on the straight and narrow. It is part of his legacy and part of the “Man in Black”.

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3.3 The Country Music Biopic

Cash’s legacy is not just about him working within the popular music culture of “sex drugs and rock ‘n’ roll” and the Great Man biopic. His persona is also strongly associated with country music. With the country music community’s common beliefs about the (stereo)typical struggles and setbacks of musicians’ lives, country music icons of the 1960s/70s, such as Johnny Cash, offer ideal opportunities for a narrative exploitation. Is the rock ‘n’ roll part of his portrayal, therefore, in unison with familiar country music biopics? In Banjos, Biopics, and Compilation Scores, David Brackett analyzed several country music biopics of the rock ‘n’ roll era. He conforms to the incorporation of these elements:

A working class white person from the rural South achieves success in love and career despite an interfering parent [...]. Success triggers jealousy with the protagonist’s spouse, and substance abuse and/or violent episodes with the spouse lead to and accompany career difficulties. Throughout these career peregrinations, the protagonist has access to wise counsel of a manager/confidante, with whose assistance she/he either reverses the decline or dies. (266)

This kind of plotting can be found in many late 1970s and early 1980s country biopics of the rock ‘n’ roll generation. Representative examples are: Urban Cowboy (1980), Coal Miner’s Daughter (1980) and Tender Mercies (1983). The similar assumptions of their struggles in life, displayed in overlapping associations with their proper names, can be partly explained by the already mentioned interconnectedness of the music genres themselves (Kerschbaumer 23–24). Therefore, James Mangold surely did stay within the conventions of both genres when adopting elements of the country formula (Brackett 248–249).

To adhere to the formula, the narrative of Walk the Line needs to begin with Cash’s childhood and end with his second marriage. In the beginning, the audience is briefly introduced to his difficult childhood. One sees images of the rural South during the Great Depression. The film then focuses largely on Cash’s early career to foreground the tension between his life at home and his exciting rock ‘n’ roller life on the road. His success and developing preferences of his new way of life, accompanied by
character transformation, bring about jealousy and a lack of understanding on Vivian’s (his first wife) part. The growing tension between his old and transforming self, in addition to childhood trauma, leads him to escapist drug abuse and, subsequently, his career suffers. June Carter, who will be explored in detail in Chapter 4, is portrayed as his personal savior, adhering to the role of the confidante and the woman behind the Great Man who helps him overcome his personal and professional issues.

Cash’s diverse persona enables Mangold to produce a biopic that addresses both fans of country and rock ‘n’ roll artists. A close reading of the key scenes in Chapter 4 also shows that Walk the Line contains many common country music tropes to stress the film’s affiliation with the genre. Moreover, the element of locating the subject’s roots in a rural white worker environment adds a layer to Cash’s representation. Only by portraying Cash’s tough past can the audience fully appreciate his success “in love and career” (Brackett 266).

3.4 The “Zoomed-in Approach”

3.4.1 Focus on Early Career

The creation of melodramatic elements by adhering to the “sex, drugs and rock ‘n’ roll” stereotype, paired with the legacy aspect of the Great Man biopic and the rural South working class struggle of the country music biopic formula, present the filmmaker with the building blocks of a potential blockbuster. To successfully manipulate these blocks into a coherent film, Mangold chooses the “zoomed-in approach” associated with the new biopic. His narrative focuses on Cash’s early life in order to work with the persona transformations connected to his early drug-related downfall and subsequent redemption. Figure 1 shows the “subway stations” (Bourdieu 302) used to represent his early life:
The prison concert is, except for Cash’s second marriage, the last galvanizing episode the audience is presented with. The narrative ends before the success of the prison concerts transforms him from a national to an international star. Furthermore, the prison session functions as a device to clearly show the bond of affection between Cash and the social pariahs. However, his time as an activist for Native Americans, for example, is not mentioned in the film, although he already wrote the critical song *Old Apache Squaw* about their critical circumstances in 1957 and actually claimed to be an activist on TV in 1966 (*Rainbow Quest*). To use Spielberg’s painting analogy once again: “[I]t was one painting out of many that could have been drawn [...]” (Hoad). Hence, Mangold ignored the events of his advanced years to successfully frame his desired Cash with the Folsom prison concerts.

### 3.4.2. Excursus: A Different Painting - Focus on Late Comeback

Another director might have gone for a different period of Cash’s life or concentrated his/her efforts more on his professional work as a musician rather than the personal transformations of the Cash persona. To illustrate this thought, we look at the documentary *Cash vs. Music Row* (2010). It deals with Cash’s difficulties to conform to the changing country music industry in the 1980s and shows how this affected his career until it flourished again in 1990. Here, the audience gets to see Cash as a solid rock of an artist who succeeded by always remaining true to himself and to the music he loves.

This documentary brings out a Johnny Cash who did not transform at all. He might have lost his influence on the country music community, but his attitude seems to appeal to a large rock music audience of the so-called “lost generation”. We see how,
with the help of producer Rick Rubin, who worked with bands such as *The Beasty Boys Slayer, or System of a Down*, the country music star was able to change his target group by 'staying true' to himself and his music. Suddenly, Cash began playing in locations closely related to new loud rock sounds, such as *The Viper Room* on the Sunset Blvd., Los Angeles. However, the country industry continued to ignore Cash’s late comeback until he passed away in May 2003.

The documentary ends with the 37th CMA Awards right after his death, when the audience sees how Cash was finally honored for his recent accomplishments by the country music community; he posthumously won three CMA Awards. Cash, thus, in the end, “won” against the music row, even though he did not live to see it. However, the producer of *Cash vs. Music Row* emphasizes in this depiction that Cash would not have cared much about the awards; the documentary conveys that Cash always wanted to make music that had an impact (*Cash vs. Music Row*).

### 3.4.3 The Chosen Focus

*Cash vs. Music Row* (2010) concentrates on Cash’s later life with a focus on his professional career. It demonstrates that there are enough potential building blocks to create various exciting representations of the “Man in Black”. As already discussed, Mangold chose a certain period of his life. However, why does *Walk the Line* focus so much on the personal transformation of his early life?

Inglis offers a possible explanation when she argues that the work of the rock ‘n’ roll era was seemingly not perceived as valuable as other musical accomplishments of the previous and following era: “[T]here are many movies telling the stories of some of the best known popular musicians and composers of the pre-rock ‘n’ roll era; indeed, [they concentrate] on music as a central, rather than incidental, narrative component [...]” (82). In other words, Inglis suggests that the music of the rock ‘n’ roll generation is, in general, perceived as less important by filmmakers and, therefore, predominate the melodramatic elements in the narration of a rock ‘n’ roll celebrity’s life. Although biopics such as *I’m Not There* (2007) break away from the common framework, a cinematic
tendency of foregrounding personal issues is undeniable. Mangold even confirms and defends his approach to *Walk the Line* by stating in an interview, “that this isn’t really John’s story as a musician. I don’t feel you can make a movie about that. […] It was through his emotional struggles that he found his artistic identity” (qtd. in Levine).

Anthony DeCurtis mentions another point for the chosen focus in *Walk the Line* when he states that this time of Cash’s life is seen as the reason for his connection to young people (Cash vs. Music Row Part 2 00:07:17) His proper name definitely is connected to an outlaw image, and the battle with his inner demons seems to appeal to “Generation X”. Thus, it is not illogical that *Walk the Line* conforms to the marketing strategy of his late comeback with *American Recordings* to attract that fan base who enjoyed the “gutbucket songs of sin and redemption” (Horton). The online music magazine *udiscovermusic*. and *Pitchfork* both published articles about these albums in retrospect in late 2018, partly analyzing the image Cash tried to establish during the second half of the 90s. Already in the subtitle of the *udiscovermusic*. article, one finds the fitting description of “Helmed by Rick Rubin, Johnny Cash’s *American Recordings* saw the country legend make a stunning return late in his career, re-establishing his rebel cred” (Milano). While Milano praises the authenticity of the album, *Pitchfork* writer Horton sides with rather critical voices. Although he also acknowledges:

The triumphant rebirth of the Man in Black, a tortured soul who sings about killing and being forgiven for killing [as a] shrewd marketing idea […] He had to stare at the grimy lights of the Sunset Strip to be the ancient voice of the dirt he’s known as now. A mythic American artist must be created and curated and rebranded. (Horton)
The album itself can, according to Horton, only be considered average in the sphere of Cash’s artistic work and is described as not the best place to begin the journey of understanding his musical testimony. Levine, a *New York Times* writer, also raises criticism on the album in terms of confining his legacy in the way of removing “a dimension or two, such as the devotional side or his humorous side.”

Clearly, fans only familiar with Cash’s work and image of the 90s were interested in his early career. There must have been a curiosity as to how he became the artist they saw in *The Viper Room. With Walk the Line*, even fans who were not willing to pick up his (auto)biographies now have a visually appealing representation of Cash’s earlier days.

Some music critics might actually be satisfied with Mangold’s chosen focus. Horton, for example, states that “there’s still only one definitive starting place, and that’s the prison albums, where country, gospel and rockabilly get soaked in ethanol.” A story of fall and redemption to explain the magic of Folsom may fit nicely not only in the marketing strategy of Cash’s 90s comeback but also in the overarching narrative of the Johnny Cash story, which neglects his rather “uncool” 80s image; the story just aligns perfectly with his proper name. As fellow country star and friend Kris Kristofferson already described Cash in his tribute song *The Pilgrim, Chapter 33* (1971):

He has tasted good and evil in your bedrooms and your bars
And he’s traded in tomorrow for today
Runnin’ from the devils Lord and reachin’ for the stars
And losin’ all he loved along the way
But if this world keeps right on turnin’ for the better or the worse
All he ever gets is older and around
From the rockin’ of the cradle to the rollin’ of the hearse
The going up was worth the coming down
This image may have been constructed from the moment Cash entered Sun Records as a young man to get his first record deal. Then and there, he was persuaded to take on the name “Johnny” because of its rebellious outlaw connotation at the time (Butler 6). It became part of his legacy, which *Walk the Line* follows very closely.

### 3.5 Closing Shot

The general formula is clear: biopics tend to tick off seemingly important events of the film’s subject. In my opinion, however, film critics tend to overlook the difficult task of depicting character transformation in the realm of the subject’s proper name. In the case of the “Man in Black”, why prison inmates connected to his sinner-saint persona is something that the audience needs to know in order to successfully portray his career milestone at the Folsom prison. Therefore, personal issues are foregrounded to give Cash’s emotional struggle the room to be recognized as part of his, as Mangold put it, “artistic identity”. Additionally, to connect emotionally with the audience is key to a successful production. To see legends rise and fall on screen, along with filling up the spaces in between with one seemingly meaningful transformation-triggering period to another, seems to do the trick. Sale figures and an IMDb rating of the musical biopic of 7.9/10 convey the impression that even true fans, after all, just want to connect emotionally to their hero. One seems to be longing for a star with very humane attributes, vices, and obstacles to overcome—simply somebody one can relate to.
Let us forget for a moment that the person in the above still is actor Joaquin Phoenix playing Cash in *Walk the Line*. What then does the film still signify? Essentially, one finds two men in the frame. With a shallow depth of field, the focus is on the dark clothed figure in the back. The low angle of the shot suggests that the man out of focus is at a table, conversing with others, and this creates a dominant but also distant position of the dark figure. Additionally, this circumstance is reinforced by his dark sunglasses—clearly unnecessary in what looks like an office environment. He is instead shielding himself from the people and their words. He does not seem to care much about the ongoing action and prefers to keep staring at the ground while smoking his cigarette, projecting a casual and indifferent aura. In other words, he is portrayed as very “cool” and sure of himself. Whatever the people on the table are discussing, he seems to have already made up his mind, and, therefore, does not see any need to join them.

Although I am aware that by knowing the movie by heart, I may have conducted a biased analysis, the point I am trying to make is that, in this scene, which is in the last twenty minutes of the movie, concerning James Mangold’s road of fall and redemption, the audience is finally introduced to *the* Johnny Cash. He has now fully transformed into
the unstoppable Great Man who is about to fulfill his destiny of becoming the legendary “Man in Black”.

In the following chapter, I will analyze the primary crossroads Mangold prepared for Cash to transform into this Great Man. I have aimed to solve the picture puzzle of the *Walk the Line* Johnny Cash by analyzing key scenes as metaphorical puzzle pieces. Additionally, I will show how the filmic construction is woven together by the discussed biopic formulas and the common themes of childhood trauma, true love, and (self-) forgiveness. Additionally, I will examine how common country music tropes were utilized to prepare Cash’s downfall. During Cash’s early career, the common lyrical themes of country music were, according to Inglis (89), “guilt, adultery, remorse, betrayal, alcoholism and divorce,” which aligns perfectly with the discourse of “sex, drugs and rock ‘n’ roll.”

Figure 3: country music tropes
The graphic representation shown in *figure 3*, drawn up by the team of statisticians of *Westworld*, confirms this tendency with their “ten biggest tropes in country music” (Rogers). When one analyzes these tropes in relation to the film, it seems plausible that Mangold actually did build his film around these common tropes in order to highlight the country music connotation of the film. Furthermore, I will discuss the selected scenes in relation to the Johnny Cash persona found in his (auto)biographies and other writings to underline the constructed nature of the biopic.

Piece by piece, I will now explore Mangold’s biographical journey of the door-to-door salesman one finds in the still below to find the fully-transformed “Man in Black” of the still above at the end of the road.

![Figure 4: Walk the Line [film still] 00:19:53](image-url)
4.1. Falling Into the Man in Black

The process of his eventual recovery reflects how the pain he caused himself, his family, and his friends had a redemptive role in the formation of his person. And, likewise, his own suffering of loss and personal defeat helped form the compassion demonstrated in his life and music toward prisoners and other sufferers. (Bilynskyj 214)

Bilynskyj’s analysis of the original Johnny Cash persona suits the already discussed intentions. From the beginning, the “Man in Black” was, to some extent, a construct, and Walk the Line plays its part in the formation of Cash’s proper legacy. It is a story about fall and redemption. This chapter is concerned with the effective filmic creation of that necessary fall. I argue that this is achieved by making use of tropes commonly found in country music and adopting the theme of psychological trauma that resulted in escapist drug abuse and subsequent suffering.

4.1.1. Introducing the Circular Saw Amphetamine Blues

In the first minutes of Walk the Line, the spectator is presented with a major milestone of Johnny Cash’s life; the event that took his career to another level and put him on international stages—the live recording At Folsom Prison. Similar to other biopic storylines, such as Ray, the audience begins the journey to the subject’s proper name with a scene that signifies the already full-fledged Johnny Cash and establishes ties to a traumatic event of his childhood. After being shown some images of the prison and inmates awaiting his encore, the spectator sees a close up of a circular saw and finds the absent-minded Mr. Cash playing with it. The exact same scene is then shown again near the end of the film (2:12:41); this time, the spectator is aware of its significance. It, therefore, functions as a framing device for the film. This is to remind the viewer of the long road Cash had to walk to become the man we see seconds later performing Cocaine Blues — a song about “guns, drugs, domestic violence, escaping the law, even the first occurrence of the phrase “bad bitch”!" (Genius) to “a bunch of murderers and rapists[…]” (Walk the Line 02:11:59). The musical biopic parody Walk Hard: The Dewey Cox Story successfully satirized this particular part with the line: “Dewey Cox needs to
think about his entire life before he plays” (00:01:21). Hereby the parody refers to the formulaic nature of musical biopics.

For the storyline of *Walk the Line*, it is important to show Johnny Cash’s rough childhood not only to fully appreciate his success in the manner of the Great Man biopic but also, more importantly, to introduce the protagonist’s psychological trauma of losing his brother to a circular saw accident, which, in his adulthood, resulted in drug abuse. Therefore, subsequent to the opening foreshadowing scene, the film takes the audience to Dyess, Arkansas in 1944, where the pre-legendary Johnny Cash lived as a child. The first ten minutes roughly serves to introduce the audience to the harsh rural life of an American family in the south. It depicts the difficulties of making a living as cotton pickers on state property during the years of the Great Depression.

The first scenes are heavily influenced by country music tropes. One finds “no money”, represented by their poor and hard life, the importance of religious values signified by Cash’s older brother Jack who is portrayed as a saint and loved and admired by his whole family, especially young Johnny Cash. Finally, alcohol is shown to be abused by Cash’s father Ray when confronted with the blow of fate of losing his favored son Jack.

The depiction of Cash’s father’s way of handling the trauma is a key element of Cash’s character formation. While the audience may relate to his actions motivated by grief, he is portrayed as the main source of Johnny Cash’s psychological childhood trauma and escapist behavior. This circumstance is best signified by the scene after Jack’s memorial service at the end of the third chapter with the fitting title *The Wrong Son* (Walk the Line 00:06:42). This scene is dominated by close up shots to put emphasis on Ray’s and young Cash’s relationship, which is signified by their body language (in fact, it is non-verbal only on Cash’s side) while communicating with each other.

In the first shot, the spectator finds young Cash, called by his birth name JR in the scene, sitting in front of the radio, which functions as an escape from reality. The radio represents his love for entering a different world through music, and the audience
is about to witness the reason for this escapist attitude, the treatment of his father. A close-up shot with shallow depth of field is used to focus the attention on young Cash when we hear the diegetic sound of a door outside the frame. He looks up to follow the sound and with an eyeline match, the next shot reveals that his eyes meet the eyes of his obviously drunk father for a moment. The eye contact does not last long and mirrors their disturbed relationship. Hence, young JR tries to focus again on his escape from his current reality. Ray, however, is not willing to let him have his piece and produces unnecessary loud noise when looking for something to eat. As a reaction, JR’s shoulders go up and his gaze goes down; he avoids eye contact and seemingly wishes to just disappear. To underpin the element of escapism, he even touches the radio now, which can be read as a pacifying action (see figure 5).

Figure 5: Walk the Line [film still] 00:10:13

His father, who was presented before as a person who cares little for young JR’s passion for music and favored Jack’s ambition of becoming a pastor, interferes even more aggressively by positioning himself right in front of his child to comment on his opinion of music in relation to his son: “You know what that is, JR? Nothing. That’s what that is. That’s what that’s worth. And that’s what you are” (Walk the Line 00:10:22). In the process of voicing his statement in a threatening way, he even moves closer to his son and emphasizes the statement by putting his hand in an empty can and wildly shaking it (see figure 6).
Besides underlining the psychological aggression of the scene, Ray’s whirling hand also signifies his view that, with music, one will not be able to put proper food on the table. The presented male role is one of a hardworking man whose sole purpose in life is to provide for his family. There is no room for creativity in Ray’s patriarchal perspective on life. This portrayal of the Cash household is further reinforced by the way Ray reacts to a pacifying attempt of his wife. When she tells him to stop and that “he didn’t do this” (Walk the Line 00:10:23), referring to Jack’s death, Ray responds by rapidly raising the can in a threatening way, acting as if he was about to throw it at her (see figure 7). In this scene, male dominance is clearly expressed through aggression.
Ray is portrayed as a dominant father who disapproves anything outside his own values, and as his younger son does not adhere to these values as strongly as his late son, he disapproves of him as well. This circumstance is intensified in the scene by showing Ray being a drunk and heartbroken man who is mourning the death of his eldest son. At this moment, he channels his negative feelings into blaming young Johnny Cash. All this is expressed when Ray screams in anger and the audience hears what they need to hear in order to fully grasp the psychological childhood trauma: “the devil did this. He took the wrong son!” (Walk the Line 00:10:46). While the spectator may relate to Ray’s feelings, he is depicted as an abusive father who is blaming young Johnny Cash not only for the way he is or how he wants to be but also for the sole fact of being alive.

To sum up this scene, the audience is aware of the burden Johnny Cash has to bear from the beginning. Childhood trauma and “daddy issues” are common themes in biopics to justify the subsequent escapist behavior as an adult, including drug abuse. The analyzed scene conveys the theme of trauma very strongly. To lose the brother he loved and admired, only to get blamed for his death and for still being alive instead of his brother, creates dramatic tension and a relatable framework for Cash’s successive fall.

“Fact” and Fiction

“Jack was my big brother and my hero: my best friend, my big buddy, my mentor, and my protector. We fit very well, Jack and I; we were very happy. I loved him. I really admired him, too. I looked up to him and I respected him” (John Cash 25). This description of Cash’s autobiography mirrors the depiction of Walk the Line. It is important for the film to establish that deep connection of brotherhood Cash had with Jack in order to successfully portray the devastation his death caused him and the whole family.

However, concerning Jack’s death, some aspects of the film deviate from the autobiography to create a more dramatic scene and cut some “unimportant” details to narrow down the narrative to a few minutes, for example, whether Jack, according to
the autobiography, works at the high-school agriculture shop and not at his neighbor's barn as depicted in the biopic. Furthermore, the “I feel like something’s going to happen” (John Cash 25) part is elaborated in much greater length in the book. The film depicts his death as an unexpected tragedy. While this is clearly a subjective statement on the autobiographer’s side, one can rather trust Cash in relation to the timespan of Jack’s death struggle. Jack was brought to a hospital after the accident and, unlike the biopic which suggests that he died on the same day, he stayed there for almost a week and underwent medical procedures before he passed away. Additionally, the impact Jack’s death had on Johnny Cash is in the autobiography described at length, while the initial trauma is overshadowed in the film by the abusive behavior of his father Ray to construct the typical musical biopic childhood trauma of foregrounding “daddy issues” (John Cash 24–28).

The depiction of Ray in his first autobiography and interviews prior to his father’s death is very different from how the audience of Walk the Line perceives him and his role in Cash’s character formation. Even eight years after his death, Cash still described him in an interview as “a man of love [and] a good, strong man who provided for his family” (Eichenthal 00:12:04). Moreover, Cash argued that Ray quit drinking after Jack’s death, while the biopic conveys the impression that he actually started (John Cash 258).

However, the authorized biography of Steve Turner lines up with Ray’s negative impact on Cash’s life:

Cash could never quite bring himself to tell the full story of his early life and inner conflicts produced during those years. His anger, self-destructive tendencies, and insecurity quite possibly originated with his early relationship with his father, Ray Cash, though […] he expressed nothing but admiration for the man. (18)

Turner further stated that Cash might have never accused his father publicly, but admitted to intimate people in his life that Ray blamed him for his brother’s passing (30). Furthermore, one finds confirmation for Ray’s stance on popular music as a waste of time, which “kept people’s minds off what was important and filled their head with escapist rubbish” (Turner 26).
To conclude, Johnny Cash was not willing to share these aspects of his past and left it to the biographers who drew the required information from friends and family and not from Cash himself. One can only speculate whether Cash was simply not willing to demean his father out of respect or personal interest. After all, his stage persona was that of a strong man who never looked back. Therefore, Cash’s decision could have been to avoid the possibility of an open discussion about his childhood trauma going against this image, as he would rather create one of fragility in the context of the social masculinity construct to which he adhered throughout his life.

4.1.2. Sex, Drugs, Rock ‘n’ Roll and Young Love

After the first ten minutes that cover his traumatic childhood, the audience is introduced to the mature Johnny Cash who is leaving home to serve in the air force. Later, we find the protagonist having money-related problems again when he is trying to offer his first wife Vivian the life she expects.

Cash works as a door-to-door salesman, while simultaneously focusing on his dream of being a professional musician. He puts together a gospel music band. Again, the country music tropes of religion and money are depicted in the film. After a successful audition at Sun Records, his career finally takes off. Until this moment, Johnny Cash is characterized as a person who adheres to the values represented by his father. Working hard to provide for his family seems to be his purpose in life. However, he never gave up on his dream of becoming a musician. Eventually, his dream interferes heavily with being a family man. With his growing success, he starts to distance himself from his life at home, and the musician’s life on the road becomes increasingly important to him. This development goes hand in hand with his new love for June Carter, who is touring with him, Jerry Lew Lewis, and Elvis. The scenes illustrating his tour include not only their lives on and off stage but also them driving on the open road to get from one concert to another; again, a connection to country music tropes can be identified here. As a romantic relationship between Cash and Carter quickly develops, he is driven even further away from a life centered around family matters.
The ongoing transformation is clearly represented in the following scene. Their portrayal adheres to the music biopic formula. Cash’s success, which goes hand in hand with his change of character, brings about jealousy on Vivian’s side. The inner changes that both Vivian and Johnny undergo are in the biopic facilitated by many close-ups. They seem to actually know from the start of their conversation that they are already living in two different worlds; it is apparent that his new exciting adventures on the road have a strong negative effect on their shared life set around family matters.

The recurring tension between home, in this scene represented by Vivian, and the road, which becomes increasingly important to Cash, is presented as the main cause for Johnny’s escapist behavior as an adult. In prior scenes, the audience witnesses that Cash is really enjoying the attention of the crowd on stage and of his colleagues off stage, especially that of June Carter. In fact, in the preceding scene, Cash and Carter have a deep and meaningful conversation; it becomes obvious that he starts to develop feelings for her. The non-diegetic music I Miss You Already by Faron Young functions as a sound bridge that underlines the growing tension. The song starts at the end of the scene and continues into the beginning of the subsequent scene, which we are about to analyze. Even the lyrics stress Cash’s growing love for the road, which is clearly connected to his relationship to June Carter. Although Cash has now achieved the goal of his former self, namely, to buy a proper house to raise his family, the viewer can already imagine that his priorities start to change and that he wants to be back on tour as soon as possible.

In the selected scene in the chapter “New Rules” (Walk the Line 00:50:33-00:53:36), Johnny is shown to be on the road for some time and is now supposed to help move into his and Vivian’s new house in California. The scene opens with two movers who carry a table into the new house, signifying that they really just moved in. This shot is followed by a cut-in transition, and the viewer now finds him/herself in the kitchen. A shallow depth of field is used to focus the attention of the shot on Vivian, with Cash’s sister being out of focus in the foreground. Through a door, we see the movers in the house’s vestibule in the background. With slow camera movement, the carriers are out of the picture and only the two women in the kitchen are visible.
The kitchen as the heart of the house has, especially in the depicted time, a strong connotation to housewives and represents a life centered around family matters (see figure 8). The decor in the kitchen shot amplifies Vivian’s dream of a “regular life”. Even though they just moved in, nothing is left to unbox; everything is already at its place. This clearly expresses that Vivian needs a permanent home and stability in her life — something a musician who is constantly touring simply cannot offer.

Vivian speaks of “John”, an audible confirmation that the audience is no longer dealing with “Johnny”, the man on the big stage. The spectator accompanies her in a following shot as she moves through the house looking for him. In the next shot, we see John, who is obviously exhausted from the tour, napping in a black armchair. His room of choice signifies anything but stability. Half unpacked boxes dominate the decor of the room, which represents living more on the road than making oneself at home. Additionally, the visible items have strong connotations to his life outside “Vivian’s” four walls. The three stools in front of the bar may represent, for example, social interaction with colleagues and the consumption of alcohol. The coffee mug is associated with adrenalizing substances, and as he is sleeping, the coffee is clearly not strong enough, therefore, the abuse of amphetamines comes to mind. Music, as another important part
of his life on the road, is represented by the radio and the notebooks on the small side table, which signify his devotion to songwriting. The whole room signifies his escapist attitude (see figure 9). Similar to little JR hiding from his father, grown-up John is now trying to escape from Vivian’s home by surrounding himself with objects of his life as a musician. Furthermore, we find differences in terms of lightning from the previous shot. In the kitchen large windows allow natural light to create a homey atmosphere, while the dim lighting in John’s room, despite it being a bright day outside, facilitates the tension and the overall mood of unhappiness.

![Figure 9: Walk the Line [film still] 00:51:00](image)

Immediately after Vivian enters the room, we see her in a medium close-up shot as she says in a calm voice: “Thought you were gonna help me today, John” (Walk the Line 00:51:05), followed by a rather disappointed, but not aggressive, facial expression, which turns into an almost condescending smile. The low angle of the shot suggests dominance and amplifies her accusation. With the gender representation of the previous kitchen setting still in mind, she almost reminds one of a loving but strict mother who is deciding what to do with a naughty child.

The following medium close-up shot of Johnny provides the audience with the exact image that one would expect of a man who actually wants to be somewhere else. We find him sitting in the black armchair, which highlights his pale exhausted facial expression (see figure 10). His half-closed eyes suggest that he is either lost in thoughts
about his life on the road or has dozed off dreaming about it. This assumption is further expressed by his delayed reaction to Vivian’s statement. Moreover, one wonders if the “Man in Black” is dressed in a shirt that reminds one of a vertically striped prison uniform. The mise en scène, thus, already conveys his inner conflict. On one hand, home is a place one cannot truly escape, a place where a devoted Christian, especially, is bound to by the holy bond of matrimony. On the other hand, he loves his life on the road, as represented by the items he surrounds himself with. However, the audience already gets the feeling that he would rather be the “Man in Black” than the man in grey stripes. The transformation from a family man who would actually enjoy spending time with his wife and children to a man who loves the exciting life on the road is already clearly visible.

Figure 10: Walk the Line [film still] 00:51:08

With these codes in mind, one can easily determine that John’s reassuring words in the conversation contradict his non-verbal signals. During their discussion, Cash claims to be happy when he is here. When he tries to comfort Vivian, the audience sees her while she is looking directly at her husband. Vivian has already taken a seat and faces him now on an equal level, suggesting that an honest conversation from one adult to another is necessary. A close-up shot with a restricted depth of field is used to signify this emotional moment. The audience seems to be invading her personal space and is compelled to focus on her facial expression, gaze, and gestures of head and neck.
John’s contradiction of verbal and non-verbal communication is mirrored in Vivian’s body language. When the conversation started, she tilted her head to the side, communicating that she is interested in her husband’s words. Additionally, by exposing a vulnerable part of her body, she also communicates to trust him not to harm her (Parvez). Therefore, we can assume that she was expecting honesty. However, as soon as Johnny claims to be happy, she moves her head into an almost upright position (see figure 11). His words obviously fail to meet her expectations. This is additionally signified by her disappointed gaze. One is virtually able to read her thoughts at this particular moment. She might think: “Really John? You’re happy right now?”

![Image](https://via.placeholder.com/150)

Figure 11: Walk the Line [film still] 00:51:36

The fact that Cash contradicts himself becomes even more obvious when he says “I like waking up and seeing your face” (Walk the Line 00:51:39) while his gaze is downcast the entire time. By avoiding eye contact, he may be trying to mask his contradicting body language. Furthermore, a downcast gaze is also associated with guilt or feeling uncomfortable about a lie; both evident in the frame (see figure 12). Then we see Vivian again in a close-up shot, her gaze still communicating disappointment and disbelief. She looks at his face, but cannot establish eye contact. The assumption that John feels uncomfortable is then confirmed, as he stands up and moves over to the bar to light a cigarette, which functions as an excuse to escape home, represented by Vivian.
The bar might give him some comfort as the aforementioned connotations bring him somewhat closer to his life on the road. Then, a rather long silence follows, which Vivian breaks by bringing up a topic connected to John’s life on the road. She mentions that the fan letters are 10 to 1 from girls and that they are obscene. On Vivian’s side, the comment on the fan letters is clearly meant as an accusation, but Cash’s face brightens for the first time in the scene (see figure 13).
Vivian’s words trigger a memory of the tour, and in the comfort of the bar, he tells a lively story about girls running after them. His face expresses pure happiness; he just loves to finally end the conversation about their relationship and talk about the things he enjoys, namely his life on the road. During the story, the spectator finds him-/herself looking at Vivian, framed in a medium shot. We can determine that her prior will to have an honest conversation is now gone. Her face expresses not only a mixture of anger and disgust but also displays that she is emotionally hurt. Vivian then interrupts his story and brings the conversation back to a home-related matter. Additionally, she expresses that she does not want to talk about the tour. She makes her position clear by standing up, which puts her in a dominant position, and says: “In fact, that’s my new rule. When you come home, I wanna get right down to talking about regular things” (Walk the Line 00:52:57). With every word, her face hardens more and more, and her tone gets stricter; she gains confidence in herself, which is expressed by her raised chin. The slightly low camera angle underlines her dominance; her body language conveys that she feels like she has every right to tell him how to behave in “her” home.

Cash is cornered by Vivian’s dominant behavior, and so he starts to defend his new way of life, and it is clear that a heated argument is about to begin. Cash starts by invalidating her arguments; he tells her how hard and stressful his life is, emphasizes on his inner conflict between home and road, and ends by listing his accomplishments with regard to the benefits Vivian enjoys now. In the meantime, his voice constantly raises and he becomes more aggressive until he screams at her with a threatening voice: “What do you want from me?” We see Johnny in a medium close-up shot; therefore, his wild gestures become visible. His facial expression is indicative of rage, expressed by his narrow eyes, tightened lips, red face, and his swollen neck. His whole body is tense; he starts to wildly wave his hands around and leans forward, which intensifies the potential threat (see figure 14). He clearly tries to intimidate his wife with male dominance; a clear parallel to the preceding scene analysis.
However, Vivian does not step back and answers his rhetorical question in an aggressive but shaky voice: “I want you John, I want you. And I want everything you promised me” (Walk the Line 00:53:22). Additionally, her facial expression also signals mixed feelings; her eyes are narrowed and the eyebrows are lowered, but the watery eyes reveal her distress\(^6\) (see figure 15). The message conveyed is that she wants him to be at home and truly like being there. She wants him to build his life around their family and not use their home to prepare and rest for the tour. With this interpretation in mind, Cash, still enraged, fails to mask his feelings and openly admits that he would rather choose the life on the road when he says: “Well, what if I can’t do that?” (Walk the Line 00:53:29). Vivian smiles bitterly to express that there is nothing to add, as he has already made up his mind and evidently revealed his thoughts. One can almost imagine her train of thought: “John, we both know that you already made your choice.” Therefore, the end of the scene underlines Johnny Cash’s inability to be the husband Vivian desires. Additionally, the tension between “home” and “road” will be continually exploited in *Walk the Line* to serve as a constant source of dramatic effect.

\(^6\) Although anger and tears are also a common combination
To conclude, although, as spectators, we can relate to Vivian’s side of the conflict, we still sympathize with Johnny Cash. Vivian is portrayed as a one-dimensional housewife, who is craving all the conveniences that come with Cash’s success, but is not willing to accept his life on the road. She demands attention and clearly expresses that she wants Cash to be a family man. Despite these relatable wishes, *Walk the Line* is a male-centered biopic, and, therefore, one tends to look past his familial missteps. Hence, the audience perceives Vivian as an obstacle in the path of Johnny Cash’s passion, which coincides with his father’s negative attitude towards his musical career. She is depicted as an always nagging and jealous housewife who stands in the protagonist’s way of becoming a Great Man and finding his true love (Harsin). One often finds similar situations in country music, represented in *figure 3* by the trope “young love”, which is extensively used to justify Cash’s behavior. The audience sees that he loved Vivian, but he was also “subconsciously blinded” (“Young Love”) by that love. To enter into the holy bond of matrimony at a rather young age is often portrayed as naive, and, in Cash’s case, he just didn’t see that they actually have different ambitions in life. June shares these ambitions and is, therefore, illustrated as the better choice. However, Carter also adheres to religious values and, thus, rejects the idea of a romantic relationship with a married man. This conflict further facilitates inner tensions and feeds

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7 Vivian was 17 when they met and 3 years later they got married
Cash’s escapist nature. After the rejection of both woman, drug and alcohol abuse are the determining factors in the depiction of Johnny Cash’s life, which is torn between Vivian and June, torn between “home” and “road”.

“Fact” and Fiction

‘Johnny, I have thought long about – and prayed about – writing a book. I want to write a book and tell our story, and the truth of what happened. [...] How do you feel about that?’ I kept my eyes fixed on Johnny’s face, watching for a change in his expression. ‘I’ve been thinking about that for the past couple of years,’ he said without a breath of hesitation. ‘I think it’s a great idea.’ (V. Cash 7)

Two years after the release of *Walk the Line*, for the first time, Vivian shared insights into their marriage from her perspective in *I Walked the Line: My Life with Johnny*. Although the media likes to read her book as a “retort to the Oscar-winning 2005 film” (*Heightline*), Vivian actually died four months before the film’s release and her editor finished the book. Therefore, one can only guess to what extent the making of the film truly motivated Vivian to compose the book. Either way, its mere existence suggests that she wanted to tell her story and write her own legacy. Although we do not know about Vivian’s reaction to the film or if she even managed to see it before her death. Her daughter Kathy Cash, however, clearly objects to Vivian’s portrayal: “My mom was basically a nonentity in the entire film except for the mad little psycho who hated his career. That’s not true. She loved his career and was proud of him until he started taking drugs and stopped coming home” (qtd. in “Cash’s daughter”). Let us examine the extent to which the stories differ.

First of all, it is important to take notice of the fact that Vivian’s book was, as indicated in the introduction of this chapter, supported by Johnny Cash. As the title *I Walked the Line* suggests, Cash clearly gave his blessing. Additionally, both Vivian and her biographer supposedly sat down with him and talked about the project. In the introduction, we find parts of their conversation that underline his support even if the content would later shed light on unknown details that may differ from the constructed Johnny Cash persona: “‘Johnny, some of your fans might be upset hearing the details of
our divorce and what happened. [...] I do worry deeply about the reaction the public will have.’ But Johnny didn’t waver his support. ‘Like I said, all my fans will read it. They’ll love it,’ he said with confidence, ‘It’s time’ ” (V. Cash 78). Furthermore, we find evidence that Vivian was aware of her role in Cash’s legacy: “[...] people of the Nashville-mindset [...] prefer that I be written out of Johnny’s history altogether” (V. Cash 9) This statement conveys that Vivian’s story does not fit into the Johnny Cash narrative.

Concerning Vivian’s portrayal in Walk the Line as a one-dimensional housewife who, alike his father, did not support his career, the book reveals many incidences where she actually shared his love for music. She draws, for example, this homely picture of their relationship: “In the evenings, I would roll my hair on our bed while Johnny sat next to me and played his guitar and wrote songs. And we listened endlessly to music on the radio” (V. Cash 11). Even though Vivian makes it clear that she also dreamed about his career as a musician (V. Cash 12), between the lines of “[t]here was nothing back than to suggest a superstar in the making or the material success that would come within a year after we were married”, one can read that her support back then might not have been completely different from the image conveyed in the biopic. Her description of the day Cash came home with the Sun Records deal supports this reading: “I don’t want to say I didn’t believe it, because Johnny sounded really good, but I was so surprised. Things like that just didn’t happen to regular people like me and Johnny” (V. Cash 276). Moreover, Vivian speaks of “blindly follow a dream” (V. Cash 276). Albeit the phrase is set in a positive context, the use of the word “blindly” may convey her true feelings. After all, due to his success, both of their lives completely changed, and Vivian might have actually preferred their life as regular people. She described herself as “[t]he shy daughter of an insurance salesman from San Antonio, and [her] life’s ambition was to be a wife and a mother.” This poses the question if Vivian would really not have wanted Cash to “get right down to talking about regular things” (Walk the Line 00:52:57) when he came back home after a tour.

As stated before, Walk the Line plays with the tension between “home” and “road” to further develop Cash’s escapist behavior. While Vivian is portrayed as a housewife who always wanted a decent regular life, Cash is portrayed as somebody
who loves excitement, reaches for the stars, and enjoys the unexpected things in life. Their ambitions in life might have been similar when they met, but as the country music trope “young love” indicates, their love is troubled by the development of their personalities. In the film, Vivian is another obstacle to overcome in order to complete Cash’s character transformation. Due to the reaction of Kathy Cash who objects her mother’s portrayal and the foreword of the book where a concerned Vivian speaks of the public impact of her story, one would expect to find a more opposing narrative. We can only ask ourselves if the book would have had a different character had Vivian not cared for Cash’s blessing. However, in that case the public might have never gotten the chance to lay eyes on it. In the biopic, Johnny Cash finds an equal companion in June Carter, somebody who is already living the life he had always dreamt about. When his dream finally came true, Vivian was not able to cope with his success. In Walk the Line, she was not able to transform the way he did. May be it was due to the life on the road, the temptations of fame, or the drugs, either way Cash was pursuing a very different goal in life—he was living his dream of becoming the legendary Johnny Cash. While it is clearly unfair of James Mangold to portray Vivian in such a one-dimensional manner; in relation to Johnny Cash’s legacy, her role was merely adapted to suit the “Woman behind the Great Man narrative.” In the afterword of Vivian’s book, her biographer asked her: “What do you think your legacy will be? What do you want to be?’ [S]he answered simply, ‘I hope my legacy is one of being a devoted mother and a devoted wife.’” (V. Cash 321). In my opinion, the two portrayals are not so different after all.
4.1.3 Big Old Expensive Tractor Stuck in the Mud

The Johnny Cash legacy turned out to be very different from that of a decent family man. Vivian describes in her book that even at his memorial tribute show, he was hailed as “America’s favorite bad boy” (V. Cash 12). To transfer this image onto the screen, many elements of the Great Man biopic formula are used to show a celebrity who cannot cope with the sudden fame and the temptations of sex and drugs. Additionally, the *Walk the Line* Cash is now separated from his new love June, who took up the Great Man biopic’s role of helpmeet and support. These circumstances drive him even further down the road of self-destruction (Bingham 379–380).

His addiction forces him to quit the tour and, as a consequence, he is forced to move back home and put up with Vivian, who knows by now of June’s status in her husband’s life. This state of affairs facilitates the protagonist’s tumbling into a stereotypical downward spiral of drugs and alcohol, as represented in *figure 3* by the term “alcohol”. Johnny cannot change his habits and starts taking pills at home. Alcohol and drug abuse in combination with Cash’s low spirits due to the fact that he is forced to be at home and not on tour causes his already crumbling marriage to completely fall apart and end in a divorce.

The musician hits rock bottom when he wants to call June Carter, who is not returning his calls, and is denied to do so because his bank account is on an automatic hold, and, consequently, the phone company has disconnected his line. The celebrated “Man in Black” is not even able to cash a check to put his phone back on and call June. When he decides to walk to June’s house and gets rejected again, due to his unhealthy appearance, it starts to rain—a symbol of purification. The rain does not wash away his drug addiction, but he starts to partly get his life together in order to meet June’s expectations, and the process of redemption begins. To express his will to change, he buys a beautiful big house next to a lake and invites his own and the Carter family to spend Thanksgiving (which is also the name of the chapter) with him. When Johnny makes that phone call to invite June and tells her how he is doing better, has stopped taking pills and got his life together, the spectator realizes that his words contradict his
true current situation. This is achieved by cutting from a medium close-up shot to a long shot, which shows the whole room he is sitting at (see figure 16).

![Figure 16: Walk the Line [film still] 01:55:14](image)

What one sees does not signify a man who is getting his life together. While the spartan interior of the supposed living room can be justified due to the fact that he just moved in, the spread out amphetamine pills on the table, on the other hand, are a clear sign of his ongoing problems. The way the plastic bag was ripped open and then just left on the table suggests the strong craving he has for pills. They are still an important part of his life, and he is still far from getting things together. Thus, the family dinner needs to escalate before his redemption can truly begin. Amphetamine pills and numerous accusations of his father, whom he wanted to impress with the house, lead to the “tractor scene” which, again, is a common trope in country music.

The spectator’s expectations are already confirmed in the first shot of the scene, which we are about to analyze. Cash is portrayed as a drug addict who cannot even lay off the pills for one day, even though he is aware that the future with his beloved June is at stake. Taking the pill, however, can be read as a reaction to the criticizing words he received from his father in the previous scene. When the Cash family arrives, Johnny obviously tries hard to present himself as a conscientious man. He shows off the house, which should represent a fresh start after all the drug-related incidents. However, the first thing that catches his father’s interest leads right to an accusation. Ray asks what
happened to the tractor that Johnny got stuck on a slope while trying to pull a stump. Cash smiles and starts telling the story while focusing his eyes on his mother, but Cash senior is not willing to let it go and adds: “That’s a fine piece of equipment to leave in that mud. Is that the way you take care of your things?” (Walk the Line 01:55:48). This sets the tone for the upcoming scene. The previously described themes of “daddy issues”, childhood trauma, and contradicting lifestyles (sex, drugs and rock ‘n’ roll versus a life set around family) all come together in his scene and are blended with the common country music trope “tractor”, which is used as a metaphor for Cash’s current state.

Back in the first shot of the scene, where the built-up tension between Cash junior and senior is again highlighted (see figure 17), the spectator is aware of his drug addiction and his escapist nature. Therefore, it is not surprising to find Cash, away from the family setting, secretly putting a pill into his mouth and washing it down with some beer; the audience has learned that this is his way to release tension.

Figure 17: Walk the Line [film still] 01:56:48

With his father, who is a major source of tension, sitting right at his table, the attempt to positively alter his mood clearly backfires. Cash notices Ray looking right at him, seemingly fully aware of his action. With an over the shoulder shot, the eye line match is established. When their eyes interlock, the rather long shot clearly conveys
that the interpersonal tension is far from being released. This is underlined by the following medium close-up of Ray who still does not participate in the ongoing conversation and prefers to track his son’s every move. On the way to the table, Johnny kisses one of June’s girls on the forehead, which signifies that he would like to be treated in a similar loving fashion by his father. When Cash looks up again, he stares back at his father and slowly walks his way toward his chair while his eyes are set on Ray the entire time. He is not willing to back down and waits for his father to break eye contact. Eventually, Ray lowers his gaze and joins the casual conversation on the table. Cash, however, just keeps staring (see figure 18). The non-verbal communication at the beginning of the scene already signifies that the upcoming conflict is going to be about male dominance. Cash may not be Ray’s little boy anymore, but he is still longing for his father’s recognition. The tension is successfully built up.

Figure 18: Walk the Line [film still] 01:57:15

Cash keeps pushing and, for the first time in the entire film, he directly addresses his father and asks: “So, what do you think daddy?” (Walk the Line 01:57:20), clearly referring to his new house and paving the way for Ray’s recognition. His father, however, answers with: “About what?” (Walk the Line 01:57:22), followed by a short lip compression that signifies concern about his uttered words. Nonetheless, his facial expression relaxes a moment later and by buttering his bread in a placid way, he
manages to deviate from his inner tension. He manages to counter his son’s attempt to lead him to acknowledge that he has become a man a father could be proud of by restraining the answer altogether. After all, from the start of their communication, it is about dominating the other male, and this kind of acknowledgment would expose Ray. Mr. Carter steps in and provides the required affirmation with: “It’s a fine big house, John” (Walk the Line 01:57:34). Ray, however, still puts Cash down by comparing his house to Jack Benny’s, which is supposedly even bigger. Now, Carter tries to change the subject, but the Cash men keep staring at each other and are so involved that Johnny does not even react to a question asked. Of course, the spectator is aware that he has just taken an amphetamine pill and might be more involved with his inner feelings than his surroundings. Instead of answering, he chooses to talk about his childhood trauma and puts it in relation to his father. With the already built up tension, the spectator is aware that the family reunion is now about to truly escalate.

Cash junior starts his argument by declaring how thankful he is that everyone accepted his thanksgiving invitation and puts emphasis on his father being here today. He continues by bringing up his brother Jack and the praise turns into an accusation. With “where have you been?”, he begins to retell the day Jack died and how he felt about his father’s words back then. The camera slowly zooms in from a so-called “dirty” shot that shows a small out of focus part of Ray’s head (see figure 19) in order to underline the power differential to a close-up of Cash’s face to put emphasis on his tormented facial expression.
Again, the camera looks over Cash’s shoulder to see Ray’s reaction in the next shot. Ray calmly answers: “Well”, followed by a long pause for dramatic effect, “where were you?” (Walk the Line 01:59:18), indicating that he is not willing to give in and apologize for his behavior. Cash continues his denunciation by adding “where were you?” (Walk the Line 01:59:24). Ray takes this as a reference to his drinking problem and counters by asking if Cash still takes pills, followed by a short look in the direction of the corner where he seemingly saw him taking one earlier. Furthermore, he adds that they are going to kill him eventually, which can be seen as the words of a worried father but, in this context, they have more effect on their power relation and are a way of criticizing his son in order to put himself above him. This interpretation is further backed by Ray’s subsequent comparison of his own life, which Cash just attacked, to how he views his son’s life. With the following words, Ray manages to re-establish the power relation in his favor and willingly pushes Cash’s over the edge. The camera now slowly zooms in on his face while he says:

You’re sitting on a high horse, boy.
I never had talent. I did the best I could with what I had. Can you say that?
Mr. Big Shot? Mr. Pill-Popping Rock Star?
Who are you to judge?
You ain’t got nothing.

Big empty house. Nothing.

Children you don’t see. Nothing

Big old expensive tractor stuck in the mud.

Nothing. (Walk the Line 01:59:45)

Ray’s repetitive usage and emphasis on the word “nothing” and his closing statement result in the expected outburst. His father’s tractor metaphor relates to Ray’s very first remark when he arrived at his son’s new house—the accusation of not taking care of his things. By referring back to the tractor that Cash got stuck with, the metaphor “big old expensive tractor stuck in the mud” signifies, therefore, that he is not taking care of his life and is basically stuck with “nothing”. Ray does not give his son the satisfaction of being complimented for his new house or any other achievement, as, in his view, fame and riches truly are worth nothing if one does not have an intact family to share these things with. When we think of Ray’s earlier remark that he “did the best [he] could with what [he] had” (Walk the Line 01:59:50), he is clearly hinting at Cash’s unused potential and, in a way, acknowledges him as a fallen Great Man.

Figure 20: Walk the Line [film still] 02:00:16
The scene ends with an extreme close-up of Cash to give the spectator the expected reaction. Ray’s words have silenced his son, and Cash only manages to respond with a short and arrogant smile, trying to show that he cares little about his father’s remarks (see figure 20). This prepares the audience for another verbal exchange, but then his facial appearance quickly turns into a rather hurt expression before he gives in and moves out of the frame. Out of words, hurt, and with his mind fogged by amphetamines, the spectator should be able to guess what is about to happen next when the diegetic sound of a tractor engine appears as a sound bridge to the next scene.

Johnny tries to free the tractor outside to prove a point, but slides down the slope and falls into the lake. This clearly conveys that he is not able to get out of the metaphorical mud on his own; he truly is still stuck in his life as a drug addict. Consequently, June’s parents acknowledge that he needs help and encourage June to stay with him.

To sum up, the family reunion on Thanksgiving represents Cash’s first attempt to prove to his and June’s family that he has managed to get his life together, is now off amphetamine pills, and, therefore, a man who is willing to start over. The audience, however, is presented with a different picture. The pills are still a determining factor in his life, and the first confrontation leads him right back to taking them. Although we cannot tell if the Walk the Line Cash wanted to lay off the drugs for this occasion, the portrayed drug addict made use of the first chance to somehow justify taking them. Ray, who seems to look right through his charade, responds in a harsh manner. He denounces Cash’s whole life instead of buying into his sudden transformation. Ray’s portrayal is necessary for the dramatized storyline, as it brings back Cash’s childhood trauma and failed marriage with Vivian and puts it in relation to his current drug addiction. His character basically sums up the crossroads of Cash’s fall and puts them together in the metaphor “big old expensive tractor stuck in the mud”, which correlates to his current situation. This signifies to the audience that nothing has changed. Cash proves him right with his subsequent symbolic fall into the lake. The depiction signifies that he is truly “stuck in the mud” and far from being able to redeem himself.
“Fact” and Fiction

In the consulted (auto)biographies, the depicted Thanksgiving family reunion in *Walk the Line* is altogether undiscoverable. The function of the scene is to display Cash’s turning point in life, which, to adhere to melodrama conventions, comes with an extreme conflict in order to give the audience the emotional pleasure they desire. Drama was already created in the prior scene when Cash wanders through the woods on amphetamines on his way back from June to Nashville; he falls asleep and wakes up to find his new home. Here the depiction deviates from his biography. Hilburn states in his Cash biography that Cash was actually planning to buy a new house and did not stumble across his dream house. “He asked Brixton Dixon, a successful architect-builder, to help him in his search. On a tour of the area, Dixon drove Cash past a house that he was building for himself […]” (310). Furthermore, the biopic presents the act of buying the house as Cash’s way to prove to June that he is going to straighten up, while his biography prevails the narrative of “wanting a home for [his] girls to visit during the summer […]” (Hilburn 310). However, in the Thanksgiving scene, his children were not even present.

One is able to find parallels of the biopic’s and Cash’s narrative, but the actual events surrounding them took place much earlier. According to Cash’s biography, there actually was a family reunion to show off his new house in commemoration of his brother Jack. The get-together, therefore, took place on May 20, Jack’s twenty-third anniversary of death, and not on Thanksgiving, which is celebrated on the fourth Thursday of November. Moreover, there is no mentioning of the Carter family’s attendance, or his fall into the lake with a tractor that day (Hilburn 312). However, a drug incident is mentioned in Hilburn’s biography when Cash accompanied his family on the flight to Tennessee:

I’d been up for about three days and nights straight with no sleep, and I was told later that when we landed in Memphis, I got up out my seat and fell on my face on the floor of the plane. […] I had taken barbiturates, thinking I would sleep until Memphis, but evidently I had far too many. […] The pilot told Mother and Daddy, ‘You’ll have to get him out of here. He can’t fly on to Nashville on this plane’ (312).
Thus, one can imagine that a dispute about Cash’s current state at the family reunion is actually not too far-fetched. Similarly, the dramatic tractor incident under the influence of amphetamine pills is no plain invention either, it just took place on a different day under different circumstances. Both occurrences are mentioned in his first autobiography and Hilburn’s biography and are part of a deviating redemption story.

In fact, I was able to identify three different narratives surrounding Cash’s redemption that loosely clinch together. These stories and other accounts will be discussed in the next chapter when we finally get to meet the redeemed Johnny Cash on his way to fulfill his destiny. In the biopic, however, it creates the necessary dramatic conflict the story needs to push Cash over the edge and simultaneously discuss childhood trauma, “daddy issues”, and his drug addiction. Therefore, the analyzed scene first sums up the fall before the redemption process begins.

4.2 Redemption in Black

The publicity in the 1960s was that June saved my life, and I sometimes still hear it said that she’s the reason I’m alive today. That may be true, but knowing what I do about addiction and survival, I’m fully aware that the only human being who can save you is yourself. What June did for me was post signs along the way, lift me when I was weak, encourage me when I was discouraged, and love me when I was alone and felt unlovable. (John Cash 314)

Cash’s redemption in the year 1967 in combination with his comeback, the legendary Folsom Prison concert, is certainly the most discussed period in his life. It perfectly expresses his acquired sinner-saint image, which, according to Edwards, is also a common trope in country music (158). Moreover, Cash’s body of work does in general emphasize “the fallen man who, nevertheless, is worthy of salvation and is redeemed” (Edwards 158). With the Folsom setlist, including songs such as I Still Miss Someone or Greystone Chapel (which was written by one of the inmates at Folsom), Cash manages to blur the boundaries of his public persona and his stage persona. The events surrounding the concerts in the maximum security prison certainly affected
Cash’s identity construction and marketing for the rest of his career. Therefore, it is no surprise that this part might also be the most fictionalized one.

During my research, I found three distinctive accounts. First, Cash presents his fans with another dramatic but rather religious redemption story in his second autobiography. Second, the biopic, on the other hand, displays June, with the help of her family, as his sole savior. Third, there is the critical narrative of Hilburn’s Cash biography, which incorporates parts of the before-mentioned accounts. In the following chapters, I will first analyze the *Walk the Line* option and show how the extreme conflict of Cash’s dramatized (tractor) fall is pressed to the subsequent extreme conclusion of June’s love as the key for his redemption. Furthermore, I will discuss in the second chapter how the then fully transformed Johnny Cash manages to single-handedly fulfill his destiny. As indicated before, I will also maintain the practice of looking beyond the edge of the *Walk the Line* plate and compare the biopic’s narrative with the mentioned (auto)biographies.

### 4.2.1 True Love Is the Key

June was a figure of redemption. (Mangold)

After the tractor scene, June and her family stayed with Cash to help him in his drug detoxification. The following depiction shows his transformation process. The spectator finds the pale-faced Cash wriggling in his bed, haunted by feverish dreams accompanied by sweat breakouts and cramps, and madly searching for pills in drawers and pant pockets. The rather disturbing images are interrupted by shots of the beautiful landscape surrounding his house accompanied by diegetic bird sounds. Blending these sounds, which convey harmony and mental balance with the disturbingly panting Cash creates a stark contrast and successfully illuminates his painful recovery.
When his drug dealer shows up at the front porch, the whole Carter family functions as his guardians who scat off the “intruder”. In still 21, we find Mr. Carter pointing a rifle at Cash’s drug dealer who is holding his next pill “delivery” in his hand. Mr. Carter’s aggressive behavior signifies that the whole family is dedicated to getting Cash “out of the mud” and is willing to even raise their arms in order to defend him. Hereby, Cash found the family he never had in June’s parents, who seemingly care for him as much as she does. Furthermore, the “dirty” shot with the apparent window frame signifies that Cash is cut off from the outside world—his new home is almost portrayed as a rehabilitation center with strict rules that eventually lead to the desired success.

Figure 21: Walk the Line [film still] 02:04:17

The following scene of the chapter “Second Chance” is dominated by close-up shots of Cash and June to emphasize their relationship and June’s unconditional love. The scene opens with a close-up of Cash’s face. Half of it is illuminated by natural light and underlines his sinner-saint dichotomy. He is lying in bed, slowly opening his eyes, when a calm and loving “hey” is heard. His eyes follow the direction of the sound and, in the next frame, the spectator finds June. She hands him some red berries, which conveys June’s caring nature. Additionally, the red berries can be read as a symbol of her love which brought back Cash’s energy and vitality. This reading is backed by Cash’s facial expression. While eating the berries, he smiles at June, and, in his teary eyes, the spectator finds nothing but gratitude for her unconditional love. In the next
shot, we find June mirroring his expression (film still 20), which signifies their regained connection. The images’ meaning is anchored a moment later with: “It’s good to see you again” (Walk the Line 02:05:16).

Figure 22: Walk the Line [film still] 02:04:17

If one compares film still 23 of the next shot with still 20 of the Thanksgiving dinner scene, the audience truly gets a visible affirmation of Cash’s positive change. In the latter, his face was rather pale, and he was sweating and altogether looked unhealthy; this, combined with a body language mostly driven by negative emotions, confronted the spectator with a man who was far from redemption. A chapter later, one finds Cash with renewed strength. Positive emotions light up his color-regained face and his eyes full of gratitude and love for June convey that a change has truly occurred.

Figure 23: Walk the Line [film still] 02:05:29
Again, the non-verbal is backed by spoken words. Cash calls June an angel, which strengthens her role as his “sole” savior and brings out a rare connotation to religion. However, *Walk the Line* does not fail to immediately connect this new liberated Cash with his dark side in order to successfully construct his sinner-saint image. The lightning still expresses this dichotomy, with Cash’s face being positioned between a stream of light and dark shadows (see figure 24).

In still 24, a minute later, one finds Cash seemingly upset. While his beloved June remains in the room, he breaks eye contact and, obviously, his mind is trailing off to negative thoughts again. The reason for this sudden change of tone in the scene is credited to Cash’s reflection on his drug-induced behavior. While he is elaborating, in a regretful voice, on the bad and hurtful things he has done, June downplays his actions in a forgiving manner. Nonetheless, Cash continues and says, almost weeping: “My daddy’s right. Should have been me on that saw. Jack was so good. He would have done so many good things. What have I done? I just hurt everybody I know. I know I’ve hurt you. I’m nothing” (*Walk the Line* 02:05:59). This statement, again, sums up the reasons for his fall by the usage of certain keywords, namely, his brother’s death, which is symbolized by the reoccurring circular saw (framing device) and the traumatic guilt of being alive, which facilitates his drug abuse and consequent whirl out of control. The mentioned reasons are again linked with the keyword “nothing”, which conveys to the audience his father’s opinion about his life.
June, as a figure of redemption, shakes her head, leans forward, and answers back with determination in her gaze (see figure 25) and voice: “You’re not nothing. You are not nothing. You’re a good man. And God has given you a second chance to make things right John. This is your chance, honey. This is your chance” (Walk the Line 02:06:45). The redemptive character resonates in June’s words. She negates his self-doubts and again backs his worthiness of redemption with religion and her love. Dramatic non-diegetic music furthers the emotional moment, and when the two lovingly hug each other, the audience knows that Cash has accepted June’s words and is now able to forgive and redeem himself.

Figure 25: Walk the Line [film still] 02:06:51

In the scene after Cash’s rehabilitation the spectator finds Cash and Carter who are going to church. Again, this is an attempt to shed light on Cash’s religious side. Furthermore, in the church, verse 11:4 of the King James Bible about Abel’s undeviating faith and his brother Cain’s fall from faith is cited: “[Cain] went out from the Lord and he dwelt in the Land of Nod in the east of Eden” (Walk the Line 02:08:11). During the sermon Cash is, mostly, shown in close up with a shallow depth of field to single him out. Mangold hereby signifies that Cash identifies himself with Cain. With his drug addiction, he also travelled away from God, but, unlike Cain, he made it through his years in the wilderness. With the help of June’s unconditional love, he was able to transform and redeem himself. When June takes his hand in the church followed by a

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8 https://www.biblehub.com/hebrews/11-4.htm
long and loving eye contact before singing *Softly and Tenderly* with the community, her role in Cash’s redemption is again foregrounded.

June’s portrayal in the *Walk the Line* narrative clearly resonates with the Great Man and the country music biopic formula. It would not be correct to place her depiction in the role of “the woman behind the man” (which was rather taken on by Vivian). She performs the function of Cash’s helpmate and support who manages to reverse his decline. Carter stays with him, even after he tried to “pull off” the thanksgiving charade of getting things together and literally fell even deeper. June’s unconditional love and the support of the Carter family pulled the *Walk the Line* Cash out of the mud of psychological trauma in the form of childhood tragedy and “daddy issues”. His drug addiction is the manifestation of lifelong traumatic guilt and functions as an explanation for his downfall. In the analyzed scene, it becomes evident that June’s companionship is not only the key to overcome the pills, but, as Smith describes their relationship at this point, “[…] a cure for a lifetime of hurt and pain” (227). Even though religious themes are apparent in the depiction of Cash’s redemption with “God has given you a second chance[…][…” (Walk the Line 02:06:45) and Cash calling June an angel, *Walk the Line* is clearly not the religious redemption story some fans wished for. Levine, for example, harshly criticized the biopic for downplaying Cash’s faith as a committed Christian. In the New York Times article *The spirit is invisible in Cash portrayals*, he refers to his second autobiography when stating that “[h]is faith was primary in getting him over that problem.”
“Fact” and Fiction

I never wanted to see another dawn. I had wasted my life. I had drifted so far away from God and every stabilizing force in my life that I felt there was no hope for me. I knew what to do. I’d go into Nickajack Cave, on the Tennessee River just north of Chattanooga, and let God take me from this earth and put me wherever He puts people like me. (John Cash 183–184)

In October 1967, according to Cash’s second autobiography, he placed his Jeep next to the Nickajack Cave and, with suicidal intentions, he crawled into it. As he got deeper into the cave, he states that his flashlight suddenly died after two or three hours of crawling. Cash describes that within the darkness, he felt completely separated from God; he felt very lonely and, at this moment, was ready to die. Then, the description of complete inner and outer darkness unexpectedly changes. An unbelievable “sensation of utter peace, clarity, and sobriety” (John Cash 185) overcame him—a feeling he is not able to explain. “How, after being awake for so long and driving my body so hard and taking so many pills – dozens of them, scores, even hundreds – could I possibly feel all right?” (John Cash 185). Cash proceeds by linking the sudden enlightenment with God and concludes that the Creator himself interfered at this moment. He makes use of the religious concept of destiny to construct his religious redemption narrative and declares: “I was going to die at God’s time, not mine. I hadn’t prayed over my decision to seek death in the cave, but that hadn’t stopped God from intervening” (John Cash 185).

When Cash miraculously managed to crawl back out of the cave, he decides to act on God’s behalf and “do whatever it [takes] to get off drugs” (John Cash 185).

This very different second account shows that Levine’s criticism of downplaying Cash’s faith in Walk the Line is justifiable, as Cash later designates the Nickajack revelation as his turning point in life and, furthermore, associates his redemption with rebuilding his connection to God (John R. Cash 187). Nonetheless, he does not fail to give credit to the Carter family when he, as depicted in the biopic, describes them as a caring “circle of faith [...], insulating [him] from the outside world” (John Cash 186) during his rehabilitation. Moreover, he concludes his episode with: “God had done more than speak to me. He had revealed His will to me through other people, family and friends” (John Cash 186).
The third narrative, written by Cash’s rather critical biographer Hilburn, however, questions his dramatized religious redemption story. First, he mentions that the cave “was underwater in the fall of 1967” (321) and, second, Cash was arrested for public drunkenness a month later and had pills on him (321). While Hilburn fails to deliver substantial proof of his claims⁹, other parts convincingly disprove Cash’s autobiographical story by taking up elements actually displayed in *Walk the Line* and his first autobiography. Hilburn states that after Cash’s arrest, he returned home and only then “through June, turned the following day to a psychiatrist, Dr. Nat Winston” (322). According to his first autobiography, however, he was only able to stay off the pills for one full day (Johnny Cash 140). Two days after the meeting with Winston, Cash again turned to pills and decided to take his tractor for a ride; obviously, he was craving excitement: “[…] I decided to get my tractor out of the shed and drive along the cliff overlooking the lake to see how close I could get to the edge without going over” (Johnny Cash 140141). Thus, the *Walk the Line* tractor scene is no plain invention but set in a completely different context in order to convey Cash’s fall as a dramatized reaction to his father’s words. Furthermore, in the third narrative, it is not June who pulled him out of the water when he fell into the lake. The architect-builder Braxton Dixon, who sold him the house, apparently saw his accident and saved him. Hilburn stated that only then did his detox period truly start and with the help of Dr. Nat Winston and June, “[h]e was finally off drugs for good.” Cash’s first autobiography reflects Hilburn’s narrative:

‘John,’ Nat said, ‘I’m a doctor, I’m a psychiatrist, and I’ve seen a lot of people in the shape you’re in. And frankly, I don’t think there is much chance for you. I’ve never known of anyone as far gone as you are to really whip it. Only you can do it, and it would be a lot easier if you let God help you.’ I knew he was right. God has been waiting all this time for me to come back. Now that He knew I was finally serious, He was beginning to surround me with His people to fight with me – Nat Winston, June, her parents, my parents, Braxton Dixon, and others. But mainly it was my fight. Only I could do it, and I had to lean on God – like He knew I’d have to. ‘I’ll do it, Nat’ I said. (Johnny Cash 142)

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⁹ Hilburn only stated that “a Cash historian discovered [that the Nickajack Cave was underwater] after extensive check of weather and that Sheriff Jones conformed this account in 1970 without citing any source; even though Jones is also mentioned in his first autobiography.”
To conclude, in all three narratives Cash’s successful detoxification is credited, at least to some extent, to June and the Carter family. In *Walk the Line*, June’s redemptive role is clearly underlined to adhere to the film’s formula. Mangold mentioned in an interview that “he tried to use Mr. Cash’s love for Ms. Carter as a symbol for various forms of redemption” (Levine). While this may be an attempt to please religious fans who do not approve of the biopic’s depiction of Cash’s faith, the other two accounts definitely back June’s important role in this process. However, they show that Cash actually wanted to craft a more religious redemption story. While in both the dramatized Nickajack Cave account and Hilburn’s critical dispute, Cash does recognize the importance of the people closest to him, especially June, his faith and his own determination to get off pills are clearly foregrounded. Furthermore, the depicted turning point in each narrative varies, but a connection to God is always identifiable. Therefore, Levine’s criticism of downplaying the role of Cash’s faith in his redemption process seems justifiable, even though the country music trope of religion is present throughout the film.
4.2.2 Fully Baked at the Prison Concerts

With or without God’s blessing, Cash managed to (at least to some extent) get his life together, and with or without the influence of drugs (depending on the depiction), he created something undeniably special—something that connected his stage persona, Johnny Cash, forever with the rebel-outlaw image—the Life at Folsom Prison album. In Walk the Line, the spectator followed Mr. Cash on his biographical journey of fall and redemption to witness the rise of a man who now finally acquired the attributes to fulfill his destiny. The puzzle pieces have fallen in place: A man who got knocked off the path and picked himself up. A Sinner. A Saint. A rock ‘n’ roll rebel outlaw. A man who saw darkness and transcended it. Brost argues that Cash’s identity was destroyed when Jack dies and is only restored when June accepts his marriage proposal (79). Furthermore, as the only Carter-Cash son, an executive producer of the biopic, framed it: “the point of the film is my parent’s love affair” (“Cash’s daughter”). While I agree with the first part of Brost’s statement, I disagree with the latter. One can argue that the love story is a substantial part of the film with the objective of creating a melodramatic clear-cut “love is the key” narrative. However, the audience still longs for the fully baked legendary Johnny Cash at the end of the biographical road. June’s love is the key for his final transformation, but only with the depictions of events surrounding the film’s climax, namely, the creation of the Live at Folsom Prison album, is Cash’s stage persona created. Therefore, the moment the spectator meets the “Man in Black” as he is remembered “across time and social space” (Bourdieu 300) must also be seen as the event restoring his identity. Let us now raise the curtain and meet this Great Man who is about to fulfill his destiny.

Upon singing together in the church, the feeling of community seems to have set something in motion. Softly and Tenderly functions as a sound bridge and highlights Cash’s thought process when he, in the next scene, looks through his fan letters and discovers that many of them are written by inmates who feel that they connect to his sinner-saint persona. The audience sees extreme close-ups and is able to read words such as: “Your music speaks to me, I know that you know what my life is like here doing time in Folsom” and “What I would do to see you play.” In the next shot, we see Cash’s
hand going through his wardrobe to pick out the black suit. The camera follows his hand as he buttons his shirt and puts on his suit. Images of a superhero or soldier who is putting on his uniform before going into battle come to mind. This, in combination with the determination in his eyes, lets the audience know that they finally get to meet the “Man in Black” (see figure 26).

In the following scene, Johnny Cash walks confidently into the building of Sun Records and, with the next shot, we are back to still 2, discussed at the beginning of chapter 4, where Cash is portrayed as the personification of “cool”—the dark-clothed figure leaning on the handrail in the back, wearing sunglasses in an office environment, and calmly smoking his cigar while the management is disapproving of his idea to do a concert in a prison. Not moving an inch, Cash then speaks in a dark and calm voice: “You can talk to me, you know. I’m standing right here” (Walk the Line 02:11:42), indicating that he wants to be addressed directly. Cash’s wish is fulfilled right away with: “Your fans are church folk, Johnny. Christians. They don’t wanna hear you singing to a bunch of murderers and rapists, trying to cheer them up” (Walk the Line 02:11:54). Suddenly, Cash moves and replies: “Well, they’re not Christians, then” (Walk the Line 02:11:04). With the previous church community scene still in mind, this statement signifies the religious character of Johnny Cash’s sinner-saint stage persona. Not willing to let go of his idea, he slowly walks over to the desk. The camera is still positioned at a
low angle, underlining his dominant position in the medium close-up when he takes off
his sunglasses and the audience sees the same determination in his eyes as earlier in
still 26. The consequent self-confident declaration mirrors his body language: “January
13th,” followed by a pause for emphasis, “I’ll be at Folsom Prison with June and the
boys. You listen to the tapes. You don’t like them, toss them.” In mid-sentence, the
exact same cheering and music at the beginning of the film are softly heard and, after
stating his last word, Cash walks out of the frame while the non-diegetic sound
increases. Mangold then directly cuts to the familiar circular saw image, which functions
as a framing device and symbolizes Cash’s childhood trauma, which triggered the
necessary downfall in order to successfully create the desired Walk the Line Johnny
Cash. To put it in the words of the beforehand mentioned parody Walk Hard, now, Cash
had already thought of his entire life and is finally ready to play Cocaine Blues to his
treasured outlaws.

The depictions surrounding the events of Cash’s career milestone underline the
bond of affection between the Cash persona and societies’ outcasts to explain the
success of the At Folsom Prison album. Mangold successfully portrayed Cash’s sinner-
saint and rebel-outlaw persona in unison with the marketing strategy of his 90’s
comeback. In the film, the depicted Cash at the prison clearly draws energy from his
downfall. He is very cool, has self-esteem, provokes and does not conform to societies
rules. One can imagine this polarizing persona to attract young people even in his elder
days. As the Walk the Line Cash stated during the biopic's prison concert: “I’d seen a
thing or two, you know?” (Walk the Line 02:14:50). In terms of the Great Man biopic
formula, the audience now knows what contributions the subject made to culture.
Cash’s journey of fall and redemption has reached its destination.

The audience has now already seen the fully transformed Cash persona perform
in front of convicts, the event which represents his proper name. I would argue that the
last 15 minutes of the extended version serves merely as a Hollywood happy-end and
do not add much to the depiction of the Cash persona. For roughly ten minutes, the
audience sees Cash asking Carter to marry him, and she refuses until he asks her on
stage. This time, he succeeds, and the love story is hereby concluded. In my opinion,
however, her choice of staying with him in his darkest hour conveys a much stronger message of “true love” than June agreeing to marry him. In the end, Mangold did not fail to show that Cash’s “daddy issues” are resolved and that he finally found a home to settle down for good. For the first time in the biopic, the audience sees Cash at a home where he truly feels at home. In the very last scene, the audience is again shown a family reunion at Cash’s house by the lake; again the relationship between the Cash men is in the center of the depiction. When Ray’s grandchildren request a story, he turns to his son and says “I don’t got no stories. You got all the stories” (Walk the Line 02:27:12), which signifies that Ray finally values his son’s life. This underlines the end of the Hollywood biopic, and that Cash’s already completed redemption refers to every addressed aspect of his life.

“Fact” and Fiction

The Walk the Line Cash’s redemption is linked to his successful detoxification. It is mentioned that he stayed clean for 6 months before he asked June to marry him on stage (Walk the Line 02:18:52). Hilburn’s Cash biography, however, deviates from this redemptive narrative. He argued that when Cash was confronted with the finality of Vivian’s divorce, “he again turned to drugs, telling a musician friend, ‘This is the worst day of my life.’ Folsom was just twenty-two days away” (323). In the biopic, his divorce is not even mentioned. Moreover, did Cash take pills on the day of the concert at Folsom prison to calm himself? Hilburn supported this claim with an account of Cash’s record producer at the time Bob Johnston, who was driving with him to the prison:

‘Just as we turned off the highway,’ he recalls, ‘we passed this sign that said something to the effect of all visitors being subject to searches, and I looked over and John was frantically going through his pockets, so I knew he had been carrying some [pills]. When I later asked him, he said, “I took more pills that morning than I ever had in my life.” He was scared.’ (327–328)

Nevertheless, Cash stated in his first autobiography that he actually was sober and, furthermore, that he took his father with him; this again contradicts the depictions in Walk the Line. “I asked him to come along on this trip, and he had been eager to come.
I was awfully proud that he could see me do a totally sober concert. It had been a long time since he’d seen me perform” (Johnny Cash 158). In a third report, Cash described Folsom as his “chance to make up for all the times when I had messed up […]. I kept hoping my voice wouldn’t give out again. Then I suddenly felt calm. I could see the men looking over at me. There was something in their eyes that made me realize everything was going to be okay, I felt I had something they needed” (Hilburn 327), which adheres closely to the Walk the Line narrative and emphasizes the redemptive character of the concert. With the previous chapters in mind, one should be aware that there is no actual “truth”, but Hilburn fashions a rather believable narrative concerning Cash’s continuing drug addiction.

The most controversial part of Hilburn’s narrative is June’s role in Cash’s detoxification process. After watching Walk the Line, one thing seems certain: June Carter would not have agreed to marry him if he would still be on drugs. Hilburn, however, included two statements in the biography that suggest that June was extremely aware of Cash’s ongoing addiction. First, Stan Jacobson, a producer at CBC television, who agreed to do a Johnny Cash special in early 1968 states: “After the show, I rode the bus with [Cash] and June […], and he was slapping his face, time after time, as if there were bugs there. I was a huge fan, but I wondered what I was getting myself into” (Hilburn 331). Hilburn then declares that June still agreed to marry him three days after this incident, as the only reason why June was not already Mrs. Johnny Cash had been that he had not officially divorced Vivian (331–332). This view is reinforced by Hilburn’s second affirmation:

[Cash’s tour members] shared Vivian’s view that all June wanted was to be Mrs. Johnny Cash, period; except for Cash’s bassist Marshall Grant who said to June after she walked off stage the day she agreed to marry him: ‘June, you’ve made a hell of a mistake. What about all the times you told me he’d have to get straight before you’d marry him? That was the only thing we had to get him off…the promise that you’d marry him. Now what are we going to do? Because we both knew he was still on pills.’ (332)
While Cash even admits in his second autobiography that his full recovery from drugs did not last long and that he “used mood-altering drugs from periods of varying length at various times since 1967” (John Cash 189), he refrains from mentioning June in this context.

To conclude, Johnny Cash’s redemption, as it is depicted in Walk the Line, can be doubted. While his first autobiography conforms the portrayal of a liberated drug addict, the second autobiography and Hilburn’s biography paint a different picture. Both convey that he was still abusing amphetamines and other mood-altering drugs after 1967. Additionally, the biography even suggests that his compelling performance at Folsom was partly chemically induced and not entirely due to the strong bond of affection between the Cash persona and societies’ outcasts. Furthermore, the discussed accounts significantly weaken June’s redemptive role as his personal savior.

4.3 A Side Note on Country Music Tropes

One is able to discover almost every common trope in country music displayed in Figure 2. With the extensive use of these tropes, which fit perfectly into the discourse of “sex, drugs and rock ‘n’ roll”, the usage of common country music tropes establishes a clear association with the music genre. Therefore, Mangold managed to differentiate his country music biopic from other popular music biopics, but, at the same time, he manages not to break the generic boundaries and conventions of the genre.

It is worth mentioning that “nostalgia”, which actually represents the point of intersection of all the tropes in figure 3, is certainly not the driving force in Johnny Cash’s transformation. The depiction of the music business and the portrayed Million Dollar Quartet (Elvis Presley, Jerry Lee Lewis, Carl Perkins, and Johnny Cash) may include a certain amount of nostalgia. The grown-up Cash., however, is portrayed as a man who never looks back at his childhood or even further into the past in a glorifying way. On the contrary, the audience is presented with a man who looks forward, who seeks the adventures of the unknown, who does not want his life to be dedicated to the ideas and values of previous generations—a person who is constantly transforming and never stands still. Lavaque-Manty and Mickey argued that Johnny Cash himself never
“aimed […] to return to any good-ol’-days but called on us to imagine a new, more inclusive America” (73). Additionally, this tendency can be found in many well-known lyrics about society’s forgotten convicts, and also in Johnny Cash’s songs, such as *What Is Truth?* which promotes that the youth should be heard in society, as they will soon be the next leaders.

*The old man turned off the radio*

*Said, ‘Where did all of the old songs go*

*Kids sure play funny music these days*

*They play it in the strangest ways’*

*Said, ‘it looks to me like they’ve all gone wild*

*It was peaceful back when I was a child’*

*Well, man, could it be that the girls and boys*

*Are trying to be heard above your noise?*

*And the lonely voice of youth cries*

*‘What is truth?’* ¹⁰

Therefore, it might have been too risky in terms of “authenticity” to give the *Walk the Line* Johnny Cash a nostalgic touch.

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5. Final Closing Shot: A Portray of a Bigger-than-Life Persona

Anyone who wants a good sex, drugs and rock ‘n’ roll movie is gonna love it. I’m anticipating dyed-in-the-wool fans objecting to a lot of stuff. (qtd. in “Cash daughter”)

In the beginning stood the general question, do common rock ‘n’ roll stereotypes dominate the depiction of the country music star Johnny Cash in the biopic Walk the Line. The biographical film clearly focuses on Cash’s dramatized phases that align with this wildly familiar understanding of a star who cannot deal with sudden fame, veers out of control and gives in to self-destruction. I believe I have sufficiently shown that director James Mangold largely focused on these episodes to fulfill the audience’s expectations. He portrayed Cash’s life as a young rock ‘n’ roll rebel outlaw drawn between sinner and saint and between fall and redemption to create the anticipated drama. Moreover, he successfully explained the bond of affection with social pariahs and, thus, recaptured the magic of his career milestone Live at Folsom Prison. Cash’s daughter Kathy, however, refers to Mangold’s Johnny Cash in a rather critical way.

While this judgement is reasonable, the biopic nevertheless functions within the realm of Cash’s proper name and legacy. In the analytical part of my thesis, I have highlighted the constructiveness of the actual Johnny Cash persona and clarified that, without the Johnny Cash story to draw from, Walk the Line would not have been feasible. Furthermore, I have illustrated that the film can not only can be read as a rock ‘n’ roll biopic but also manages to stay within the conventions of portraying country musicians and a Great Man. With extensive incorporation of common country music tropes, the film establishes a clear association with the music genre and, therefore, ensures to appeal to fans of both country and rock ‘n’ roll artists. Mangold has certainly dramatized many elements and even invented some parts to satisfy the audience. He has also successfully moved the spectator from one transformative process to another, but the film never fails to fit Cash’s overall representation - even if Kathy Cash’s criticism is, as addressed in the sections “Fact” and Fiction, at times, justifiable.
The biopic’s aim is to paint a dramatized picture of the circumstances that transformed a door-to-door salesman into the “Man in Black”—the man who fell, the man who rose again, the man who lent outcasts his voice. The examination of the composition of the *Walk the Line* formula and close readings of representative scenes clearly shows that Mangold had to adapt characters and events of the Johnny Cash story in order to adhere to the discussed narrative patterns and the framework of fall and redemption. Cash’s downfall, which is represented by his escapist drug abuse in the biopic, is mainly created by two rationales.

The first rational is the childhood trauma induced by the deadly circular saw accident of his beloved brother Jack. The analyzed scene shows how his father Ray blames young Cash for the death of his brother, and the line “The devil did this! He took the wrong son!” (Walk the Line 00:10:46) conveys the abusive nature of his boyhood. Second, his marriage with Vivian built up the tension between a musician's life on the road and a life at home centered around family matters. Vivian is portrayed as a one-dimensional housewife and, similar to Ray (keyword: “daddy issues”), is rather an obstacle to overcome before the “big old expensive tractor stuck in the mud” can pursue its road of redemption.

In the filmic depiction, the redemption process is framed by a “true love is the key” narrative. June Carter takes up the Great Man biopic role of a redemptive helpmeet character. Only with her unconditional love is Cash able to get out of the mud and reverse his decline. Self-forgiveness can only be achieved with her help and approval. The biographical journey passed through the drug addict lane and received redemption by the love road only to reach its destination at a seemingly restricting place, the Folsom Prison. With the dramatized fall and the subsequent clear-cut redemption, the audience is now able to grasp Cash’s connection to social pariahs. The “Man in Black” can finally rise. The Cash that is portrayed highlights that he has a respectful (Christian) attitude towards outlaws and becomes, therefore, their public voice. Mangold had to first show the spectator the sinner to later successfully depict the Man in Black as the saint of social pariahs.
I was aware of the constructiveness of *Walk the Line* when I began my research, but what has struck me is the extent of the constructiveness of the actual Johnny Cash story. Retrospectively, I was very much tempted to enter the biographical pact when reading the first biography. However, the more I worked my way through depictions of key events, the more inconsistencies became apparent, especially, his redemption stories are full of divergences. Cash actually fashioned a very religious redemption story. *Walk the Line* has almost sparked a cultual war between Cash admirers, as the film downplays Cash’s religious side and the impact his faith had on the successful detoxification. However, I have provided evidence that Cash’s own redemption account can also be doubted. This shows that the constructed Johnny Cash persona is a cultural icon that bears vast significance for sinners, saints, and all in-between.

While it is fruitful for this thesis to scratch the surface of the actual Johnny Cash story and its cultural impact, my focus on the biopic’s construction of the Johnny Cash persona, naturally limited the impact of this particular part. Additionally, in terms of *Walk the Line*, there are still facets to consider. One could, for example, look in more detail into gender representations. It would surely be interesting to apply the concept of the “Male Gaze” to the comparison of Vivian’s and June’s depiction or analyze Johnny Cash with regards to the “White Worker Masculinity”, a notion often found in his autobiographies. Furthermore, one could lay his/her focus on other identifiable common narrative patterns, such as “From Rags to Riches” or “The American Dream”. Furthermore, I would have liked to include the musical biopic parody *Walk Hard: The Dewey Cox Story* more frequently. The parody’s mocking of the biopic formula paves the way to a thesis on its own right. Additionally, one could work with the exceptional biographical graphic novel *Johnny Cash: I See a Darkness*, which merges the Johnny Cash persona with the characters of his songs to present the musician’s “essence”.
The general aim of my thesis is to contribute to the study of biographical film and, especially, to the filmic representation of diverse public personas. A complex persona, such as Johnny Cash, is hard to put on screen, as there is simply no single Cash. Therefore, Mangold chose to represent Johnny Cash’s life as a “self-sufficient series of successive events (sufficient unto itself), and without ties other than the association to a ‘subject’ whose constancy is probably just that of a proper name[...]” (Bourdieu 300).

However, Cash’s fans want to find their bigger-than-life star, this fully baked Great rock ‘n’ roll-country outlaw, at the end of the biographical journey. We gladly put up with excluded details, slight changes, or plain inventions to let Mangold carve out the picture we desire—a picture of a man whose iconic image is frozen in time and social space to suit the young rebel outlaw Johnny, who later became the “ancient voice of dirt” (Horton). Walk the Line provides the audience with the narrative prior to his image of “[a]ll he ever gets is older and around” (“The Pilgrim, Chapter 33”). The audience may now leave the cinema and recall: “No matter how far you drift out of your proper lane, no matter how much you screw up your life, you can take comfort in knowing that [...] [t]here’ll be help along eventually, and, in any case, the Man in Black understands your troubles and has been down this road before” (Geisz 42).
6. Sources

6.1 Primary Sources


6.2 Secondary Sources


Film Analysis Guide. Yale University Film Analysis Guide. [Online]. http://filmanalysis.yctl.org/


Kris Kristofferson. Lyrics to “The Pilgrim, Chapter 33”. Lyricsfreak [Online]. 


6.3 Table of Figures

Figure 1: Walk the Line timeline

Figure 2: Walk the Line [film still] 02:11:15

Figure 4: Walk the Line [film still] 00:19:53

Figure 5: Walk the Line [film still] 00:10:13

Figure 6: Walk the Line [film still] 00:10:39

Figure 7: Walk the Line [film still] 00:10:26

Figure 8: Walk the Line [film still] 00:10:39

Figure 9: Walk the Line [film still] 00:51:00

Figure 10: Walk the Line [film still] 00:51:08

Figure 11: Walk the Line [film still] 00:51:36

Figure 12: Walk the Line [film still] 00:51:39

Figure 13: Walk the Line [film still] 00:52:29

Figure 14: Walk the Line [film still] 00:53:20

Figure 15: Walk the Line [film still] 00:53:22

Figure 16: Walk the Line [film still] 01:55:14

Figure 17: Walk the Line [film still] 01:56:48

Figure 18: Walk the Line [film still] 01:57:15
Figure 19: Walk the Line [film still] 01:58:36

Figure 20: Walk the Line [film still] 02:00:16

Figure 21: Walk the Line [film still] 02:04:17

Figure 22: Walk the Line [film still] 02:04:17

Figure 23: Walk the Line [film still] 02:05:29

Figure 24: Walk the Line [film still] 02:06:21

Figure 25: Walk the Line [film still] 02:06:51

Figure 26: Walk the Line [film still] 02:10:55