Appalachia on Stage: the *Southern Mountaineer in American Drama.

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APPALACHIA ON STAGE:
THE SOUTHERN MOUNTAINEER
IN AMERICAN DRAMA

A Dissertation
Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
Louisiana State University and
Agricultural and Mechanical College
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

in

The Department of English

by
Laura Grace Pattillo
B.A., University of Richmond, 1991
M.A., Louisiana State University, 1993
August 2001
This dissertation is dedicated to the memory of my grandmother.
Bertha Gilliam Mullins,
1898-1986
a strong Appalachian woman of faith, patience, and wisdom. mother of fourteen children, grandmother, great-grandmother, and great-great-grandmother to dozens more. and an eternal inspiration to me.

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the portrayal of Southern Appalachian people and their culture in American drama, discussing works from time periods that range from the 1880s to the 1990s. The plays are grouped into categories that are reflective of mainstream America's perceptions of Appalachian culture: (1) the importance of family and gender roles, including the insider/outsider romance plot, (2) issues of violence and conflict between both internal and external forces within the region in the context of wars, feuds, and environmental and labor abuses, (3) the importance of folk practice and belief, including tales of the supernatural, superstitious and astrological traditions, and the folk religious practice of snake handling in signs following churches, and (4) traditional fundamentalist mountain religion as portrayed in both sympathetic and unsympathetic ways. These are the attributes of the culture most often emphasized in the social history, literature and other media images of the region.

The playwrights who figure prominently in this study include Frances Hodgson Burnett and William Gillette, Charles T. Dazey, Hatcher Hughes, Percy MacKaye, Lula Vollmer, Thomas Wolfe, Paul Green, Fred Koch, Jr., Peter Taylor, Howard Richardson and William Berney, Susan Cooper and Hume Cronyn, Romulus Linney, Elizabeth Stearns, Paula Cizmar, Jane Martin, Deborah Pryor, Connie Ray and Alan Bailey, Tom Ziegler and Robert Schenkkan. The plays discussed are all either currently in print or available widely in libraries. The study is concerned with the region's image on the national stage and in the national cultural imagination. Excluded are the plays performed only within the region by grassroots theatre
companies because those plays are largely written by and for those who live in Appalachia, and thus they constitute a separate phenomenon. Also excluded are outdoor dramas, except those published in book form, not because they do not merit study, but because the versions performed often change yearly and sometimes differ significantly from the original, unpublished scripts.

Central to the study is an exploration of how plays about Appalachia treat various cultural themes and how the scripts reflect both America’s idea of Appalachia and, at times, the “insider” or “outsider” perspectives of the playwrights.
CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION: SCRIPTING AMERICA’S HILLBILLY OTHER: THE CASE FOR APPALACHIAN DRAMA STUDIES

In this study, I examine the portrayal of Southern Appalachian people and their culture in American drama, discussing a variety of works from time periods that range from the 1880s to the 1990s. I have grouped the plays into categories that are reflective of mainstream America’s perceptions of Appalachian cultural traits: the importance of family and gender roles, issues of violence and conflict between both internal and external forces within the region, the importance of folk practice and belief, and traditional fundamentalist mountain religion. These are the attributes of the culture most often emphasized in the social history, literature and other media images of the region. I will explore how plays about Appalachia treat various cultural themes and how the scripts reflect both America’s idea of Appalachia and, at times, the “insider” or “outsider” perspectives of the playwrights.

The playwrights who figure prominently in this study include Charles T. Dazey, Hatcher Hughes, Percy MacKaye, Lula Vollmer, Thomas Wolfe, Paul Green, Peter Taylor, Howard Richardson and William Berney, Susan Cooper and Hume Cronyn, Romulus Linney, Elizabeth Stearns, Paula Cizmar, Deborah Pryor, Jane Martin, Connie Ray and Alan Bailey, Tom Ziegler, and Robert Schenkkan. The plays discussed are all either currently in print or available widely in book form in libraries. I have excluded those plays performed only within the region by indigenous grassroots theatre companies because those plays are largely written by and for those who live in the region, and thus they constitute a separate phenomenon. They do not directly reflect the region’s image on the national stage and in the
national cultural imagination, which is my concern in this study. By the national stage, I mean plays which have had productions in New York or by professional regional theatres or are available for production through major theatrical publishing services. These plays are most likely to reflect the attitudes and beliefs about Appalachia in the general mainstream culture, and are also most likely to have had an impact on the perceptions of the region by the nation at large. They have also been given to some degree the stamp of approval by America's theatrical and literary establishment, which may lead audiences to view their portrayals of Appalachian culture as valid, authentic or appropriate, even when they are inaccurate or insulting.

I have also excluded outdoor dramas, except those few published in book form at some point in their history, not because they do not merit study, but because the versions performed often change from year to year and sometimes bear little resemblance to the original, unpublished script. The outdoor dramas are also proprietary and are not performed outside their mountain venues, so while they are certainly part of the cultural presentation of the region to tourist and other populations, they are not as readily accessible to the nation at large as are the works included here. I also do not examine stage adaptations of works primarily known and studied as novels or non-fiction books; I have included a few works not originally created as dramas but that have become better known, or at least as well known, as stage plays.

Considerable attention has been paid to other media in Appalachian Studies, but scant attention has been paid to the dramatic genre. However, the Appalachian South has consistently been subject matter for the American theatre since the late
nineteenth century. This drama calls for scholarly attention much as the fiction, film and television has received, yet the plays in the field have been largely neglected. This dissertation aims to correct that great oversight in scholarship and provide a resource for those who wish to do research on Appalachian drama in the future.

Appalachia, or more accurately, the idea of Appalachia, has occupied a place in American culture that is as much conceptual as geographical for much of the country’s history. The physical boundaries of the region have often been debated, drawn and redrawn for various purposes, never seeming to be definite and final, and so, too, have its psychic boundaries. Karl B. Raitz and Richard Ulack point out that Appalachia first was seen as a sociocultural region in the late nineteenth century and that the criteria for how a region’s boundaries are drawn “depend upon the purpose of the regionalization . . . a region is a mental construct: an area that has been bounded in accordance with the goals of those delimiting the region. In a sense, regions do not have truth — they have only utility.” Physical geographic regionalizations of Appalachia often extend north into Pennsylvania and New York and west into Ohio, but the boundaries of sociocultural regionalizations are typically more closely drawn. For the purposes of this study, I will be concerned with Appalachia as defined by John C. Campbell and Thomas R. Ford in their studies, since those regionalizations most closely approximate the area associated with the southern mountaineer by most Americans. This version of the region encompasses the mountainous parts of Virginia, West Virginia, Kentucky, Tennessee, North Carolina, South Carolina, Georgia and Alabama. These areas are often referred to as the Upland South, a term used by geographer Wilbur Zelinsky in his 1973 study *The
Cultural Geography of the United States, in order to distinguish them from the Lowland South or the Plantation South.³

The historian Henry Shapiro dates the birth of Appalachia as a region from Berea College president William Goodell Frost’s coining of the phrase “Appalachian America” in 1893 as he attempted to communicate the school’s mission to those outside the region: “He was not the first to ‘discover’ Appalachia . . . nor was his contribution merely that of naming a preexistent reality. He attempted . . . to achieve explanation by naming. But in the process, and apparently without any full understanding of the consequences of his actions, he did no less a work than the invention of Appalachia.”⁴

Many scholars agree that Appalachia’s otherness has served various purposes for American culture over the years. In her essay “Appalachia in Context,” Wilma Dykeman examines Appalachia in three contexts: the South, America and the world. She asserts:

> In each instance Appalachia has provided an alternative: first, to the generally accepted image known as the Solid South; second, to the notion of an ever-progressing, inevitably successful, invariably happy America; and third, to the shadowy threat/opportunity of an emerging third world “out there,” pressing ever more forcibly upon our consciousness and our conscience.⁵

Shapiro says that to Americans in general, “defined by its culture as well as by geography, Appalachia has seemed an anomaly in an otherwise unified and homogenous nation, a discrete region, in but not of America. As such it has generally been ignored, or at most viewed as a quaint and interesting land.”⁶ At times, however, when Appalachia is “rediscovered” (as it was during the War on
Poverty), he observes that “Americans have been forced to consider the possible implications of Appalachia’s existence for their own understanding of the nature of American civilization.” As Ron D. Eller writes: “The mountains have much to share with the rest of the country. The story of the mountains is the story of the nation writ small.”

Melinda Bollar Wagner says that America, particularly “middle America,” sees Appalachia as a sort of “alter ego,” “as its opposite, perhaps as what it once was and might be again,” and, in an article co-written with several students, she describes two “constellations” of images of Appalachia, stereotype and archetype. The images of Appalachia often take precedence over reality in the perception of outsiders. John C. Campbell described Appalachia as “a land about which, perhaps, more things are known that are not true than of any part of our country.” Loyal Jones reminds us that in Campbell’s day the stereotypes had not yet even “fully taken hold.” Jones goes on to say that in the years since then many groups and authors have, for various reasons, presented their views of the region and that readers and reviewers have accepted these images of mountain people with little critical adjustment. Mainstream Americans have been fascinated by Appalachian people for more than a century and have avidly read or watched widely disparate descriptions. Thus they carry pictures derived from the various media in their heads, and it has been difficult for them to take a new look, unencumbered by the distorted pictures, to look afresh at the facts and at our own version of ourselves.

Similarly, Harry Shapiro points out in Appalachia On Our Mind that “churches discovered Appalachia quite independently of the local colorists and saw the region in terms of their own experiences and in terms of their own needs,” and both groups...
responded to a vision of Appalachia rather than to reality. Ronald Eller says that while most of the distortions of mountain culture were unconscious, "like so many other subcultural groups in American society, mountain people have rarely appeared as conscious actors on the stage of American history." Their story has been told largely by outsiders, or in a way that caters to outsiders, who consider them part of a culture that is separate from the rest of America.

It is no wonder that much of what we know falls into Wagner's constellations of stereotype and archetype. Louie Brown's introduction to the 1977 festschrift An Appalachian Symposium: Essays Written in Honor of Cratis D. Williams addresses the prevalence of stereotypes: "The writings on Appalachia, fact and fiction, directly or indirectly set forth certain stereotypes of the mountaineer. These stereotypes range from a romantic description of the frontiersman's glorified traits, of which religiosity is one, to a maladjusted, culturally deprived creature oriented to violence and any number of other nonglorified traits." In her essay "Slaying the Mythical Kingdom." Isabel Bonnyman Stanley compares herself, as an Appalachian, to the prevailing stereotype, claiming most people from outside the region would say the following stereotype is the correct definition: "1. One born on a mountaintop in Tennessee, maker of moonshine, player of the dulcimer, slayer of the Queen's English (unless the queen is Elizabeth I), possessor of an eighth-grade education, member of a snake handling religious sect." Stanley points out the fallacy of that assumption: "I'm not too sure where Number One lives, except in the mythical kingdom of Appalachia Stereotypica." Perhaps it is what Batteau calls Appalachia's "double otherness" that causes the region to be so thoroughly
stereotyped and scapegoated by the rest of the country. The South might be America’s other, but Appalachia is other even to the South itself; someone has to be at the bottom of the pecking order. The *Appalachian Journal* wryly acknowledges Appalachia’s cultural function in the title of a running feature: “Everybody’s Got a Hillbilly,” which reports on similar instances of stereotyping from other cultures.

The political correctness movement has attempted to remedy many wrongs done to America’s minority populations by prejudicial negative stereotyping. But the “hillbilly” and the lowland southern “redneck” still seem to be considered fair game. Perhaps it is the quintessential “whiteness” of the stereotypical rural southerner or mountaineer that exempts them from consideration. In the more idealized stereotypical representations of the mountain South it is the supposed pure “whiteness” of the people that is at the root of the perception of the culture as a pure, unsullied survival of America’s frontier past. Or perhaps white America continues to mock or degrade these groups in an effort to distance itself from the negative qualities so often associated with them. In any case, the southern Appalachian mountaineer remains America’s “other” even in this age of multiculturalism and political correctness.

There are two major schools of thought about how Appalachia came to be America’s hillbilly other, embodying so much of what the nation fears and values about its present and its past. The “subculture model” of Appalachian development began to appear very early in its history as a regional idea, and still persists today. The “internal colony” model came into vogue in the 1960s and 1970s and also continues to be influential. The subculture model assumes that there is something
inherent in the genetic makeup of mountain people or in their “strange and peculiar” way of life that makes them different from other Americans. In the introduction to *Appalachia and America: Autonomy and Regional Dependence*, Allen Batteau and Phillip Obermiller write:

The paradox of Appalachia is that it has always combined opposed images of America’s self-definition. . . . Every succeeding statement of the identity of Appalachia has posed a challenge for the identity of America: A land of progress containing an entire region of backwardness and poverty, a metropolitan society of rapid mobility and footloose individualism, accommodating a subculture that insists on maintaining strong family ties and a sense of community.21

Batteau and Obermiller argue that the differences are only paradoxical to those who need to see America in undifferentiated terms.22 Wilma Dykeman notes William Alexander Percy’s conflicted feelings about southern hill people.23 Percy writes in the 1941 *Lanterns on the Levee*:

Pure English stock. If it was ever good, the virus of poverty, malnutrition, and interbreeding has done its degenerative work: the present breed is probably the most unprepossessing on the broad face of the ill-populated earth. I know they are responsible for the only America ballads, for camp meetings, for a whole new and excellent school of Southern literature. I can forgive them as the Lord God forgives, but admire them, trust them, love them — never.24

Dwight Billings, Mary Beth Pudup and Altina L. Waller cite the British historian Arnold Toynbee’s assessment of Appalachian people as an example of damaging conclusions about the supposed subculture drawn from limited, often secondhand, information: “His claim that the people of Appalachia had ‘relapsed into illiteracy and witchcraft’ is one of the most pejorative and often quoted interpretations in the vast literature about Appalachia. For Toynbee, Appalachians were ‘no better than
barbarians’ who represented ‘the melancholy spectacle of a people who have
acquired civilization and then lost it.” 25

Horace Kephart’s *Our Southern Highlanders*, on the other hand, did result
from firsthand observation; Kephart was an outsider, but moved to the mountains
and spent much of his later adult life living there. While he does promote the idea of
the mountaineer as a sort of anachronistic holdover from the colonial frontier,
Kephart provides an exceptionally early refutation of some of the assumptions of the
subculture model:

> Some well-meaning missionaries are shocked and scandalized at what
> seems to them incurable perversity and race degeneration. It is
> nothing of the sort. . . . All that is the inevitable result of isolation and
> lack of opportunity. . . . It must be known that the future of this really
> fine race is, at bottom, an economic problem, which must be studied
> hand-in-hand with the educational one. . . . It is far from my own
> purpose to preach or advise. . . . Still farther is it from my thought to
> let characterization degenerate into caricature. Whenever I tell
> anything that is unusual or below the average of backwoods life, I
> give fair warning that it is admitted only for spice or contrast, and let
> it go at that.26

Kephart stills sees Appalachia as having a distinct culture and still adheres to the
idea of Anglo-Saxon survivals, but at least he does not promote the extreme negative
examples or see the region’s problems as somehow inherent in a deficiency of the
people or their culture. However, Kephart’s caution against generalizing about the
whole region based upon exceptional examples did not stop writers, some of them
“well-meaning missionaries,” from focusing on the most degraded hollow they could
find and presenting it as if it were representative of the entire region or from
stereotyping Appalachian people for many decades to come.27
One of the primary culprits in furthering the subculture model of Appalachian otherness is Jack Weller’s infamous 1965 book *Yesterday’s People.* Weller was assigned by the Presbyterian Church to work in West Virginia and eastern Kentucky and thereby became an “expert” outside observer of mountain culture just in time for the War on Poverty and a renewal of religious cultural uplift programs. Rupert Vance wrote in his introduction to Weller’s book:

> Because he came as a missionary, Mr. Weller brought the objectivity of the stranger. Finally, he came to know these people better than they knew themselves. Intimate involvement in the social life of a people does not necessarily reveal the meaning of that life to a native who has no standard of comparison, but for Mr. Weller there was always a background of the other life, the outside world with which he could make comparison.

In a 1979 article, Allen Batteau blasts Weller and others like him:

> Many writers have ascribed to ‘culture’ any divergence from their own social patterns. The most ill-informed statements about Appalachian culture consist of one individual’s local observations of novel behavior patterns, with no explicit statement of his criteria of abstraction, except perhaps a familiarity with sociological jargon. Weller thus finds the mountain subculture to be ‘regressive,’ ‘existence-oriented,’ and ‘traditionalistic’ . . . .

Batteau goes on to say that Weller’s observations “have the status of a myth” and that his work “was widely accepted, not because it accurately portrayed Appalachia but because it portrayed Appalachia in a way that middle-class readers wanted Appalachia portrayed.” Weller is cited and criticized by most scholars examining the subculture model because his writing was so influential in both public perception of and public policy toward the region in the 1960s and 1970s, “in spite of the fact that Weller’s descriptions are largely unproven and abound with contradictions and that his prescriptions have had some very damaging consequences for the
Appalachian people." Weller's conclusions were accepted and used as the basis for many subsequent studies; Fisher provides an extensive list of examples from the 1960s and 1970s.

Weller's book promotes many of the negative stereotypes about mountain people upon which the subculture model is based. He implies that inbreeding resulting from isolation is a problem: "One wonders how much this close intermarriage has affected the basic stock of the people of southern Appalachia." He sees them as frozen in time, left behind by progress, as the rest of the nation moved forward: "There, time was standing still. The people spoke as they had always spoken; they preserved the old handicrafts and grubbed out a living in the old ways. . . . The mountains were proving to be not only a physical barrier but a social, cultural, economic, educational, and religious barrier as well." He explains that the cowboy is "heroic," while the mountaineer is "at best pathetically amusing" because the cowboy had "an 'open door' culture, which presented him with opportunity for progress," while "the mountaineer had a 'closed door' culture, which denied him the chance of advancement." He examines what he perceives as the mountaineer's traits: "individualism," which means self-centeredness, but not independence; "traditionalism," which means a stubborn adherence to outdated ways geared toward mere existence or survival, not progress or success; "fatalism," which means "passive resignation" to one's fate, which causes the mountaineer to accept "undesirable conditions" rather than hope or work for improvement; "action seeking," which causes the mountaineer to see life as "episodic" and to reject "routine" pursuits such as education, career or organized religion; a strange mix of
“fearlessness” and “apprehension,” which Weller calls “the psychology of fear,” which makes the mountaineer capable of performing brave acts in times of imminent danger while at the same time being overly dependent on the security of family, almost incapable of making difficult decisions that might cause conflict, unwilling to assume leadership positions, insecure, and “afraid to attempt any unfamiliar experience;” and “person-orientation,” which means the mountaineer values preserving relationships at the expense of achieving goals, self-improvement, financial or business success, time management, education and governance. Weller even provides an appendix in which he enumerates thirty-four points of comparison between the “Middle Class American” and “Southern Appalachian,” which are grouped under the headings “Personal Characteristics,” “Family Life Characteristics,” and “Relationships with Others;” the items often reveal his (admitted) bias toward mainstream culture in his choice of words when describing these traits.

In her article “Fatalism or the Coal Industry?” Helen Lewis gives an excellent summary of the subculture model and some of its shortcomings. She likens it to what Charles Valentine calls a “difference” or “deficiency” model in Culture and Poverty. Southern Appalachia is seen as having a distinct culture that through the generations has passed down “customs, values, style of life” that are viewed as different from and lesser than those of the larger American culture:

Some emphasize the subcultural traits as obsolete as indicated by such terms as Yesterday’s People, Contemporary Ancestors, Arrested Frontier culture while others emphasize the traits as pathological, disorganized, defeating value system such as [Richard] Ball’s ultramainstream-chauvinistic characterization of the Appalachians as
an “analgesic” subculture. . . most subculture descriptions emphasize only the dramatic and destructive traits of Appalachia, e.g., traditionalism, fatalism and emphasize the Appalachian people as passive and apathetic carriers of their culture.46

Lewis says many well-intentioned poverty programs and other institutions have projected these largely negative generalizations onto Appalachia without seeming to see the arrogance of this model and the hypocrisy inherent in the programs it spawns: “Instead of pride or power or positive identity the Appalachian poor folks are allowed maximum feasible participation in a self-help program to preserve the ‘best’ of their culture: cornshuck dolls.”47

Lewis’s reference to the valuing of cornshuck dolls by programs which devalue the very culture that produces them brings to mind the idealization of Appalachia as a quaint, racially pure, history-bearing subculture that is also in some ways part of the subculture model. William Goodell Frost called mountaineers “our contemporary ancestors” in an effort to raise funds for Berea College, an institution meant to “uplift” the members of the subculture while valuing what mainstream America saw as the more appealing aspects of their heritage, such as arts and handcrafts.48 The many “settlement schools,” of which John C. Campbell was an advocate, had a similar mission and attitude. They provided an education to mountain youth while at the same time preserving and promoting selected elements of their supposedly purely Celtic and English culture.49 They even went so far as to teach folk dances and practices from the British isles to their students as their own culture.50 Collectors of folk ballads privileged those which seemed to be survivals of English folk songs over other types of music,51 and schools and other organizations
even discouraged the banjo as a corrupting influence.\textsuperscript{52} Appalachian music, arts and crafts were turned into hot commodities during the craft revival.\textsuperscript{53} This side of the subculture model values the elements of Appalachian culture seen as “survivals” of America’s English, Celtic or frontier past, yet still sees the mountaineer as frozen in time, incapable of progress without help from mainstream culture. Even when looking at Appalachia with more favorable eyes, the nation still sees the region in stereotypes.

Thomas R. Ford, editor of the noted 1962 volume, *The Southern Appalachian Region: A Survey*, gives his overview of Appalachian culture in “The Passing of Provincialism,” and explains how it shaped and was (or was not) borne out by his survey of the population. He chooses to highlight four principal traits: individualism and self-reliance, traditionalism, fatalism, and “fundamentalist religion containing a powerful strain of Puritanism.”\textsuperscript{54} He chose these traits in part because they were most likely to be affected by recent social changes in the region:

In examining the web of mountain life, one finds these themes intertwined and generally, though not always, mutually supporting. Most so-called “mountain traits” are to be found in one form or another throughout the nation, particularly in rural areas. At the same time, each of them has its antithesis in contemporary industrial society. The self-reliant individualist, at least as an “ideal type,” stands at the far end of the scale from the much berated “organization man.” Traditionalism, not only in the sense of clinging to an earlier heritage, but also in the exaltation of resistance to social change, is viewed as both anachronistic and vaguely immoral by a larger society that values progress through rational, scientific endeavor. Even more reprehensible to a culture that stresses achievement, self-betterment, and mastery over nature is a passive resignation to one’s situation in life, particularly if it is a situation viewed as both undesirable and remediable. Less subject to censure by the larger society, perhaps, but contrasting as sharply with its dominant values — and not immune to ridicule — is the rigid, pervasive religious ethos of the Region.\textsuperscript{55}
In “Toward a Definition of Appalachia,” Bruce Ergood lists some of the stereotypical images of the mountaineer: “an ornery, independent feuding moonshiner”; “a proud, honest, God-fearing subsistence farmer”; “the thin, gaunt black-faced mountain miner”; and “a down-hearted, beaten, welfare recipient rocking on his dilapidated porch ‘just a setten.’”\textsuperscript{56} In an examination of twenty books and articles which purport to give a general description of mountain people, not just of one community, Ergood found eleven specific characteristics of mountain people that are cited again and again:

They are, in order of most frequent citation: Independence, Religious Fundamentalism, Strong Family Ties, Life in Harmony with Nature, Fatalism, Traditionalism, Honor, Fearlessness, Allegiance, Suspicion of Government, and Born Trader. Of the last five cited, Born Trader is found only in Campbell’s study, and the others are cited with equal frequency.\textsuperscript{57}

Ergood claims his study “exposes the pattern of recent inclusion of the three traits of fatalism, traditionalism, and religious fundamentalism by writers since Ford,” which is evidence of both the influence of Ford and of the large number of studies done since his “watershed” publication.\textsuperscript{58} But Ergood also notes that “most of the specific characteristics cited in Ford are also found in Jack Weller,” whose book, because of its church audience and reasonable price “received far greater acceptance.”\textsuperscript{59}

Stephen L. Fisher claims the subculture model is a classic case of “victim-blaming” because it points to the characteristics of poor Appalachians as the fundamental cause of their poverty, which means anti-poverty organizations may create a self-fulfilling prophecy of failure for mountain children by shaming and
devaluing the very people they aim to “rescue” from their circumstances by rescuing them from themselves.60

The result, as Maloney and Huelsman point out, has been a focus “not on what the rest of society is doing to the Appalachian but rather on what the Appalachian is supposed to be doing to himself through his own defective value system.” There has been little questioning of the manner in which the institutions of the region serve and affect the people because there has been agreement that the values of the people are at fault. It is these values which must be changed before poverty can be eliminated.61

While Fisher points out that one need not “accept the validity of the [internal] colonial model in order to be critical of the subculture model’s assumptions about change,” the internal colonialism model is the other main theoretical camp among those seeking to explain Appalachian difference and difficulties.62

In her essay “Fatalism or the Coal Industry?” Helen Lewis discusses what she calls the “Colonialism-Exploitation Model” of Appalachian development:

Some of the outspoken critics of the subculture model claim that the subculture proponents blame the underdevelopment of the region on the Appalachian character rather than the exploitative conditions institutionalized in the region. In their search for the causes of the problem, they see Appalachia as a subsociety structurally alienated and lacking resources due to processes of colonialism and exploitation. Those who control the resources preserve their advantages by discrimination. The people are not essentially passive but these “subcultural” traits of fatalism, passivity, etc., are adjustive techniques of the powerless; ways in which people protect their way of life from new economic modes and the concomitant alien culture. These values are reactions to powerlessness.63

In an essay co-authored with Edward E. Knipe, Lewis traces some of the history of the colonialism model in the study of Appalachia: “Harry M. Caudill, in Night Comes to the Cumberlands, calls the Appalachians ‘the last unchallenged stronghold of Western colonialism.’ This is not a new claim. C. Vann Woodward
(1951) characterizes the whole South as a colony suffering from absentee ownership and economic exploitation. Lewis quotes the following passage from Woodward’s *Origins of the New South* to show how he contextualizes the problem in Southern Appalachia:

As the old [19th] century drew to a close and the new century progressed through the first decade, the penetration of the South [and the Southern Appalachians] by Northeastern capital continued at an accelerated pace. The Morgans, Mellons, the Rockefellers sent their agents to take charge of the region’s railroads, mines, coke furnaces and financial corporations.

In the introduction to *Colonialism in Modern America: The Appalachian Case*, Lewis notes that Richard Drake “in his comments on regional historiography traces the use of the Colonialism interpretation to writers in the Labor Movement in the 1890’s and the Populist Movement;” she also recalls that during the regional labor struggles of the 1930s, “such writers as Theodore Dreiser and Malcolm Ross focused on the outside ownership and exploitation of the area,” and that the concept “continued through the reform movements which arose in the 30’s and crystallized in such leaders and organizations as Don West, Myles Horton, and the Highlander Folk School.”


> Despite its current popularity, the concept of internal colonialism is not a new one. V. I. Lenin was, perhaps, the first writer to use this notion in an empirical investigation of national development. Several years thereafter, Antonio Gramsci discussed the Italian Mezzogiorno in similar terms. More recently, Latin American sociologists have made use of this concept to describe Amerindian regions of their
societies. At this writing, internal colonialism has also gained wide acceptance in the United States; the term is bandied about in political manifestos and in some scholarly journals.

The internal colonialism model is an outgrowth of a larger body of work on colonialism in general. Traditionally, colonialism involves one nation entering and exploiting another, but internal colonialism argues that a similar process can also occur within one nation. In his essay “Internal Colonialism and Ghetto Revolt,” Robert Blauner writes that in traditional colonialism, the colonization is of a nation most often inhabited by people of a different race and culture, where this domination is political and economic, and the colony exists subordinated to and dependent upon the mother country. Typically the colonizers exploit the land, the raw materials, the labor, and other resources of the colonized nation; in addition a formal recognition is given to the difference in power, autonomy, and political status, and various agencies are set up to maintain the subordination.

He says that while it may seem a stretch to apply the model to America (in the case of Blauner’s essay, the colonized people are African-Americans), “classical colonialism and America’s internal version developed out of a similar balance of technological, cultural, and power relations,” resulting in “a common process of social oppression.” According to Blauner, there are “four basic components of the colonization complex.” The colonized are subjected to “forced, involuntary entry” by the colonizer. Then there is a dramatic “impact on the culture and social organization of the colonized people.” The colonizer systematically changes or destroys the previous way of life or values of the colonized people. The third element is that the colonized people “tend to be administered by representatives of the dominant power” and are “managed and manipulated by outsiders.” The fourth component is racism, defined as: “a principle of social domination by which a group
seen as inferior or different in terms of alleged biological characteristics is exploited, controlled, and oppressed socially and psychically by a superordinate group."71

Blauner says colonization results in "a weakening of the colonized's individual and collective will to resist his oppression," and that "to the extent that they are involved in the larger society and economy, the colonized are caught up in a conflict between two cultures," citing Frantz Fanon's account of his own experience with forced assimilation in the Martinique schools as an example.72 Blauner says the colonized elites in particular experience "a split in identity, cultural loyalty, and political orientation." Colonized elites are "intellectuals, politicians, and middle class," and they are encouraged to identify with the colonial system.73

Hechter explains that the core dominates the periphery and exploits it "politically" and "materially," and that "there is a crystallization of the unequal distribution of resources and power between the two group. The superordinate group, or core, seeks to stabilize and monopolize its advantages through policies aiming at the institutionalization of the existing stratification system" and in allocating social roles reserves "those roles defined as having high prestige" for members of the core group.74 The division of labor also entails a "distinctive ethnic identification" of the groups, who are categorized by "cultural markers;" Hechter claims "acculturation does not occur because it is not in the interests of institutions within the core." The periphery stays dependent, and anything it produces is "geared for export" to the core.75

Many Appalachian studies scholars see a clear application of this model in the region. In the introduction to Colonialism in Modern America, Lewis writes:
“Appalachia is a good example of colonial domination by outside interests. Its history also demonstrates the concerted efforts of the exploiters to label their work ‘progress’ and to blame any of the obvious problems it causes on the ignorance or deficiencies of the Appalachian people.” And she reminds us that “exploitation takes many forms — from coal mining in West Virginia to tourism in North Carolina, from TVA development in Tennessee to educational development in Kentucky.”

Allen Batteau sees the dominant culture’s interaction with the region as one big mining expedition: “The local colorists mined the region for literary images, the missionaries mined it for lost souls, and the coal operators mined it for natural resources. The later developers have mined Appalachia as well: the journalists for vivid images of rural white poverty and the technocrats of ‘human resources’ — well-trained workers for America’s economy, usually employed away from the region.”

Lewis and Knipe point out that even the ethnography of the region is tainted by colonialism because the colonized have little power to resist intrusion: “While the anthropologist often becomes the native’s advocate, he may not wish to upset those conditions which enable him to continue his research.”

They note that Whitesburg Mountain Eagle editor Tom Gish sees the government agencies meant to help the people merely taking the place of the coal companies in controlling the lives of Appalachians.

If Jack Weller is the popular author who symbolizes the subculture model, Harry Caudill is the symbol of the internal colonialism model. An attorney native to the region who remained there to practice law, his books about Appalachia and its problems sold widely during the 1960s and 1970s. Night Comes to the
Cumberlands: A Biography of a Depressed Area was very influential on America’s view of the region and its struggle with poverty after its publication in 1963. Caudill returned to the subject several times over the years, writing of the horrors of strip mining in 1971’s My Land is Dying, the persisting problem of poverty and exploitation in 1976’s The Watches of the Night, billed as “A new plea for Appalachia from the author of Night Comes to the Cumberlands,” and the power structure that controls the region’s resources in 1983’s Theirs Be the Power: The Moguls of Eastern Kentucky.  While Caudill may have helped spawn many valuable internal colonialism studies, many scholars have found fault with him just as they have with Weller. Stephen Fisher points out that Caudill (who might be considered one of the “colonized elites”) often “displays a patronizing attitude” toward mountain people. Fisher also complains that Caudill’s books are plagued by errors and a dearth of footnotes to back up his claims.

But after Caudill’s work, the floodgates of scholarship have opened. John Gaventa’s well-regarded 1980 book Power and Powerlessness: Quiescence and Rebellion in an Appalachian Valley is a notable example of a study that uses the internal colonialism model.  Who Owns Appalachia?: Landownership and Its Impact, the 1983 publication of the Appalachian Land Ownership Task Force also deals with issues of core-periphery domination. Rodger Cunningham’s excellent article “Appalachianism and Orientalism: Reflections on Edward Said,” makes a detailed comparison between the dominant Western views of the Muslim East as analyzed by Said and how Appalachia has been viewed by scholars and journalists. Roberta McKenzie’s article “Appalachian Culture as Reaction to Uneven
Development: A World Systems Approach to Regionalism” gives an excellent overview of scholarship in the field. And yet there is even more material published than she covers; Fisher lists eleven sources beyond those named here in one footnote alone.

Both the subculture and internal colonialism models still govern much of America’s interaction with the region and are useful in discussing its portrayal in mainstream culture. Scholars in the field of Appalachian studies have already done a great deal of work in the area of examining perceptions of Appalachia and their influence upon various materials produced by and about the region. Portrayals of Appalachia in non-fiction, fiction, film and television have all received critical attention. Many of the thematic and cultural issues examined in previous scholarship about other media have relevance to the study of drama, the genre deserves its own scholarship as well. The body of scholarship about Appalachian subject matter in other genres is substantial, indeed.

Journals such as Appalachian Journal, Appalachian Heritage, Mountain Life and Work, Mountain Review, Peoples Appalachia, Southern Exposure and others, as well as the many publications of conference proceedings by the Appalachian Consortium Press, contain many scholarly articles which critique works of non-fiction about the region. A number of fine anthologies, such as Voices From the Hills, Appalachia Inside Out, A Southern Appalachian Reader, and Appalachia: Social Context Past and Present, among others, make both the primary texts of Appalachian cultural history and decades of responses to them available for study. In 1977, Lynn Dickerson and Barbara Vann published in Appalachian Heritage a
thorough annotated bibliography of studies of mountain life published between 1905 and 1972; it traces quite well the development of Appalachian studies and the images of the region. Henry D. Shapiro also discusses many important texts in his 1978 book *Appalachia on Our Mind*.

One excellent resource for examining these issues is W. K. McNeil’s *Appalachian Images in Folk and Popular Culture*, first published in 1989 and in a second edition in 1995. In his introduction to the second edition, McNeil addresses criticism of the first edition. Many people shared Richard Drake’s negative reaction to the book; in his *Appalachian Heritage* review, Drake complained that McNeil included essays which “repeat and reinforce abrasive stereotypes about Appalachia.” McNeil argues that one must face the stereotypes in order to “lay them to rest.” He was not being “insensitive,” but instead felt compelled to include them because not to do so would have been to rewrite history. In his foreword to McNeil’s book, Loyal Jones writes of how a pattern of stereotyping recognized by John C. Campbell nearly a century ago persists even today and therefore requires studies like McNeil’s to point out the errors in supposedly factual accounts of Appalachia:

Campbell and his wife, Olive Dame Campbell, who finished his book after his death, were among the first “outsiders” to see the problems in Appalachian scholarship. They saw that the local color writers, the sensationalist newswriters, the industrialists and even the missionaries had hopelessly distorted the picture of the mountain people for their own purposes. Emma Bell Miles had even earlier noted this problem in her *Spirit of the Mountains*. Later writers such as Henry Shapiro and David Whisnant have written at length on the same problem. One might assume that the record has been straightened up by now and that there is a reliable set of writings to give one a balanced picture of Appalachia. Unfortunately, this is not so.
McNeil devotes his entire twenty-two page introduction to tracing the history of non-fiction writing about Appalachia from the late nineteenth century, when articles began to appear in magazines after the Civil War, all the way to more scholarly studies published in the final decade of the twentieth century. Many of the works discussed have been written about extensively in other places, but McNeil provides a valuable overview.

There are also many excellent resources for the study of Appalachia in fiction. Perhaps the most famous is the formidable 1,661 page dissertation *The Southern Mountaineer in Fact and Fiction* by Cratis D. Williams. Williams's dissertation, completed in 1961 for New York University, covers the years from 1784 to 1958 and deals primarily with fiction, though some of the early chapters do encompass travel writing. The dissertation, available through University Microfilms International, has never been published as a book, but much of its contents have been published in shorter form in scholarly journals and have been very influential in the field.

Other earlier dissertations on the subject include Carvel Collins's 1944 University of Chicago dissertation, "The Literary Tradition of the Southern Mountaineer, 1824-1900," and Isabella D. Harris's 1948 Duke University dissertation, "The Southern Mountaineer in American Fiction, 1824-1910." Many more recent articles and book-length studies have followed over the years. Just a few examples of books are *Appalachian Literature: Critical Essays*, edited by Ruel E. Foster; *The Poetics of Appalachian Space*, edited by Parks Lanier, Jr.; *The Folk of Southern Fiction* by Merrill Maguire Skaggs; *Wingless Flights: Appalachian*
Women in Fiction, by Danny Miller; and the anthology of essays, Bloodroot: Reflections on Place by Appalachian Women Writers, edited by Joyce Dyer. Many useful bibliographies have been published, including Jefferson Caskey’s Appalachian Authors: A Selective Bibliography; Sidney Saylor Farr’s Appalachian Women: An Annotated Bibliography; and Berea’s Works of Fiction by Southern Appalachian Authors or with Southern Appalachian Settings.

There has also been considerable scholarship regarding images of Appalachia in film and television. Again, the articles are numerous, covering silent films, B-movies, blockbusters, television news, television situation comedies and television movies. One of the better, more comprehensive articles is Horace Newcomb’s “Appalachia on Television: Region as Symbol in American Popular Culture.”

Appalachia is touched on in Edward J. Campbell, Jr.’s The Celluloid South and Jack Temple Kirby’s Media-Made Dixie, but it takes center stage in J. W. Williamson’s excellent 1995 study, Hillbillyland: What the Movies Did to the Mountains and What the Mountains Did to the Movies.

Despite this attention to various forms of expression, scholarship about the Southern mountaineer in drama has been surprisingly limited. Articles about individual theatre companies and newspaper reviews of plays have appeared, but except in the case of a few well-known works like The Kentucky Cycle the place of drama in the evolution of Appalachian cultural history generally, and in the case of the portrayal of the mountaineer particularly, has received little scholarly attention. And there are a great number of plays, some of them major hits in their day, among the neglected material. Even Hatcher Hughes’s 1924 Pulitzer Prize-
winning play, *Hell-Bent Fer Heaven*, has seen no real attention outside of anthology introductions from the 1920s and 1930s.\(^\text{103}\)

Charles S. Watson's important 1997 book, *The History of Southern Drama*, mentions *Hell-Bent fer Heaven* only in passing as a play that deals with "hypocritical fundamentalism among the North Carolina mountaineers," giving it no analysis.\(^\text{104}\) Lula Vollmer and Percy MacKaye are little more than listed names. In fact, Watson even misspells MacKaye's name, omitting the final "e."\(^\text{105}\) Watson devotes a scant four pages to Romulus Linney, grouping him with Beth Henley, Marsha Norman and Horton Foote as an example of a recent Southern playwright; Linney's attention to mountain subjects is likened to the tendency among many Southern writers to depict fictional versions of the specific area of the South they call home.\(^\text{106}\) Paul Green is granted an entire chapter, but other than *Wilderness Road*, the plays of the famed folk dramatist focus primarily on lowland Eastern North Carolina. His only mountain play, *Wilderness Road*, even upset many of those who commissioned it for Berea College because it focused on race, an issue Green had dealt with elsewhere and which is more identified with the lowland South, rather than on the mountain people themselves.\(^\text{107}\)

The purpose of this dissertation is to address this significant gap in scholarship. Although not meant to be comprehensive, it does present an overview of published plays in the field, arranged thematically. To identify and analyze these dramatic portrayals of mountain life, I have organized my commentary according to broad social categories: the family and gender roles, issues of violence and conflict, folk belief and fundamentalist religion. Some of the works are by outsiders and some
are by natives or residents of the region. They cover a span of time from the late
nineteenth century to the late twentieth century. I have limited my study to published
works that have had a national audience or arguably have national appeal. My
intention is not to catalogue all of the dramatic literature about the mountains but to
examine those works which give one insight into how the nation’s perception of the
region is reflected in drama about it.

In her essay “Seeing Knowledge,” Wilma Dykeman recalls having read a
sentence somewhere that stayed with her: “The purpose of research in every field is
to set back the frontier of darkness.” The purpose of this study is to do just that, to
carry a light into an unexplored territory in the hope that others will follow. To date,
there is not even a bibliography of Appalachian drama. This will be the first study
to identify, catalogue and discuss plays that have Appalachian subject matter and
themes; it will provide a resource that is sorely needed by those who wish to explore
the region’s presence in this genre. The body of work yet to be studied in
Appalachian drama is great, and this study is but the beginning.

Notes

1 Bruce Ergood, “Toward a Definition of Appalachia,” Appalachia: Social
Context Past and Present, ed. Bruce Ergood and Bruce E. Kuhre, 3rd ed. (Dubuque:
Kendall/Hunt Publishing Company, 1991) 39-49; David E. Whisnant, Modernizing
the Mountaineer: People, Power and Planning in Appalachia (Boone: Appalachian
Definitions,” Appalachia: A Regional Geography, ed. Karl Raitz and Richard
Ulack with Thomas R. Leinbach (Westview Press, 1984) 9-35, rpt. in Appalachia:

2 Raitz and Ulack 16.

3 Raitz and Ulack 10-21.


7 Shapiro, “Idea” 43.


10 Wagner 574-75.


13 Jones v.

14 Shapiro, *Appalachia on Our Mind* 57-58.


19 Stanley 656.


22 Batteau and Obermiller 2.

23 Dykeman 32.


31 Batteau, “Concept” 154.


33 Fisher 193, note 10.

34 Weller 13.

35 Weller 13-14.

36 Weller 28.

37 Weller 29.

38 Weller 29-32.

39 Weller 33-37.

40 Weller 37-40.

41 Weller 40-43.
42 Weller 44-49.

43 Weller 49-57.

44 Weller 161-163.


47 Lewis, “Fatalism” 222.


51 Whisnant, *Native* 114-124; Shapiro, *Mind* 244-260.

52 Whisnant, *Native* 93, 97-98.


55 Ford, “Provincialism” 11.

56 Ergood 45.
57 Ergood 45.
58 Ergood 45.
59 Ergood 59.
60 Fisher 191-192.
61 Fisher 191.
62 Fisher 191.
63 Lewis, "Fatalism" 223.
70 Blauner 178.
71 Blauner 179.

72 Blauner 182, 184.

73 Blauner 184.

74 Hechter 9.

75 Hechter 9.

76 Lewis, "Colony" 2,3.

77 Batteau, "Concept" 166.

78 Lewis and Knipe 24.

79 Lewis and Knipe 25.


81 Fisher 185-186.


Fisher 194, note 59.


101 William W. French, "Don Baker and a Theatre that Makes Sense for Southern Appalachia," *Contemporary Theatre in the South*, spec. issue of Southern...


Watson 108, 112.

Watson 207-211.

Watson 115.

Dykeman 643.
CHAPTER TWO:
MOUNTAIN MEN, HILLBILLY WOMEN, THEIR KITH AND KIN:
DRAMATIC TREATMENTS OF THE MOUNTAIN FAMILY AND
APPALACHIAN GENDER ROLES

Much of Appalachia's image in the mind of the nation, both positive and negative, is tied to the family. The family is where stereotypes about Appalachian men, women, and children, their relationship to one another, and their attitudes toward life are played out. These ideas and images pervade the region's literature, social history, and media portrayals from cartoons to situation comedies. Many plays about the region make use of these images, some to mock the region, some to romanticize it, some for the purpose of irony, and some for purposes of insight or political statement.

Appalachian values and cultural traits both shape and are shaped by family life. Jack Weller and others who promote the subculture of poverty model tend to view Appalachian cultural traits from a negative viewpoint. But Loyal Jones and other insider observers of Appalachian culture take a more even-handed view. Weller lists the distinctive traits of Appalachian people as individualism, traditionalism, fatalism, action-seeking, psychology of fear, and person orientation.1 But Jones, in his famous, often reprinted, 1973 essay “Appalachian Values,” later revised and published as a short book, reframes these qualities in a more positive light.2 He identifies Appalachian values as religion, independence, self-reliance and pride, neighborliness, familism, personalism, humility and modesty, love of place, patriotism, sense of beauty and sense of humor.3 As John B. Stephenson notes in his introduction to Jones’s 1994 book, Jones does not fall into the trap of romanticizing
the region. Rather, he admits that there are disadvantages to many of these values which contribute to negative conditions for the land and its people. At the same, time he asserts that he is proud of these values and thinks that, combined with positive social and economic action from within the region, they can be a source of great strength for the people of Appalachia.

One of the key values listed by Jones is familism, and it is one value about which he has nothing really negative to say:

Appalachian people are family-centered. Mountain people usually feel an obligation to family members and are more truly themselves when within the family circle. Family loyalty runs deep and wide and may extend to grandparents, uncles, aunts, nephews, nieces, cousins and even in-laws. Family members gather when there is sickness, death, or a disaster. Supervisors in northern industries have been perplexed when employees from Appalachia have been absent from jobs to attend funerals of distant relatives. Families often take in relatives for extended periods, or even raise children of kin when there is death or sickness in the family.

Jones provides the following anecdote to illustrate the depth of the loyalty: “Blood is thick in Appalachia. Two brothers were talking. One said, ‘You know, I’ve come to the conclusion that Uncle Luther is an S.O.B.’ The other said, ‘Yeah, he is, but he’s our’n.’” Jones notes that Appalachian people extend hospitality to family (and often to strangers) even when they cannot afford it. He allows that Appalachian families have problems and stresses just like other American families, but “there is a strong commitment to the extended family in Appalachia that is becoming rare in a land where most of us live someplace other than where we were born.”

Weller, on the other hand, sees Appalachian familism not as a strength, but as a limitation:
To the outsider, the mountain family is apparently close knit, which would seem to lend security to mountain life. In some respects, this is true. The members of a family, however, are bound to one another by ties of emotional dependence which tend to increase insecurity. In a sense, the family is not so much a mutually supporting group, in which each member gives himself for the others, as it is a group in which each member demands support from the others. I have known young people who have expressed almost a hatred of home but could not be away from “Mommy” and “Daddy” for a weekend without becoming homesick.\textsuperscript{11}

Weller conducts this discussion of the family within the section of his book entitled “The Psychology of Fear,” and sees the family as a fear-driven and anxiety-producing social institution in Appalachia: “There is a curious ambivalence in family relationships. On the one hand, members are dependent upon one another for security; on the other, they are suspicious of each other’s intentions. One’s rights are jealously guarded from encroachment by any of the others.”\textsuperscript{12}

The Appalachian family is often portrayed as isolated, clannish (a quality that figures prominently in its reputation for feuding, which will be discussed in the next chapter), and limiting to its members, particularly women.\textsuperscript{13} Despite having endured for generations in the mountains, its structure is seen by more critical outside observers as dysfunctional or less desirable than that of other American families. It is ironic, then, that contemporary, mainstream urban America often laments the loss of kinship and community that have survived in Appalachian culture. Kinship is an important element of Appalachian culture and society. In \textit{Rural Community in the Appalachian South}, Patricia Duane Beaver notes that

\begin{quote}
kinship is more than biological or genealogical connectedness; it is a cultural idea through which relationships are expressed and from which community homogeneity is derived. Kin ties connect community residents into a system that gives personal identity
\end{quote}
through the expression of common roots, common ancestry, shared experience, and shared values; kinship also provides an idiom for people’s behavior toward one another and is one of several bases for the actual formation of groups.14

Several sociological studies, such as F. Carlene Bryant’s We’re All Kin: A Cultural Study of a Mountain Neighborhood and Elmora Messer Matthews’s Neighbor and Kin: Life in a Tennessee Ridge Community, examine kinship issues as an organizing principle in Appalachian culture.15 But as Beaver points out, despite the importance of extended family, expectations of loyalty and sharing of “resources, labor, time, and love,” and the fact that extended family groups often live in very close proximity to one another, the nuclear family is still somewhat autonomous and independent.16

Within the Appalachian family, gender roles are depicted as rigid, and in reality they often have been. Men and women have had, and in many respects still have, distinct and different roles in the family and in society. Appalachian social activity is more divided by gender than most American cultures; men and women socialize primarily with their own gender and opposite-sex friendships are rare.17

Appalachian men have a very conflicted image in the American imagination. On the one hand, they are viewed as the last of the true frontiersmen, self-sufficient, hardworking, rugged individualists with great pride and patriotism. But on the other hand, they are often depicted as shiftless, lazy, lawless, hot-tempered, unlettered, alcoholic, abusive or even deviant. The latter image has become more and more prevalent over time. In the popular imagination, young mountain men are simple, wild and often armed, the old men often sleeping, and all ages of men are in search of ways either to make money by illegal means like moonshining or scrape by
without working at all. Allen Batteau observes that the idea of the mountaineer as "hostile toward progress" and grossly backward, ignorant, and lazy proliferated in the 1930s as America struggled with the Depression and pushed toward industrialization and modernization. Both Batteau and J. W. Williamson cite Paul Webb's *Esquire* cartoons in particular for promoting the image of the bearded, pipe-smoking mountain man in tall hat and overalls, sleeping outdoors in the daytime, rising only to hunt or feud, and doing no work outside of moonshining while his wife toils. Ridiculing the mountaineer is really an act of ridiculing and exorcising what America wants to reject about its larger troubled past. Williamson notes that, years later, the dangerous raping and murdering hillbilly villains of films like *Deliverance* and *Cape Fear* exhibit the dark, "monstrous" side of the mountain man's incompatibility with modern mainstream America. Williamson and Rodger Cunningham both see these profoundly negative portrayals as an "urban mirror," a playing out of America's worst fears about itself. The mountain man is a figure either to be feared or mocked, an anachronistic antagonist to and victim of contemporary American culture. Williamson treats these images in great detail in his book, *Hillbillyland: What the Movies Did to the Mountains and What the Mountains Did to the Movies.*

Women, too, are associated with complex and contradictory images in America's perception of Appalachia. Teenage girls and young women are often portrayed as beautiful, barefoot, and eager for romance. They are almost wild creatures of nature, in the most innocent sense, so that in the fiction of authors like John Fox, Jr., they often end up in "Pygmalion" type relationships with outsider male
characters who see untutored potential in them. Allen Batteau notes that, until
Harry Caudill’s concern over strip mining and the “War on Poverty” of the 1960s
when the region is more often represented by the elderly, the romanticized mountains
were often symbolized by innocent, lively young girls in fiction. A latter-day
example of the stereotypical mountain girl is Ellie Mae Clampett of the television
series The Beverly Hillbillies, who is buxom and beautiful, yet innocent, and who
communes with and dotes upon her many “critters” and birds.

However, youth and beauty are fleeting for the mountain woman. They are
married young, worked to exhaustion, and “old” by the age of thirty-five according to
most accounts. In his 1913 Our Southern Highlanders, Horace Kephart writes,

Many of the women are pretty in youth; but hard toil in house and
field, early marriage, frequent child-bearing with shockingly poor
attention, and ignorance or defiance of the plainest necessities of
hygiene, soon warp and age them. At thirty or thirty-five a mountain
woman is apt to have a worn and faded look, with form prematurely
bent — and what wonder?

In fact, the responsibility and work begin even in childhood, as girls are expected to
care for younger children and perform many household chores. Kephart gives a
brutal account of women’s labor and status:

The mountain farmer’s wife is not only a household drudge, but a
field-hand as well. . . . Outside the towns no hat is lifted to maid or
wife. A swain would consider it belittled his dignity. At table, if
women be seated at all, the dishes are passed first to the men; but
generally the wife stands by and serves. There is no conscious
discourtesy in such customs; but they betoken an indifference to
woman’s weakness, a disregard for her fine nature, a denial of her
proper rank, that are real and deep-seated in the mountaineer. To him
she is little more than a sort of superior domestic animal.
In their old age, however, mountain women have great power and wisdom, and they are often portrayed as pipe-smoking grannies wearing brogans, no longer caring what the world thinks. Again, *The Beverly Hillbillies* provides a classic example of a mountain female stereotype in the character of Granny Clampett. John C. Campbell says the “granny” holds a position of great authority and that “there is something magnificent” about her; he also notes that, finally free to do what she likes, she may often advise younger women never to marry at all. Emma Bell Miles writes of the older women:

I have learned to enjoy the company of these old prophetesses almost more than any other. The range of their experience is wonderful; they are, moreover, repositories of tribal lore — tradition and song, medical and religious learning. They are nurses, the teachers of practical arts, the priestesses, and their wisdom commands the respect of all. An old woman has usually more authority over the bad boys of a household than all the strength of man. A similar reverence may have been accorded to the mothers of ancient Israel, as it is given by all people to those of superior holiness — to priests, teachers, nuns; it is not the result of affection, still less of fear.

Beaver concurs that old age is the time when women achieve real power and authority and, unlike men, once widowed often live alone by choice.

Some middle-aged women not primarily functioning as mother figures are portrayed for comic purposes as exhibiting masculine habits and traits and bullying the weaker men. Williamson discusses in detail the aggressive, strong, mannish, even sometimes cross-dressing, “hillbilly gal” as portrayed in film. Women are sometimes mocked in fictional accounts, but also sometimes shown as holding the family together in spite of unworthy husbands, numerous children, and the many hardships of life in the mountains.
Appalachian childhood is often depicted as deprived and sad, but also often idealized as carefree and wild. However, if mountain childhood is happy, it is also brief, as early marriage is a prominent feature in writing about the region. Shotgun weddings and premarital pregnancies abound in both fiction and social history. Sometimes mountain girls are represented as having great freedom, but more often boys are granted freedom and girls kept closer to home for protection. Beaver notes that even in contemporary Appalachia courtship tends to be a “family affair” in which the boy visits the girl and her family, though formal dating is more common now as part of the process. Sometimes girls are portrayed as choosing their own mates, sometimes as having no choice in the matter at all. But, undeniably, in most mountain family plots, marriage is the primary goal for young women. And with the achievement of that goal, the family cycle is renewed to be played out in another generation which will slowly adapt the traditional rules to suit the needs of the time; for instance, Beaver notes that Appalachian men are beginning to become more involved in the previously female domain of child-rearing since more women have entered the workforce.

But while Appalachia’s real families may be changing with the times, many of those portrayed in the theatre have not evolved significantly since the first plays about the region were written in the late nineteenth century, in part because so few of the plays are set in contemporary Appalachia. In the first section of this chapter, I will examine the family and gender stereotypes as established by one-act comedies in the early part of the twentieth century, including a number of examples from the well-known Carolina Playmakers repertoire. In the second section, I will examine
how gender roles are handled in more serious contemporary plays about Appalachia.
In the third section, I will discuss how plots of romance between mountain people
and “outsiders” illustrate and examine the gender and family stereotypes associated
with the region through the clash between cultures.

“It’s just like that movie we saw at Radio City last week.”: The One-Act
Hillbilly Comedy

Many early one-act plays about Appalachia are formulaic and adhere closely
to the stereotypes found in cartoons and other fiction of the time. Most are
comedies, and they were very popular in the 1930s and 1940s. During the 1930s,
many animated and live-action hillbilly comedy shorts came out of Hollywood,
which Williamson describes as Paul Webb, Al Capp and Billy DeBeck’s cartoon
hillbillies come to life,40 so it is not surprising that the theatre offered similar fare.
By the late 1940s, the Ma and Pa Kettle films, which blurred the lines between the
Pacific Northwest, the Ozarks and Appalachia considerably,41 had taken up some of
these types, and by the 1960s and early 1970s, most of this sort of humor had moved
to television in the form of shows like the Beverly Hillbillies, Green Acres, Petticoat
Junction, and Hee Haw; in the late 1970s and 1980s, the images were revisited in the
Dukes of Hazzard.42

The Carolina Playmakers produced a number of one-act plays about the
mountains. Frederick Koch, a professor at the University of North Carolina at
Chapel Hill, founded the group in 1918 and encouraged his students to write “folk-
plays” for performance. Among the many successful alumni of his program are such
prominent writers as Paul Green and Thomas Wolfe. The Playmakers were very
influential in popularizing the folk drama genre that spawned many of the Appalachian plays of the following decades.43

**Wash Carver's Mouse Trap**

*Wash Carver's Mouse Trap*, a 1939 one-act set in 1934, examines outsider expectations of mountain types. It was written for the Carolina Playmakers by Fred Koch, Jr., their founder’s son.44 Wash Carver, a “tall, lean slow-moving and slow-talking man with weathered face and shrewd blue eyes,” has taken advantage of the wet weather and purposely made the dirt road below his house boggy in hopes tourists will get stuck and pay him to pull them out with his wagon; he has hauled eight cars already by the time the action of the play begins (217). His wife Jen, “a sturdy middle-aged mountain woman,” objects to his trickery, but he reminds her that she puts water in the milk and lard in the butter that she trades (218). Wash thinks himself lucky to have won an old bedspread at the Indian Fair for only a dime, but Jen, who is presently mending it, is not sure it was even worth that much. She would far rather have a new store-bought bedspread like one her friend has purchased with money earned from selling her worn homespun spreads to tourist shops in Asheville (219).

Soon, Harry and Rosie Goldstein of New York get stuck in Wash’s trap and come to the cabin seeking assistance. Rosie is thrilled to be on this detour: “Oh, Harry, isn’t this romantic? It’s just like that movie we saw at Radio City last week. Aren’t you glad now that we came to the mountains?” but Harry is more concerned with the well-being of his new car and with getting to Asheville by nightfall (222). Wash plays dumb and dawdles, knowing they are in a hurry, intentionally exhibiting
all the slow-wittedness and laziness of the stereotypical mountaineer he knows tourists expect (222-223). Harry offers Wash ten dollars to tow him immediately, and the men go to free the car, leaving the women in the cabin. The two complain a bit about men while getting acquainted; in the process, Rosie tells Jen that the pearls she is wearing are only costume jewelry worth ten cents, the kind that her husband sells in bulk to stores (225).

Rosie has promised to buy a homespun spread for her daughter’s room, and when she sees the spread Jen is mending, she assumes it must be a family heirloom “at least a hundred years old!” (226). She has been fearful of buying a spread in a tourist gift shop because she wants to be sure she gets something authentic, and she pleads with Jen to sell her the “genuine” spread, offering her ten dollars (226). Jen tries to tell her the truth, but cannot get “a word in edgewise” for Rosie’s excited babbling (226, 228). Rosie thinks she has not offered enough, so she gives her thirteen dollars; a “bewildered” Jen lets her have the spread (226-227).

Wash returns thinking he has pulled one over on a “powerful good trader,” not realizing Jen has made a deal of her own (227). She tells him Rosie gave her thirteen dollars for the spread and refuses to share it because the spread was a gift to her. A frustrated Wash comments, “Wish’t now I’d a-took the money instead” (228). He has paid Harry back the ten dollar towing fee and sixteen cents more for a string of the ten-cent pearls, which he believes to be “worth twenty dollars” so he could give them to Jen as a present (228-229). Wash is so convinced of his shrewdness, he cannot fathom why Jen bursts into laughter.
In this play, the Goldsteins see the Carvers as the stereotypes they expect to find in the mountains, and Wash plays on those assumptions for personal gain. At the same time, he is exhibiting the stereotypical trait of the mountain man who is a "close trader" and achieves financial gain through unconventional, potentially dishonest means rather than honest work. He also exemplifies the stereotype of the mountaineer as unworldly and foolish with money. Jen is not trying to play the hillbilly fool for Rosie, but Rosie is so sure of what she believes to be true about mountain people and their lives that she ignores what Jen is really saying to her, viewing her merely as a quaint experiential souvenir to go with the "authentic" bedspread she means to take home from her trip to the mountains. Jen also reflects the strong, smart mountain woman who does well for herself in life, often in spite of the "sorry" man she has married. Koch's is a short play, but remarkable for its simultaneous use of and satire of mountain stereotypes, using its portrayal of the Goldsteins and their interaction with the Carvers to tweak the very sort of outsider audience that might eagerly attend a mountain folk comedy. The sophisticated layers of meaning Koch creates in this brief episode of insider-outsider contact are unusual in a mountain one-act; most lack Koch's ironic critical distance.

Another of the Carolina Playmakers "folk plays," Hubert Heffner's 1920 *Dod Gast Ye Both!* portrays mountain men as moonshiners. Thomas Wolfe's 1919 *The Return of Buck Gavin*, the first play he ever wrote, and in whose first production he played the lead, shows the mountain man as outlaw, but a somewhat noble, loyal outlaw who would risk his own life to pay his respects to a dead friend. *Triflin'*, a 1938 one act by Lealon N. Jones, is set in the Ozarks, but, like many plays about the
mountain people of the Ozarks, makes use of many of the same stereotypes associated with Appalachian plays, particularly the lazy mountain man.47

_A Shotgun Splicin'

Another of the Carolina Playmakers scripts, _A Shotgun Splicin'_, by Gertrude Wilson Coffin, the daughter of a North Carolina mountain doctor, highlights a number of gender and family stereotypes about the region, in particular some regarding premarital sex.48 The play’s first production in 1928 at the University of North Carolina sparked controversy after reaction to a touring performance in the western part of the state reached Chapel Hill. A ministerial association sent a resolution to the university requesting they ban the play from their repertory:

The Resolution held that the members of the Association “do not believe that a young woman should be trained at the state University to play the role of an adulteress and the mother of a bastard child whose stage father is another student, the young man playing the part of her seducer.”49

The play is set at the post office of a mountain town in North Carolina in the summer of 1910 (290). The post office is run by Aunt Viney, but she is sick, so Sairey-Sam Mull, a plain, opinionated, gossipy middle-aged mountain woman, is filling in. Pink Gibson, age twenty-eight, a “shiftless, good-natured, man-of-the-neighborhood,” dressed in worn clothes and a tattered hat, is sprawled on a bench beside his gun and fishing pole as the action begins (291-292). He is chewing tobacco and whittling as Sairey-Sam waits for the mail to arrive so she can sort it. He teases her about being able to read well enough to sort the mail, indicating his own illiteracy. Ben Bayles, a local man who aspires to the state legislature, has paid him a dime to hang campaign posters, and he is waiting for them to arrive. Sairey-Sam remarks on her resentment
toward Ben for acting "biggety" about his education and for not putting it to better use than politics (294).

Fate Gaddy, the mail carrier, thirty-five years old and also fitting the standard physical description of a mountain man, finally arrives late with the mail; he explains that he is late because he fell in the creek when an alarm clock placed in his sack by "'em devilish Sisk boys" as a prank rang and startled him (295). Pink tells him the news that a baby has mysteriously appeared at the Radford home "up on Little Hongry," and he suspects it belongs to their daughter Dicey, who has been away at school (295-296). Fate warns Pink not to tell Sairey-Sam or she will repeat the gossip.

Squire Ben Harrison Bayles arrives, and the people gathered at the post office are distressed to see from his posters that he has switched from being a "Radical" to a Democrat for the sake of political expediency (299). Sairey-Sam expresses the opinion that hard work gets people farther than a "heap o' book larnin'." and Ben responds:

Why, Sairey, they hain't enough schools. When our boys and girls grows up, jist fryin' size, they marries off, 'cause our schools are so short. Some of the smartest ones has to leave home and study. Take that little brown-eyed girl of Leander's — smart as a whip-cracker in school; her folks lacked money to send her off to Asheville — I lent her money myself. Transylvany's schools beats our'n. (300)

Dicey Radford, the "little brown-eyed girl," arrives just after Ben, Fate and Sairey-Sam have gone inside. She blushes when Pink asks if she is there to see Fate. When she hears Sairey-Sam is running the post office that day, she says she doesn't want to see her, but wishes she had time to go visit Sairey-Sam's daughter, Doshy,
before she has to hurry home. Fate comes outside, and Dicey is happy to see him, but seems markedly less happy to see Ben. When Sairey-Sam emerges, she immediately starts prying about the baby; she has heard the men talking about the doctor going to see the sick child and is eager to find out whose it is. Dicey says she is in a hurry, and the women go inside so Dicey can buy Castor oil for the infant.

Pink comments to Ben that Dicey “wasn’t overly proud to see” him, and then he comments to Fate that he is waiting to see if Dicey will walk with him; Pink is beginning to put two and two together about Dicey’s relationship to the two men (302-303). Sairey-Sam tells Dicey to stop by and see Doshy, and Fate leaves with her, much to the surprise of the others. Sairey-Sam guesses Fate is looking for a second wife, and she is shocked when Pink says he thinks the baby is Dicey’s; now she is concerned that her daughter might associate with a loose girl (304).

Pink spies Dicey’s brother Amos, a twenty-five year old preacher with a crippled leg, coming down the road. As he approaches, Pink comments that Amos was supposedly more upset than Dicey’s parents about the baby and wants to “marry ’er off;” Sairey-Sam responds, “Who’s he a-splicin’ ’er to? Amos ort to see that his own blood sister acts right, or his preachin’ ain’t wuth nothin’” (304). Amos is looking for Dicey, and Sairey-Sam tells him she’s left with Fate and “Ef that talk that’s a-goin’ around here is the straight of hit, she ort to be spliced to Fate, and no time lost” (305).

Ben chuckles that the law ought to force them to marry, offering that if they had a license he would perform the ceremony right away himself. Amos says he suspects Fate is the father, so he already has licenses ready. He asks Pink to borrow
his rifle "so's I c'n git the drap on him ef he shows fight," and limps off to find the
couple (306). He returns with Fate at gunpoint, and Ben takes his position to begin
the ceremony when Dicey stops it: "Take that gun off Fate, Amos. Guess I'm in
trouble for the rest o' my life, but I won't lie. [She points at Squire Ben] It's him!"
(308). Pink grabs the gun and pushes Ben into the groom's place, but Dicey insists
she won't marry him. Amos asks "Whut you got to say about it?" and Dicey,
"conscious of victory," responds, "Ever'thing. [Quavering.] I love Fate" (308).
Sairey-Sam explodes, "Eh, Lordy! Hain't that jist like a ooman!" but encourages
Amos to let Dicey marry Fate (308). Fate says he is happy to marry Dicey, but he
refuses to raise Ben's child. Amos exuberantly agrees: "That's all right. Me and Pa
and Ma'll be proud to keep the little-un. [He goes up to the sign bearing Ben's
picture, spits on it, tears it down, and tramples on it. Then, laconically]: 'Druther
have a bastard in the fam'ly than a damn' legislater!'" (308).

Coffin's play reflects the idea that out-of-wedlock births are common in
Appalachia, as are resultant "shotgun" weddings. Its conclusion is also in keeping
with the widely observed acceptance of illegitimate children into the extended
family, as well as the practice of children's sometimes being raised by extended
family. Jack Weller blames the situation on lack of adult guidance and constructive
activity for young people in the mountains. He is critical of adult society's
acceptance of illegitimacy: "Sometimes the boy is required to marry the girl; often
he is not. The girl will keep her baby; she may quit school to tend it, or perhaps she
will give it to her mother to keep and bring up. Because babies are so highly
regarded in mountain families, illegitimate children are welcomed gladly and spoiled
with the rest." But in this instance, the fault lies not with a mountain boy, but with an older "uppity" political aspirant who seems to have taken advantage of Dicey by paying for her schooling, then demanding sex from her, creating the very problem for her that he claims to want to solve for the mountain youth: interruption of schooling by early marriage and childbearing.

Amos's relief at not having a politician for a brother-in-law and Sairey-Sam's condemnation of his political career as lesser than any other kind of work reflects the fierce independence of the mountaineer and the mountain social taboo against "getting above your raising." Loyal Jones explains: "We mountaineers are levellers, and we believe we are as good as anybody else, but no better. We believe that we should not put on airs, not boast, nor try to get above our raising. We usually do not extoll our own virtues, and if we do we are ridiculed by others in subtle ways."

Coffin's play allows its audience to feel more civilized than the mountain people who engage in such scandalous acts of premarital sex and dishonesty that result in illegitimate births and shotgun weddings. At the same time it lampoons political corruption, though the corrupt politician in this play is not an outsider come to take advantage of the mountaineers, but one of their own who has betrayed the very people whose interests he claims to represent. While Coffin's characters may have rustic charm and may entertain, they do little to further the cause of mountain people with their negative stereotypical behavior.

_For Better or Worse_

Another one-act from the era, though not a Playmakers piece, that exemplifies mountain family stereotypes is Susie Smith Sinclair's _For Better or_
Worse. The play features a North Carolina mountain family in which the mother is somber, worn, and hardworking, the father is a lazy drinker, the teenage son is lazy and ungrateful, the grown son is also lazy and a drinker like his father, and the daughter-in-law complains of her lot in life after giving up a job to marry and have a baby, all the while letting her husband’s mother wait on her more than she should.

Aunt Dicey, an old “granny woman,” stops by on her way to deliver a baby, and the mother explains how angry and frustrated she has become. Dicey tells her she cannot prescribe any herbal medicine for what ails her, but recommends that the mother pretend to fall ill so her family will appreciate her. She does, and at first her husband is angry that she is sleeping with her work still unfinished, but when Dicey says there is no hope and the mother will surely die, he begins to feel guilty and promises never to visit the local moonshine still again. The older son says he will never drink again, and the younger son says he would work hard around the place if he had it to do over. The daughter-in-law even makes up a sick bed for her mother-in-law.

Dicey cautions that if she recovers too quickly the family’s reformation may not last, but the mother cannot stand to see them hurt, so she “recovers.” Dicey leaves, warning them all that the mother could relapse at any time and will never be the same again. After she goes, the family is critical of Dicey for being wrong about the mother’s impending death, discounts Dicey’s medical authority, and all immediately go back to their old ways. They assume the mother will be cooking dinner that night and back at work right away, and they think only of the inconvenience her illness or death would have caused them, not of her well-being.
Hearing this, the mother relapses as instructed, and the family calls after Dicey for help.

*For Better or Worse* is an extreme example of the kind of brutal overwork of women, and the lack of respect paid to them, described by Horace Kephart. All of the men in this play are worthless, as is the materialistic young wife unsuited to traditional domestic life. They are selfish and treat the mother like a slave. But the wise granny figure steps in to help and knows just how to remedy the situation; she is very much the wise keeper of lore, practitioner of folk medicine, and dispenser of wisdom for whom Emma Bell Miles expresses such admiration. While Aunt Dicey may embody an appealing sort of rural folk wisdom in this play, the overall effect is one of negative stereotyping of mountain people.

In the decades that followed the folk drama movement, many more hillbilly one-acts were written and widely produced, perhaps in part because many of them were marketed as non-royalty plays, which made them affordable for school and community groups to perform. Ned Albert is one playwright whose works are still sold by Samuel French today. His plays are set in the Ozarks, but rely on the same mountain stereotypes for humor. His 1938 *Comin’ 'Round the Mountain* and 1952 *Shotgun Wedding* feature extreme stereotypes of lazy men, worn-out mothers, mannish women in boots who even serve as sheriffs, surly young men who want a wife only to keep house, young mountain girls so close to nature that they talk to birds, parents who sometimes try to force their daughters to marry against their wishes, uneducated families who know little of the outside world and have poor hygiene, and outsiders who upset the order of their world to humorous effect.53
The hillbilly comedies of the middle twentieth century gave audiences just what they expected: mountain people to be charmed by and to laugh at. Urban audiences were allowed to revisit the country's supposedly simpler rural past as embodied by contemporary mountaineers, while at the same time being reassured that the rest of the nation had moved on to bigger and better things. The form was so pervasive and influential that even in 1988 Jack Sharkey satirized it in his "musical melodrama" *Nell of the Ozarks; Or, Tobacco Island Meets Treasure Road*, in which mountaineers and pirates collide to ludicrous comic effect.\(^{54}\)

The stereotypes established by hillbilly one-acts, comic film shorts, and newspaper and magazine cartoons of the 1920s and 1930s are repeated again and again in the decades that follow, and still linger in American popular culture today. The characters seen in these early plays are echoed in everything from *Hee Haw* and *The Beverly Hillbillies* to comic advertisements to the Elvis Presley movie *Kissin' Cousins* to darker manifestations of mountaineers like those in *Deliverance* and the bleak images so ubiquitous during the War on Poverty in the 1960s.

"She's not Mammy Yokum and I'm not Daisy Mae": The Function of Gender Stereotypes in Serious Contemporary Drama

Lula Vollmer's 1931 *Sun-Up*, which will be discussed in depth in the next chapter, is of the same era as the hillbilly comedies and reinforces some of the same stereotypes, but at its center are a strong mountain mother and her noble soldier son who are taken seriously and treated with dignity.\(^ {55}\) Vollmer's sensitive portrayals of strong mountain women in many of her early plays laid the groundwork for serious examinations of the Appalachian female condition in the years to come.\(^ {56}\)
Since Vollmer, many plays have commented on the plight of women in Appalachia. Women's concerns have received far more attention than men's, perhaps because they have historically been so symbolic of the region as romanticized and victimized. In the course of telling women's stories, men's stories are partially told as well; in the case of Paula Cizmar's 1982 *Death of a Miner*, the struggle with rigid gender roles is shown to be as difficult for men as for women. But more often than not, the men appear as callous, controlling figures and the positive portraits are shown as exceptions to the rule.

*Tennessee*

Romulus Linney's *Tennessee*, set in the mountains of North Carolina in 1870, comments on the powerlessness of Appalachian women of the time while maintaining a sense of humor in its bittersweet storytelling. *Tennessee* premiered in New York in a 1979 Ensemble Studio Theatre production featuring Lois Smith in the lead role of the Old Woman.57

A mountain family with two sons, one teenager and one infant, is finishing up their chores and preparing for supper when a strange elderly woman appears, traveling on foot, carrying a cowbell and a piece of broken mirror. She questions them about who lives in the house and who used to own it, then turns to leave. But the family, concerned at her tired, haggard appearance, pleads with her to stay with them to eat and rest for a while. They learn she has walked seven miles over the mountain for a number of days, sleeping outside and foraging for food. They are puzzled that she claims to live in Tennessee while at the same time she says she lives only seven miles away.

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As she tells her story, they learn that in an attempt to avoid marriage as a girl, she had declared she would only marry a man who would take her to Tennessee. Griswold Plankman took her up on the offer, and since she had given her word, she had to go. They had a long and difficult trip in a wagon over what she thought were the eighty miles to Tennessee; even before they reached their destination she was already pregnant. She spent the rest of her life in an isolated cabin, kept from friends and society by her husband, never visiting home again, then outliving her own children and losing touch with grandchildren who “melted away into other kin’s families” (19).

Finally, her husband died, and she began to have a very uneasy feeling. Despite a neighbor’s urging not to “try to leave Tennessee,” she followed her urgent impulse to walk out in the countryside, where sights began to seem strangely familiar (20). After several days of walking, she heard the familiar sound of her father’s cowbell; when she found the cow, she looked inside the bell and saw her father’s initial. She took the bell and rang it as she walked. Then she found a bit of broken mirror she had left behind in the burl of a tree on her wedding journey, and eventually came upon her childhood home. She realizes now that her husband, her family, her neighbors, and even her own children were all in on the trick and that her entire life has been a lie. She expresses anger to those long dead, almost confusing them with the family that now occupies the home, then turns to walk back to “Tennessee” because she cannot think what else to do. The family goes in to supper as their older son watches her go, then picks up the dropped mirror and sees his face in it.
The Old Woman has a great deal to say about the limited choices and opportunities allowed women in nineteenth century Appalachia. She tells the young family that when she was nineteen years old she had rebelled against her family’s expectations: “I wasn’t no shriveled up pea then. I was a choice item. The best looking woman in these mountains. And the meanest. Mean and proud. Damn men. I didn’t like ’em. Said so. Drove my momma crazy. You’re wild, she said. Settle down” (12). But she did not want any part of her mother’s way of life: “Marry when you’re a child. Work and slave for men who don’t care one spit what you think or how you feel. Who never listen. Don’t talk like that, momma said. But I did. I give men hell. They’d come, and I’d spit, and they’d go” (12).

Her family could not see any other future for her but marriage, and would shake their heads as she drove away suitor after suitor:

Heavy-footed, tongue-tied, bug-eyed horsefaces, coming here looking for a slave. Wanting to lie on top of me one minute, and work me to death the next. And take me away from you. And you hoping one of them would. Clucking your tongues, saying, “Land sakes, what will become of her, treating men like this.” Wanting me to go. Well, I won’t! I won’t leave this house, and you, to be plowed under like dirt by some sweating, groaning, bone-headed man! Hell, no! (12)

But when Griswold says he will take her to Tennessee, she gives in even though she doesn’t want to in order to prove her word “is as good as any damn man’s” (14). Griswold tells her they must sleep in the wagon on the trip and not in boarding houses because, “I don’t want to be shut up in a tiny little room, with neighbors, and a good looking bride like you. I figure we’ll want to make some noise about it,” so she moves to leave for home, beating him with her fists. They struggle until she becomes frightened and promises never to hit him again (15-16).
He tells her life will be hard in the wilderness, but Tennessee is beautiful. After more than six weeks, they arrive in what he says is Tennessee, and he tells her to hop out of the wagon. The trials of marriage begin: “I hopped, all right. Hopped while you built the house. Hopped while you sat aching and sweating, waiting for your supper. Then you hopped while I had Sally, and we lost Malcolm, and again when Sarah came. And we lived there, alone. At least I did” (18). Griswold rarely let her go to the store eight miles away, and never without him; even then, she says, “I knowed Griswold didn’t want me saying nothing. We lived, like a man and woman can, sometimes speaking, sometimes not” (18). She smiles as she recalls how she “made him pay” for joking that a girl who worked at the store was pregnant and “they were trying to blame it on us” (19). Neighbors came to visit only occasionally, always telling her how lucky they were to be in that place, nodding as Griswold said it was exactly where she had wanted to go, something she realizes in retrospect was part of the lie.

Her girls married and left home, just as she did, and “they died young, worn out wives” (19). After Griswold dies at eighty-nine, her neighbor warns her not to leave because she could “get lost,” a comment that has more meaning now that the Old Woman realizes the consequences of her trip (20). The neighbor tells her she has had a good life in Tennessee, and when the Old Woman replies, “Sometimes,” the neighbor says, “No woman can ask for more” (20). At the end of her life, just as in her youth, she is being told not to ask for more, to accept and be satisfied with a life as a subservient wife. But she is not satisfied. She has become an old granny woman, and with age comes freedom for Appalachian women.
When she learns the truth, she is furious, cursing the memory of her husband, her family, and all those who participated in the lie. After she rages violently, she coughs, regains her composure, and says to the young family, “Whew. Shoo. Well, that’s that. Think you lived your life in Tennessee. Find out you didn’t,” and she turns to walk back to the home she so long believed was Tennessee muttering, “That man. That damn man” (23). Her surrender to her fate after her outburst is a gesture Jack Weller would interpret as fatalistic, Loyal Jones as realistic, and perhaps Jones would be right. She resisted the fatalistic attitudes of her family and culture as a young woman, and in old age has the courage to seek out the truth, but at her age, alone in the world, perhaps returning to “Tennessee” is simply her only option. At least she will return there on her own terms, knowing the truth and having expressed her anger.

But her troubles are not just part of the past. As she rails against her dead family, she confuses the young family with her own, asking “I am still not sure, not even now while I’m a-talking to you. Are you the strangers give me spoonbread and tea? Or are you poppa? Are you Rachel, Billy, and Ab? Is my mother back in the house, making me my wedding dress?” (22). The husband gently tells her, “I am afeared we’re the strangers give you spoonbread,” to which she responds, “Ah, I know it!” (22). In a deeper sense, they are the same as her family, and perhaps she sees it. In the moments before she arrived, the husband was asking for his dinner, unsympathetic to his wife’s pain as the baby nurses, telling his son he can look forward to a future like his: “You get yourself some land, a house and a wife” (5). He is pleased with his life and his land, having survived horrors in the Civil War;
his account of battle gives voice to the trials of men in a play that is focused primarily on the trials of women. He looks forward to the day when his son will stand up to him and strike out on his own when he gets so frustrated that he is “about to bust” wanting things his own way (6-7). He will admire the sort of rebellion in his son that he would probably, like the Old Woman’s family, condemn in a daughter. The young family is happy now, but in their lives are the seeds of all the sorrows that frustrated the Old Woman’s life. The couple seems to acknowledge that realization as they look at each other and “shiver” before going inside in the play’s final moments; and their young son seems to sense it, too, as he sees his own face in the mirror broken on the Old Woman’s wedding day (23).

Linney’s play shows the oppression of women in Appalachia, particularly in years past when women everywhere had fewer choices and less independence. It also depicts a mountain man who is such a slick trader that he is able to successfully and dishonestly bargain for a wife, whom he will later limit and sometimes abuse. But Linney tells his tale with warmth and humor, and provides at least the possibility, though not the promise, of a hopeful future in his characterization of the young family and their oldest son.

*Unchanging Love*

Another of Linney’s plays, *Unchanging Love*, also paints a grim picture of the lives of Appalachian women. *Unchanging Love* was first performed at the Milwaukee Repertory Theatre in 1988 under the title *Precious Memories* and premiered in New York at the Triangle Theatre under its current title in 1991. The play is set in 1921 in Manard, North Carolina, a “small mill town in the foothills of
the Appalachian Mountains” (5). The Pitman family runs the local store and is well off financially; they ask the poor Musgrove Family Singers to perform for the seventy-fifth birthday celebration of their patriarch, Benjamin. Family and legacy are very important to Benjamin, who has two sons, but no grandchildren. The older son, Shelby, is unmarried at twenty-eight, and the younger son, Avery, is only twenty-five and married to a woman of thirty-five, Leena, who is barren. Benjamin’s new wife, Barbara, is forty-five and “beyond” having children, but Benjamin longs for “a baby and the future,” which he hopes Shelby will settle down and produce (11).

Shelby chooses the Musgrove’s teenage daughter, Judy, for a wife, and they soon have a baby, Tommy. But Shelby leaves his wife home alone often as he works in the state capitol to get a crony elected. Eventually Shelby’s shady business dealings catch up with him, and he goes to jail, taking the fall for the political machine on a counterfeiting charge.

Avery’s tough, greedy wife Leena helps run the family business and has no qualms about engaging in dishonest practices that advance the family’s financial cause. She even sleeps with other men to further the business. After Shelby’s arrest, she fears the scandal will hurt her plans to build and run a brick-making factory on property she brought into the Pitman family. When Benjamin and Barbara decide to put the property and the business in a trust for baby Tommy so that it cannot be taken away in any legal battle, Leena is furious and scalds the baby to death with a pan of boiling water.
The family convinces Judy to take the blame and say the death was an accident, and she agrees because she knows she could not prove Leena’s guilt and is more concerned with her dead baby than with legal justice. She gives the baby a touching, simple funeral and leaves the Pitman family to return to her own after a tender farewell to her devastated father-in-law.

The Pitman family has pragmatic, demanding expectations of women. Patriarch Benjamin has buried two wives already and needs to find a wife for Shelby so he can “re-invent” the family again, perhaps wearing out another woman in the process (10). The family talks as if a wife for Shelby would be merely an addition to the staff, not a loving companion for him: “Just get married and get us some woman to help us out and have a baby or two!” (22). Benjamin and Avery employed a local man to find suitable wives, but Shelby chooses young Judy on his own, and for dubious reasons:

Well, tell him he don’t have to find me no wife, I got one in mind. All he has to do is make sure she’ll do. I mean, find out about her, if she’ll stay pregnant, barefoot, in the kitchen, oh, hell, yes! I’M READY! Of course, has to be understood, I go work in the Capitol, do my business there, come home see my wife when I damn well please. Cause I’m going to have bigger and better opportunities then than I do now. Need my freedom, and my solid position! (24)

Benjamin is concerned about Shelby’s choice of Judy: “God knows she’s a pretty little thing. Sings like a bird and all that, but, uh, how hard she’ll work, well now, we just don’t know” (25). He is concerned less for how his son feels about Judy than he is about her ability to serve the family as a labor resource. But Shelby’s desire is for her meekness, not her heart or mind anyway: “She knows her place, and it’s her I want” (26). After the marriage, he drunkenly boasts of what he has gained in the
business and political realm by it: “I jest got married, didn’t I? I’m a safe and substantial citizen”(36). Even after their child is born, Shelby hardly sees Judy as a viable partner; when Barbara suggests he be kinder to his wife, he says almost in disgust, “How can you say something nice to a child who has another child? It’s unnatural. She’ll grow up someday. I’ll be nice to her then” (41).

Judy’s own family tends to treat her like a commodity as well, perhaps because they know the Pitman men and others like them see their brides as chattel. Her father lists her assets for Shelby: “Our Judy is healthy, have plenty of babies, make a good Momma,” but also her liability: “through no fault of her own, she was carnally deceived by a preaching scoundrel day after she turned eleven year. She is not a virgin and I wouldn’t want my beloved darlin’ low-rated and maybe even returned on account of it” (26-27). Shelby accepts this “flaw” in Judy, but he does use evidence of sexual impurity as a threat to Leena in regard to her mixing of sex and business:

SHELBY: I’m a man. You’re a woman.
LEENA: What does that mean?
SHELBY: It means, be careful, I’m a detective. I can wake Daddy up.
LEENA: Why do that?
SHELBY: To show you who’s boss. Send you home, I can. (42)

In the Pitman world, men are “boss,” and women can always be “sent home” if they do not tow the line. Judy later tells Barbara she knows about Leena’s past with Crutch Holston, “twice her age. It was him made her barren, give her a bastard might near kilt her, when she was young. Married her off to one family, who
threwed her out, now here” (47). Shelby’s threat is something Leena must take seriously, based on prior experience.

Barbara marvels as how hardworking Judy is, even just a week after the baby’s birth: “Leena with the books. Me with the food. You with the house. Another perfect Pitman wife. This time with a baby, and the future. They don’t marry women, people say. They marry angels” (45). Judy is “content” to work hard there because she lives better than she did at home and, if her husband is cold, at least her father-in-law is kind to her. Barbara urges her to rest and have some tea, acknowledging that they can take a break from work sometimes, even though “we’re forever told that’s the way we stay alive” (46).

Barbara is like a protective older sister to Judy, her only friend in the family besides Benjamin. But Judy’s most positive and fulfilling relationship is with her baby, whose young life is snuffed out by another jealous, competitive Pitman wife. Judy returns home to her family, seemingly still innocent, but very aware that, despite his grief over the loss of his grandson, Benjamin will do fine with the other Pitman women there to meet his needs: “Barbara will cook your food for you. Leena will run your store and the brick factory will do good. You’ll get richer and we’ll get poorer. But I hope you will stop when you see me, and if I have something for you, you will take it” (63). Judy’s only victory is in remaining gentle and generous in the face of such abuse.

In *Unchanging Love*, as in *Tennessee*, Linney paints a picture of life in Appalachia as very difficult for women. And, like *Tennessee*, the play is set in an era where women’s opportunities in all parts of the nation were more limited than they
are today. The Pitmans are an especially negative example of an Appalachian family, the Musgroves less so. In fact, the Musgroves, who are less connected with progress and financial or educational betterment seem to be more favorably portrayed because of their very simplicity. Certainly Judy is a sympathetic, though tragic, figure. Her child might have been the Pitman family’s hope for the future, had not Leena’s greed and determination to achieve financial success at any cost led her to kill him. If Leena is the colonized elite, quite literally in bed with the exploitative enemies of the local people in the form of businessmen, then Judy and the Musgroves are the nearly idealized innocents that are trampled by those who would leave traditional mountain culture and all its hardships behind.

**Hillbilly Women**

The women of Elizabeth Stearns’s 1979 *Hillbilly Women* are rarely as meek as Judy Pitman. The play is based upon Kathy Kahn’s 1973 oral history of the same name and has no real plot, but puts a collection of various types of mountain women together to discuss life as they see it. One character is an amateur song writer, and the women sing several songs, though the play is not a musical. The women range in age from twenty-five to eighty-five, and most of them work or have worked outside the home. Some still live in the region, but a few have left it by choice or necessity. They speak of a spectrum of joys and sorrows they have experienced; the characters give voice to feelings and opinions expressed by real Appalachian women in the interviews from Kahn’s book, thereby contributing a candid dramatic portrayal of contemporary women’s lives to the drama of the region.
The women in the play are proud of their mountain heritage and see themselves as strong, fighting their way through life in spite of pain; in the first moments of the play, Sharleen declares, “I don’t think there’s any women around more woman than hillbilly women” (10). They tell of the trials of being daughters and wives of miners who work hard and risk their lives, and of the hazards they encounter in the workplace themselves. They tell of childbirth and death and all the family dramas in between in which women play such a vital role. They tell of marriage and divorce, faith and the loss of it, union struggles within the region and encounters with prejudice in northern cities.

Their stories reflect lives of hard work, but also enjoyment. The women recall that as children, “Mostly you worked, but there was playing,” and they share memories of hopscotch, jump rope, horseback riding and playing tag in the fields (18). Sharleen explains that she went to live with her mother and stepfather at the age of ten primarily because they needed her for labor: “I moved in with ’em ’cause they needed somebody. Well, Sargeant needed Buddy to work the still so me’n him toted sugar for whiskey. Imajean and Ruth Ellen tended the chickens and Lillie milked the cow. Me’n Buddy did the cleaning, cooking and washing. All the others were so small, they needed me to watch ’em” (16). At one point, Jewel jokes about lazy men: “They want to lay on their backs and you do all the darn work” (62). But both Denise and Betty Jo say their husbands help out at home (59). Betty Jo says she really understands “what it’s like to have to do on your own” now that her husband is sick; until that happened they had always shared the burdens (62).
The women want to retain their femininity, even as they venture outside the home to work. Della thinks work is not very liberating if it robs you of your ability to feel feminine and look attractive: “I’m proud to be a woman. I don’t want to run a Euclid earthmover. I mean it. I just want to have a man that has sense enough to treat me like an equal” (27-29). She recognizes how difficult equity can be for women: “Women have had it hard . . . as far as political equality, job rights ’n equal pay goes and it’s the whole set-up that’s oppressing people, including some pretty snobbish women” (28). Sharleen, Denise and Ada have created economic opportunity and freedom for themselves by opening their own small sewing “factory” (14). They are doing well because they have a good contract now, and Ada notes that it is a new development for women to be able to translate their domestic skills into real income: “When Denise ’n me were growing up, we didn’t have no contracts. There weren’t no such things. Women didn’t have no ways ta help their husbands then other than makin’ gardens or raisin’ cows ’n chickens” (15). Women work hard in Appalachia, but these women see more options and opportunities for women in the 1970s than in the past.

Many of the women tell stories of sexual initiation and courtship. The women see a dramatic double standard, both in terms of gender and class, when it comes to sexual activity. Della says, “Now, as long as you don’t flaunt it and if you’re from a certain class, you aren’t ostracized ’cause you do it. It’s covered up” (53). But her mother Jewel explains that did not apply to Della because, “I didn’t have any position in the community, didn’t have any money, so if she did it, she was a bad girl” (53). The double standard based on gender is even greater:
DELLA: Of course, boys are expected to get into trouble in school, raise hell, get all they can.
JEWEL: That's right.
DELLA: If they screw you, it's perfectly O.K., but if you let them screw you, you're a bad girl.
JEWEL: Yeah, this is about how they'd "phrase" it: "So 'n so's boy is takin' this girl out and . . . well, knocked her up. Yeah, well, he's a boy, that's natural. She must have instigated it. If she'd a kept her legs crossed, it never would've happened."
DELLA: Uh-huhn.
SHARLEEN: Yeah. Try keepin' your legs crossed with some big arm going up through there! (53)

Jewel recalls being "scared to death of boys" and that she quit school to get married because many other girls did, and she felt you had to do that in order to be sexually active without being "disgraced" (47). She was closely chaperoned and relatively inexperienced, and she wound up married for only five months to a boy she felt sorry for because he had been dumped (47-49). They eloped and then went back to live with his parents, where they had to share a bed with one of his brothers (50). Several of the women married young. At fourteen, Siddy married a man who started mining at eleven, and she quips, "They say them child brides don't last, but they do!" (12). Betty Jo courted for six years and was married at twenty-two to the only boy she had ever dated in her life, and is she still married to him in middle age (52). Denise and Ada both eloped while still in high school against their parents' wishes, but, Denise informs the audience, "They take you back after it's over" (52).

Della admits she was dating sixteen and seventeen-year-old boys when she was just twelve, "sneakin' around, scared all the time, doin' it in the back seat of cars" (52-53). Eventually, she had to get married at fifteen because of an unplanned pregnancy and stayed married only three years (55-56). Sharleen learned about sex
early because she was raped at the age of seven by an uncle she later found out was her biological father. She felt ashamed for years, and her first child was born dead because of the physical damage done to her by the rape (60). As a teenager, she got pregnant on purpose because her stepfather was always accusing her of sleeping around “just like her mother” (55). She was only fourteen and her mother married her off to one of her own boyfriends who was in the army. He beat her so severely that she wound up in the hospital; she left him four times, but says, “Mama’d always blackmail me into goin’ back” (56).

The women complain not only about men being violent, but also about their drinking. Della and Jewel say that even today men want to boss women around and women are supposed to be grateful to have a “good” man with a decent job, even though those men may be out drinking or cheating as soon as they are off for the day (56-57). Jewel tells of a night when she went looking for her husband after work and found him heading away from home. It made him angry and he shoved her, so she decided she “had had enough,” picked up a brick and “whapped him across the chest just like that. They took thirteen stitches in him” (59). Siddy then comments that she was happily married to her late husband for forty-five years, and they raised eight children together without these kinds of problems: “I don’t know where you find these guys” (59).

Another key issue the women touch upon is the “love of place” Loyal Jones lists as an Appalachian value. The women observe that while many young people leave in search of better opportunities, many stay, either because “they’re too damn lazy to make the struggle,” or are so closely bound to family and community that
they cannot imagine leaving (66). Della says she felt she had to leave for Atlanta
"because it’s narrow, that’s why. You stay wherever you’re born . . . you’re forever
friends with the same people . . . You forever do the same things, you live in the
same house, you die, get buried and go to the cemetery. I wasn’t gonna do that” (66).
But several of the women who have grown children living elsewhere point out that
they are always eager to come home to visit (65).

The women close the play talking about how proud they are of their mountain
heritage, in spite of what outsiders might think:

SIDDY: I’m proud to be a hillbilly.
SHARLEEN: We’re supposed to be backwards, ignorant people, right?
DELLA: But then she’s not Mammy Yokum and I’m not Daisy Mae.
That’s not what we are.
JEWEL: Well, opinions of mountain people do tend to run along the lines
that we smoke corncob pipes and sit around with our boots unlaced.
BETTY JO: People make fun of me, but I like the way I talk. (75)

They point out that, while they do have accents, only a few old people use the odd,
archaic “folk speech” of the type found in many of the plays discussed in this
chapter. They directly address and deflate the stereotypical images with their words
and with their stories; while some of them may fit the outlines of outsider
expectations, real life is always more complex than a one-dimensional cartoon. In
the end, the women agree to embrace the term “hillbilly,” which has been used so
often in a derogatory way:

ADA: Well, everybody’s got a title. I’d just as soon be called
hillbilly as yankee, you know.
SHARLEEN: . . . or city slicker.
DENISE: Somebody said to me, she said, “Well, now, I don’t know
if I’d appreciate that very much . . .” I said, “What?” And she said,
“Oh, you know, calling you a hillbilly woman.” And I said, “Why,
what’d you think we are?!” (76)
They close the play by singing a song about being there for others in time of trouble and understanding their pain; the final line is “You’ll find yourself in me” (77). This speaks to the idea expressed by Batteau, Williamson and Cunningham that the hillbilly stereotype serves as a mirror to denied parts of America’s urban self. And in telling their stories these women have put human faces on the cartoons and perhaps touched familiar nerves in audience members who are not from the region; the play is, in fact, replete with stage directions that call for the actresses to acknowledge laughter of recognition in the audience and draw them into their stories, thereby helping them “see themselves” in the strong, complicated “hillbilly women” onstage.

*Hillbilly Women* shows the modern face of Appalachian women who work outside the home and have struggled with the strict gender roles which limited the generations that preceded them, and Paula Cizmar’s *The Death of a Miner* continues that effort by portraying what life is like for women who pursue careers in the traditionally exclusively male occupation of coal mining.

**The Death of a Miner**

*The Death of a Miner* premiered in New York in 1982 at the American Place Theatre. The play is set in an Appalachian mining town and takes place in the aftermath of a mine cave-in that kills miner Mary Alice Hager. She is already dead when the play begins, but she appears in flashbacks that help tell her story.

Mary Alice is survived by her husband Jack, a carpenter, and her daughter from a previous marriage, Sallie, who is in her early teens. Jack and Sallie grieve privately while television news crews follow the controversy surrounding Mary
Alice's accident. The mining company denies Jack and Sallie survivors' benefits on the grounds that they are only for widows and families, not widowers or a non-traditional step-family like theirs. At first Jack does not want to fight for the benefits, but then decides to do it for Sallie. The courts are not on the family's side, and the union decides not to strike on their behalf. Jack considers moving away and selling the house he was building in stages for the family, but decides to stay on in the mountains Mary Alice loved so much and raise her daughter.

The flashbacks reveal that Mary Alice had been a waitress before she decided to go into mining for the better pay. Both she and Jack face criticism for that decision. Mary Alice's male co-workers in the mine are critical of the female miners' abilities and tell off-color jokes about them. Other women are suspicious of their husbands' being down in the mines with women bold enough to work in a man's world. And Jack worries that people in town think he forced Mary Alice to go into the mines when, in fact, he would have preferred that she quit.

Chester, one of the male miners, is the character most critical of women workers. According to him, "A woman ain't a woman if she's a coal miner. Gotta be one or the other... If she's a lady, she don't do a good job. If she does a good job as a miner, she ain't no lady" (37). He tells another miner whose wife also works in the mines that he would sooner see his wife dead than working there: "Bonnie Jean went down into the mines, I'd blow her brains out" (37). Bonnie Jean is a waitress, which Chester deems appropriate because it is "women's work" and low-paying; he feels real men should not take money from their women and women should not take good jobs away from men who need to support families (39).
Jack knows that the men think him unmanly for allowing Mary Alice to mine. Mary Alice does not care if others laugh or criticize, but it bothers Jack:

What’re we supposed to do — roll over and play dead while the whole town is mutterin’ bout how that poor Hager woman sure got herself buffaloed by that worthless hillbilly, forced down into the mines, you know that woman don’t wanna have to do somethin like that, you know what it’s like down in those pits. (29)

Eventually, the altered gender roles begin to make him question his own manhood and purpose in the relationship. If Mary Alice can take care of herself, he wonders why she even needs him. The strain is getting to him, and he wants her to quit so they can “be like everyone else” (71).

But Mary Alice is mining for her own reasons, not to support Jack, and he knows it. She speaks several times of how her mother was unfulfilled and never expressed what she wanted out of life and how her parents were never very happy. She wants a different life for herself and sees mining as a way to have such a life, no matter what the world might think about its lessening her womanhood.

After the union votes not to strike on behalf of Mary Alice’s survivors, Chester cruelly remarks to Sallie that her mother should have stayed where she belonged and that it is “too bad your mama didn’t marry a real man, Sallie, she’d be alive today,” which provokes Jack to hit him (105). Bonnie Jean tries to reassure Sallie: “Sallie, honey, this didn’t have nothin to do with your mama. . . . Sallie, you know your mama, she was a real woman, and your daddy’s a real man, you know that. But Chester. . . well . . . it’s just the way things are, see?” (106).

Paula Cizmar’s play, like Hillbilly Women, has its origins in reality. Cizmar explains in a playwright’s note that the play is drawn from experience, “a fictional
version of what I’ve seen, what I remember” (13). *The Death of a Miner* shows a world in which women can do the same work as men, but at a cost. Some members of the community cannot cope with an occupation as nontraditional as mining for women. And the men they are married to are thrown into crisis by it as well; no matter how supportive they may be of their wives, it is difficult for them to navigate a world in which gender roles are no longer as distinct and defined as they were just a few years before. *The Death of a Miner* also reveals that mountain women not only work outside the home, but work in demanding professions that require great strength and courage, like underground mining, adding yet another dimension to the portrait of the strong mountain woman.

“You would be as much out of place there as I am here”: Culture Clash as Dramatized in the Insider/Outsider Romance Plot

Many of the courtship plots featured in plays about the mountains find their source of conflict in a romantic relationship between a mountain “insider,” usually a young woman or girl, and an “outsider,” usually an educated urban male from the north. The clash of cultures is a source of great humor and sometimes great tragedy, and it provides a scenario in which the values of Appalachia and mainstream America can collide to great effect in a single personal relationship.

The classic example of the outsider who falls for a mountain girl and transforms her into a civilized, educated lady by removing her from the mountains is John Fox, Jr.’s 1908 novel *The Trail of the Lonesome Pine*. After her schooling and exposure to the wider world, the young woman and her suitor ultimately return to settle in her home at Lonesome Cove. It was adapted for the stage by Alice
Chadwicke in 1916, and another outdoor stage version has been playing in Big Stone Gap, Virginia every summer since 1964. The romance between civil engineer Jack Hale and the archetypal mountain girl, June Tolliver, has been discussed at length in the criticism devoted to the novel and so will not be treated in this study, but it merits mention as the model for many insider/outsider romance plots that followed.

*Ruint*

One of the many plays that followed is North Carolinian Hatcher Hughes's comedy *Ruint*, which premiered in New York in 1925; the playwright was a professor at Columbia University who had won the Pulitzer Prize for his mountain drama, *Hell-Bent fer Heaven*, the preceding year. *Ruint* features a mountain girl, Mary Jane Horton, who is smitten with a wealthy northerner, Reginald Vanderpeet, who has come to help build a mission school in her community. He is also attracted to her, and they stray from the path into a laurel thicket, where they kiss.

Mary Jane assumes he wants to marry her, but he does not. Reginald knows a serious relationship would be impossible because of his family and his obligations back home in the north. When he says he could not stay in the mountains with her, she asks if he is ashamed to take her back north with him. He explains, “No, Mary Jane. But it simply wouldn’t do. You would be as much out of place there as I am here” (124). But Mary Jane will not be consoled and is so furious that she lets her family believe much more happened in the laurel thicket, that Reginald has “ruint” her. When word gets out, the lesser men of the community show up at her doorstep, thinking she will have lowered her standards. She rejects proposals from both a homely, awkward young farmer and a pushy older preacher.
When her male relatives hear what Reginald has supposedly done, they begin tracking him with dogs, planning to hang him. Some of the neighbors help because they have never seen a man hanged and see it as entertainment. When they learn in the end that Reginald only kissed her, the womenfolk refuse to let them kill him, so they tar and feather him and ride him out of town on a rail instead.

Hughes's play makes use of many mountain stereotypes, from hunting moonshining men to the young girl who communes with nature and yearns for romance, and also mocks the northern elite as silly and effete. The play highlights the essential incompatibility between the two young people that results from their differing cultural backgrounds and also implies that their very strangeness to one another is a source of their attraction. It is an entertaining and humorous play, but does not have the literary sophistication of Hughes's earlier dramatic mountain play, *Hell-Bent for Heaven*, which will be discussed in chapter five of this study.

*Keep Me a Woman Grown*

*Keep Me a Woman Grown* by Gladys Charles and George Savage is unusual because it features a city girl, Suzanne Palmer, who has fallen in love with a young mountain man, Paul Clevenger. But while male outsiders may fall for the mountain girl in her natural state, it is worth noting that the young woman in this play has met her well-spoken, educated beau after he has left the region to seek his fortune; the action of the play is an account of her first visit to his family home in the Kentucky hills. The home has a whisky jug on the mantle, a Bible on the table, and a rifle over the door. The mother is worn-out and fatalistic in her beliefs about life and gender roles. She is also gritty enough to fire shots out the back door at drunken
trespassers. The teenage daughter is pretty, barefoot, and simple. There is a corpse on the back porch; a male relative was shot in the heart, and the family is leaving him there for three days just in case he should be resurrected. Not only do they have a difficult time keeping the yard dogs away from him, but his own sister steals the coins from his eyes. In the bedroom is a woman in labor who has gotten drunk on liquor consumed as an anesthetic. Susan’s mother is horrified by all of this, but while her mother is away, Susan meets the local preacher and helps deliver the drunk woman’s baby. In the process Susan finds religion and meaning in her life; she is more committed to Paul than ever and embraces his family wholeheartedly.

This play piles on the negative stereotypes, then gives its city girl an epiphany through her connection with them. It is an odd way to romanticize the mountains, but that is the final effect. Suzanne’s fiancé is hardly a character; she has already become engaged to him, and the central plot constitutes a test to see whether she can love his origins as much as the man he has become. She can, and her mother must trust her daughter’s judgment and resign herself to having hillbilly in-laws.

*Esmeralda*

One of the important early plays about the region is *Esmeralda* by Frances Hodgson Burnett and William H. Gillette, which premiered in New York in 1881 at the Madison Square Theatre. The play takes its title from Esmeralda Rogers, the only child of Lydia Ann and Elbert Rogers, a North Carolina mountain couple. Esmeralda and her father are both fond of the mountains, the beauty of nature, and the slow pace of life they enjoy. Mrs. Rogers, however, aspires to greater things and
is forever reminding them that she grew up in the town of Elizabethville, so she
knows something of life in big cities beyond the mountains.

Dave Hardy, the young man who lives on the neighboring farm, is in love
with Esmeralda, whom he has known all his life, and plans to propose to her. Only
Esmeralda’s father is in on the surprise. Dave has built a little cabin for them to live
in when they are married. Esmeralda is eager to accept his proposal, and her mother
concedes, even though she openly expresses her belief that her daughter could have
done better.

Some speculators arrive and offer to buy the Rogers farm because they
believe it contains a large vein of iron ore. Dave keeps the Rogers from selling at too
low a price, and the thanks he gets from Mrs. Rogers for his help is a cancellation of
his wedding plans. Mrs. Rogers whisks the family away to Paris in search of a rich
husband for Esmeralda.

In Paris, a miserable Esmeralda is courted by a wealthy Marquis as,
unbeknownst to her, a forlorn Dave has traveled to Paris to watch from a distance. In
a surprising turn of events, the Rogers are informed their land is worthless and that
some of the money on which they have been living in Paris has secretly come from
Dave, as his land contained the vein of iron after all. Dave and Esmeralda are
reunited and plan to marry and return to live out their days in their beloved
mountains.

_Esmeralda_ is an especially early example of the use of typical mountain
characters in drama. The speculators begin the play by admiring the “simplicity”
and "innocence" of the mountain people and the "atmosphere" of their surroundings (3-4). Likewise, the socialites the mountaineers meet in Paris laugh at them, but at the same time are charmed by their rustic naivété. But for all the charms of the mountain people, the speculators do not hesitate to take advantage of their innocence to make a profitable deal for their land. The Marquis Esmeralda dates in Paris also turns out to be using them; the moment word of their poverty leaks, he elopes with a wealthy woman.

Mr. Rogers is the stereotypical slow-moving mountaineer who is satisfied with very little and bossed around by his much stronger wife, even in the matter of the sale of the property. Neither he nor Esmeralda want to sell, but they do not seem to have a voice in the matter. Mrs. Rogers complains that Esmeralda takes too much after her father, and the two do seem to be kindred spirits. When the land deal is to be amended, their main concern is sparing their little house for sentimental reasons:

Ef — ef ye could do anything about gettin' him ter leave the house standin'; not ter pull it down, it 'ud be a heap o' comfort ter us — me and Esmeraldy — a heap of comfort. . . . Seems ter me like it's been yere so long that the very mountain 'ud kinder miss it. (15)

Dave is also a gentle, sentimental soul, who has designed his entire house with Esmeralda's convenience in mind, right down to a little nail for her sunbonnet (10). He, too, loves rural life and simple pleasures.

Mrs. Rogers is the only malcontent in the group, despite the fact that she always seems to get her way. She is certain she could have done better for herself in life and wants to save Esmeralda from a similar fate:

Always drudge — drudge — drudge — nothing else — and no chance of anything else. I ought to be used to it by this time. But I suppose I
never will be. It comes over me morning, noon and night. And there’s no escape. I was a fool. There wasn’t a man in Lizabethville or round I mightn’t have had when I was teaching school there — and some have done well since then — done well — and moved off to big cities. And for a mere fancy — a whim — I came to this — to drudge my life out on a rocky farm — and I never see a soul from month’s end to month’s end . . . always had it in me to kind of long for what was going on outside. What fools girls are. (8)

It is out of this disappointment that her determination that Esmeralda be “a lady” grows. And Esmeralda knows there is no stopping her with regard to either the sale of the land: “she’s made up her mind, and we know what that is”; or the dissolution of Esmeralda’s engagement: “She’ll do it if it breaks our hearts. I’ve felt it since the first moment. She — [an outburst of grief] She has been cruel to me all my life. and she’ll be cruel to me now” (16-17).

The Rogerses are laughingstocks in Paris, always buying new dresses for Esmeralda and photographing her in each one, going from party to party where they cannot communicate with the French guests, chasing after the Marquis. Mr. Rogers concludes. “We’re home folks — me and Esmeralda — home folks. We can’t get used to city ways and we’re allers a-thinkin of North Carolina” (43). Again, we see Loyal Jones’s “love of place” exhibited by mountain characters.

The insider/outsider romance plot in Esmeralda is unusual because it is a romance being forced upon Esmeralda by her mother, when usually the parents in such plots resist the idea of their daughter’s marrying anyone but a fellow mountaineer. Mrs. Rogers’s pretensions and ambitions blind her to Esmeralda’s incompatibility with and unhappiness with the Marquis, but Mr. Rogers doesn’t like him because “he haint got North Carolina ways” (43). He tries to persuade the
Marquis to give up Esmeralda so she can be with Dave, but since he still believes the Rogerses to be rich, the Marquis will not listen (43).

When Esmeralda finds out Dave is in Paris, she becomes determined to locate him and get him back, even standing up to her mother: "I'm your own daughter for the first time in my life and I'm no more to be stopped than you are" (46). She turns to her father, excited: "[W]e'll find Dave, won't we father? And go back to the mountains and the blue sky and no one will be cruel to us any more — and I'll kneel down before Dave and tell him that I was true and loved him — and the little house won't be empty a — any more" (47). Then she faints, and her mother goes to see what is wrong, but her father waves her off, suddenly finding some backbone himself: "'Taint fer you to tech her. Seems like she's gone back to North Car'liny in spite of ye" (47). He becomes even more assertive when Dave and Esmeralda are about to be reunited, saying he and Esmeralda have tried to live her way and leave home behind to see the world, "But I'll bring them two young hearts together an let em beat side by side as the Lord intended — an no one shayn't hurt nor separate em, so help me — North Car'liny" (54). His love for his mountain home is so great that it can stand in for God in an oath. He tells his wife that money doesn't matter because Esmeralda is "going back to home and love" (55). In the final scene, when the truth about Dave's finances is revealed, the truth about the Marquis's ulterior motives are also revealed by a letter, and Esmeralda says it frightens her just to think of him. Dave comforts her with a vision of home in the play's final lines: "There is no need of that, honey. The sun shines again as it used
in the old days. It shines upon the little house, and the door is waiting to be opened. And we are together” (59).

The mountains and the mountain man win out over Paris and the fashionable Marquis in Esmeralda. Mrs. Rogers aspires to be a part of high society, but the other mountain characters are true to their Appalachian values of humility, home, family and neighborliness. The outsider is an impossible suitor for Esmeralda, and so their worlds will never be one. She will return to North Carolina to live out her days with her love in the place where they were born and reared.

Esmeralda was not written by insiders to the Appalachia region, and it is an early play about the mountains, so some of its elements seem more of a standard rural nature than specifically Appalachian, and some of the stereotypes are not yet as extremely drawn as they will be in subsequent decades. Its plot is a standard romance of class difference and surprise endings that has appeared in various forms throughout the history of modern theatre. But it is notable for being one of the first times Appalachia and its people were featured on the stage.

*In Old Kentucky*

Another early play that features an unlikely romance between a mountain girl and a wealthy outsider in Charles T. Dazey’s *In Old Kentucky*.66 The play, which was once second only to *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* as the most-performed play in America, opened in St. Paul, Minnesota in 1892, then Pittsburgh in 1893, and it finally opened in New York at the People’s Theatre on September 11, 1893.67 The play is set in 1870 and centers around the interaction between a group of Kentucky mountaineers and a group of socialites from the Bluegrass.
The first act takes place in the Kentucky mountains, where Frank Layson, a gentleman from the bluegrass is hunting deer. His old African-American family servant, Neb, has come to tell Frank his Aunt and some friends have come to see him. Joe Lorey, a young mountaineer with whom he has become acquainted during his visit, ominously warns Frank that he should leave the mountains and return to his own kind. Frank realizes that Joe must be jealous of his attention to a young mountain girl, Madge Brierly; despite some gentle teasing from Neb, Frank denies romantic interest in her.

Madge arrives, eager to "say her lessons" for Frank, who has been trying to nurture her innate intelligence and eagerness to learn. When she hears the others are coming, she hides in fear of strangers, but Frank explains they are just friends and relatives from the bluegrass. Madge wants to change into a new dress she has just finished making and turns to cross the drawbridge that leads to her home on the other side of a chasm. Frank puts his arm around her and asks for a kiss, but she refuses. He starts to follow her, but she tells him no man but her future husband will ever cross the bridge. He has insulted her by making the pass, and he begs for her forgiveness, which she quickly grants.

As Frank's bluegrass neighbor Horace Holton and his daughter Barbara approach, they express concern that Frank has not proposed to Barbara as they had expected. Holton says perhaps he looks down upon them. Barbara suspects her father is really from the mountains, as she has dim memories of the place from early childhood, and thinks perhaps these origins are the reason for the disdain they have
sensed in the bluegrass. Holton insists, however the rejection comes because he was a slave trader before the war.

Frank’s Aunt Lethe and the family friend and horseman Colonel Sandusky Doolittle arrive and deliver news to Frank concerning the land in the mountains his father left to him. The railroad is coming, and a New York syndicate wants to develop the land, which is rich in coal and iron ore, if Frank will buy twenty-five thousand dollars worth of stock. Frank is hesitant to take a loan from his aunt to buy it, but the Colonel says he has set up a deal with some buyers to purchase Frank’s prize racehorse, Queen Bess, for the same amount on race day at the Ashland Oaks; he could repay the loan with the money, but is reluctant to sell.

Madge reappears, and thoroughly charms the Colonel with tales of how she and her pony always win informal races against the local boys. Barbara dislikes her, suspecting she is what has stunted her relationship with Frank. When Barbara finds it “shocking” that Madge lives alone in “that little hut,” Madge explains that there was a long-standing feud between the Brierlys and the Lindsays until only two men remained, her father and Lem Lindsay. Lindsay asked her father to meet him without weapons to shake hands and make up. When he did, Lindsay stabbed him in the heart. Her father’s friend, Ben Lorey, was watching, and tried to shoot Lindsay, but Lindsay killed him, too. Unbeknownst to Lindsay, Madge’s mother was watching, too, holding little Madge in her arms. Lindsay fled the mountains, and Joe Lorey, Ben’s son, still seeks revenge. Eventually, Madge’s bereaved mother “wasted away,” leaving her to fend for herself.
After the group leaves, Joe returns, with a homemade bomb he plans to use to booby trap his still against revenuers. He needs the income from the family still to finance his search for his father's killer. He tells Madge the only thing stronger than his hatred for Lindsay is his love for her, but, as always, she refuses his advances.

Holton has been spying on them, and tells Lorey that Frank Layson has helped the revenuers find his still and tells him the location to prove it. When Joe sees Frank again, he fights and defeats him, then cuts Madge's bridge loose to protect her and lights the bomb beside Frank. When he hears Madge singing a hymn from across the chasm, he has a change of heart and stomps out the fuse. But it relights after he leaves. Madge sees it, swings across the chasm on a rope in order to save Frank, and throws the bomb into the chasm where it explodes.

Act Two takes place in the bluegrass, where Neb is guarding Queen Bess's stable on the day before the Ashland Oaks. He refuses to let Holton in, and as Holton tries to force the heavy lock on the door, Madge appears. He tells her to return to the mountains, even offering her money for the trip. Neb is stunned to discover Madge has walked all the way from home. She assumes the stable is Frank's house, and wants to go in to change into a "fashionable" outfit she has designed for her visit to the bluegrass. Neb tells her Queen Bess lives there, and decides to violate Frank's orders and let her in so she can have privacy. She is surprised to see a horse, as she assumed Neb meant Queen Bess was royalty.

Frank has just learned he must also pay a fifteen thousand dollar assessment on his stock, so he needs to sell Queen Bess more than ever. He is surprised Neb has
disobeyed him and given up the key, but when Madge emerges, dressed and behaving in imitation of Barbara, he understands.

Madge asks if she can bring Queen Bess out for her run, and the others are amazed at how the horse takes to her and obeys her. She rides the horse impressively and they marvel at what a great jockey she could be if only she were a man.

In a private moment, the Colonel hands Lethe a note expressing his long-unspoken love. She agrees to accept him on the condition he cut down on his cigar smoking and mint julep consumption and promise never to enter another race track again. He agrees, and she admits she has loved him for twenty years, too.

On the way to the lawn party, Madge takes Frank aside to explain she has come to warn him that Joe is in the bluegrass, seeking revenge against Frank for betraying him to the revenuers. Joe is hiding nearby with his rifle and hears Frank deny the charge. Joe questions Holton's honesty, but Holton gives him more details about the still and convinces him he was right about Frank. Joe says he must settle his score with Lindsay first, as he has heard he was a slave trader in the area. Holton says he has never heard of him, and the moment Joe is gone, he sets fire to the stable.

Madge passes by, headed home because Barbara's mocking has hurt her. She sees the fire and sounds the alarm. Neb cannot get the panicked Queen Bess out, so Madge rescues her.

Act Three takes place in a Lexington hotel, where Frank and the Colonel praise Madge's bravery and skill, and Frank's enthusiasm prompts the Colonel to ask if he has feelings for her. Frank says he does, but will not pursue them because her mountain origins mean she could never be his wife. Madge and Lethe arrive; Madge
has just been terrified by her first elevator ride. Holton thinks Frank should have Joe arrested for setting the fire, but Frank agrees with Madge that Joe would not harm an innocent animal.

The Colonel receives a telegram from the buyers stating that, as proof she is unharmed, Queen Bess must win the race before they will complete the deal. Then they discover that, despite their efforts to prevent it, someone has smuggled liquor to the jockey and he is too drunk to ride. It is too late to find another jockey familiar with the horse and all hope seems to be lost. Barbara takes Madge aside and says her father will advance Frank the money he needs if she will return to the mountains and never see Frank again. Madge refuses.

Later that day, the Colonel brings Madge to the track dressed as a male jockey to save the day. He warns her that if word ever got out she would be disgraced in the bluegrass for riding publicly in pants; he implies that her actions may ruin any chance of a future with Frank. But Madge says she is willing to sacrifice her own happiness to save him.

The Colonel has promised not to enter the track, so he goes to watch through a knothole in the fence. Miss Lethe, who despite her convictions against racing cannot resist seeing the outcome, comes looking for the same knothole. They forgive each other, and the Colonel climbs the nearby tree to watch Madge ride Queen Bess to victory.

Act Four opens on the morning after the victory celebration at the Layson plantation, as Lethe agrees that the Colonel may now attend races only if she is with him to see that he does not gamble. Madge comes to say goodbye, and Frank urges
her to sell her mountain land and use the money to get the education she has always
wanted. She says she belongs in the mountains and wants no part of society. Frank
realizes he may never see her again, professes his love for her and begs her to marry
him. Madge reluctantly declines.

The Colonel enters and says he has discovered Holton was the one who got
the jockey drunk. Joe Lorey enters, chased by dogs and an angry lynch mob led by
Holton, begging for mercy. Frank protects him. Madge and Joe realize that Holton
is really Lem Lindsay, and Joe kills him in a fight. The Colonel reassures Joe that
when the jury learns that Holton was the last one at the stable before the fire and
surely set it himself, he will almost certainly be acquitted.

Before the sheriff takes him away, Joe tells Madge he can see now that she
was meant to be with Frank and wishes them well. Madge reveals she was the
jockey, expecting Frank to reject her, but he does not, and they become engaged.

In his essay "How I Wrote In Old Kentucky," Dazey says he needed to write a
hit after he and his wife had a baby because otherwise he could not afford to continue
a career writing for the theatre. Hence he settled on a Cinderella story sure to have
mass appeal:

I brought into sharp contrast two very opposite types — one, a young
Kentuckian, a veritable Prince Charming, born and bred in the
Bluegrass region — the other a little mountain lass, uncultured,
ignorant, of low birth, but sweet, true and womanly. In the play
circumstances threw these two together in picturesque surroundings,
and from the first it was plain that Madge Brierly loved the hero with
a devotion as great as it seemed hopeless. The apparent impossibility
of a marriage between them created interest, suspense and sympathy,
especially as my Cinderella had as a rival a woman, cold and
heartless, and willing to stoop to any means to gain her end.68
Dazey set out to paint a portrait of the ultimate romanticized mountain girl, a type Batteau notes was especially popular in early fiction about Appalachia. In all likelihood, Dazey had read the stories of Mary Noailles Murfree, which feature many examples of the type, in the 1860s and 1870s. By the time the play was first adapted for film in 1909 (three more versions were subsequently made by different studios in 1919, 1927 and 1935), John Fox, Jr.’s 1908 novel Trail of the Lonesome Pine had been published, and surely must have influenced the film portrayals of Madge as well.

Madge exhibits many of the classic features of the mountain girl as portrayed in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. She is an independent orphan, either in the literal or figurative sense, she loves nature and considers birds and animals her friends, she knows little of the world beyond the mountains, she is timid in the face of society and modernity, but brave and bold in ways lowland women are not, she is uneducated, but very bright, and she is sexually innocent, but beautiful.

Frank and the Colonel romanticize her from the start. Frank calls her “a rustic Diana,” and when he sees her on horseback describes her as “mounted like Europa,” a phrase coincidentally echoed in the title of John Fox, Jr.’s short story “A Mountain Europa,” which appeared in the September-October 1892 issue of The Century, just one month after In Old Kentucky opened in St. Paul. While Frank associates her with goddesses, the Colonel says she rides “like a centaur” (80), a mythological figure that is half human and half horse, and a “thoroughbred, if she hasn’t a pedigree” (49). He repeatedly compliments her as a “thoroughbred,” which, along with the centaur reference, may simply indicate his affection for and obsession
with horses, but also hints at a perception of her as a wild creature and of the
mountains as a mythical place.

Joe Lorey is a fairly typical male mountain character, but Dazey arranges for
all his violent deeds to be motivated by the higher cause of avenging his father’s
death, and he certainly does not show the laziness so pervasive in later portraits of
mountain men. Even his attempt at bombing Frank is prompted by his betrayal, not
just his jealousy over Madge; in fact, his love for Madge and the religious sentiment
in the hymn she sings stop him from completing the deed. In the end, he acts nobly
in giving Madge and Frank his blessing.

Holton, on the other hand, is pure evil, and his daughter Barbara does not rate
much better. Holton, while a product of mountain feud culture, is also associated
with the Old South through his past as a slave trader, which makes him unpopular in
Kentucky, a border state in which even the former plantation owners are not as
comfortable identifying with the “lost cause” as they might be in other southern
states. So Holton really does not fit into either society, having broken both the code
of honor in the mountains by ambushing Ben Lorey and betraying the location of Joe
Lorey’s still and the laws of the bluegrass by attempting a particularly cruel act of
arson.

The rift between the world of the bluegrass and the world of the mountains is
extreme in this play, partly because the bluegrass characters the simple mountain folk
become involved with are not just lowland people, but aristocratic lowland gentry
who host lawn parties and own plantations and racehorses. The extreme class
differences contribute to the apparent incompatibility of Frank and Madge, to
Madge's feelings that she is not worthy of him, and to Frank's reluctance to violate society's expectations by marrying her. But, in the end, love wins the day and a presumably happy future awaits them. This sort of ending is typical of the consummated insider/outsider romance plot, affirming the American ability to either reinvent oneself and become a member of a higher, wealthier social class, or, alternatively, choose to return to a rustic way of life to enjoy the pleasures of a time gone by in the few remaining areas of frontier-style wilderness left in this country.

*A Stand in the Mountains*

Most insider/outsider romance plots focus only on the courtship and engagement of the man from the city and the girl from the mountains (and, on rare occasions, the reverse). Seldom do we see what happens in an actual marriage of this sort. Peter Taylor's *A Stand in the Mountains* offers a catastrophic vision of what a youthful insider/outsider marriage has become ten years later.

*A Stand in the Mountains* was revised and published in 1985, but an earlier version appeared in the *Kenyon Review* in 1968. The play is unique in Taylor's body of work for its inclusion of Appalachian characters. The primary action, however, focuses on the lowland Southern family typical of Taylor's fiction.

In the play, the Weaver family visit their vacation cottage in an old, declining resort settlement on Owl Mountain that was once a popular summer getaway. Louisa, the long-widowed matriarch of the family, has brought with her, in addition to her faithful brother-in-law Will and adult son Zack, her latest protégé, Mina, whom she intends to take to Louisville to make her debut in the fall. Having never had daughters, she sponsors promising daughters of people who do not belong to the
social elite. Georgia, Louisa’s former failed debutante project, now in her mid-thirties and married to an Italian nobleman, is visiting the same resort town. Much of the plot deals with their intrigues and shall not be recounted here, but the mountain subplot is of interest.

The older of the two Weaver sons, Harry, has married a local mountain girl in an act of passion and rebellion when he was nineteen and ten years later is still living on Owl Mountain. Harry was once enamored of the idea of the rustic life at an age when he wanted to reject his mother’s aristocratic pretensions. In his youthful ardor, he married Lucille Campbell, whose grandmother Thelma works as a housekeeper for his mother when they visit Owl Mountain. Harry and his brother Zack, as well as many other people in Owl Mountain, have long incorrectly suspected that Lucille’s late mother might have been the love child of their uncle Will and Thelma Campbell. Will is devoted to their mother and has been a sort of surrogate father to the boys, so he suspects Harry married Lucille to prevent his mother from returning Will’s affections; Zack theorizes that it might have been an attempt to connect with their uncle instead (84).

Over the years, Harry’s romance with mountain life has soured, and he now is fighting to incorporate the town in hopes that the state legislature will place it on the route for the new four-lane highway. He came to the mountains to escape civilization, which now he wants to bring to the mountains. Likewise, his romance with Lucille has dimmed, and he flirts with his mother’s new debutante, who has a crush on him, and eventually he begins an affair with Georgia, who once dallied with
his younger brother while in Europe. His taste in women is returning to the values of
his culture of origin, too.

Harry’s complaints about his wife echo the statements of Kephart and others
about the rapid aging of the mountain women who are so lovely in their youth. He
tells Will and Zack:

I guess my marriage to Lucille is like the other marriages around here. When I married Lucille she was lovely and full of life as only our
mountain girls can be. She seemed to me then — well, just as her
grandma must have seemed to a certain old person we know. . . . But
now, at thirty, Lucille is an old woman. When she traipses about the
Mountain with those boys of ours, people don’t mistake her for their
big sister as they used to do mother when she went out with us.
Strangers are apt to mistake her for the boys’ grandmammy. But I
don’t blame her, and I don’t blame myself either. That’s what life has
been like here for a long time. (53)

He tells young Mina that he “can’t bear the sight of” Lucille and that he doesn’t care
if she repeats it because it wouldn’t even matter to her:

She’s like a card player that passes every hand, no matter what she’s
dealt. She passes, she accepts — everything. She inspires me with
loathing. Yet a dozen years ago she was a joy to behold. [In a
different tone, obviously rationalizing] It’s what the life here does to
these mountain women. (60)

Lucille’s brief appearance onstage bears out his assessment. She is “drab” and wears
a faded, shapeless muslin dress, her hair is in a straight, center-parted, unstyled bob,
she makes “no effort at attractiveness,” “at thirty she can easily be mistaken for a
woman of fifty,” and she is “stooped” just like her “haglike” grandmother (70, 21).

Harry refuses to see that he might have contributed to Lucille’s rapid aging
by expecting her to serve him and work hard in his drive to become “part of
something real” (52) and more like the mountain people than the tourists, or as Zack
puts it, “going native” (47). He resented the phoniness of debutantes and aging society women trying to retain their youth at any cost, so he chose something entirely different, a woman and a lifestyle he saw as more authentic. He tells Mina that he married Lucille because she was “pure woman . . . all woman, woman through and through, nothing else. That was what I needed at the time, a woman who was more interested in being a wife than . . . a hostess, like my mother” (60). He is focused only on his own needs at any given moment, and Lucille no longer meets them. The wealthy Georgia also seems to consider Lucille just a diversion who has overstayed her welcome: “Why should he go on paying the rest of his life for a romantic notion he had as a boy?” (97).

Not long after speaking with Mina, Harry “accidentally” shoots his wife, which greatly upsets her grandmother, especially because her daughter, Lucille’s mother, was murdered by her husband (73, 78). Lucille does not die, however, and Harry winds up waiting on her hand and foot; Lucille enjoys her newfound power as patient, victim, and lady of leisure, and she bosses him around a great deal, much to the amusement of the Weavers, who want to believe it really was an accident.

But later, when Harry’s initiative to incorporate the town is defeated, he suspects Lucille and her mother of organizing the votes against it, especially since he receives a false message that the vote is almost unanimously going his way before the official results arrive (96, 99). He believes they misled him in order to increase the agony of his defeat. In a fit of anger he chokes his wife and breaks her neck, then runs off, gasping to himself, “My boys!” (101). Georgia had said just moments earlier, “He can hardly bear the sight of her. He may shoot her again accidentally-
on-purpose; he may yet poison her — that’s something he can’t control. But he will never abandon her and the two boys entirely while she lives” (98), and now he seems to be truly spinning out of control. The family fears he will commit suicide, and he does, but first he kills Lucille’s grandmother Thelma and both of his children (104).

In the play’s final scene, Zack and Will comment on the irony of the state’s deciding to run the highway through the village after all; Harry got his wish after death, but they are not so sure it is a change for the better. Will reminisces about his fondness for Thelma when she was a girl and the way things used to be on the mountain, lamenting the loss of the good old days of rural neighborliness and simple pleasures that they used to enjoy on Owl Mountain. Zack sympathetically laments the loss of place in contemporary America. Louisa and Will plan to stay on the mountain into the winter for the first time, but Zack is leaving. As he kisses his mother goodbye he promises, “I’ll send you a post card from the real world” (112). Owl Mountain has been both dream and nightmare, both paradise and purgatory for the Weaver family, lowland Southerners clinging to their old “rustic” vacation memories, the last of the “summer people,” making their stand, Zack muses, like “Lee in the mountains,” referring to a theory that had they let Lee go to the mountains, the South might have “held out indefinitely” (107).

Once again, the innocence and wildness of the mountains are represented in the outsider memory by a young girl, this time as Thelma in Will’s long-ago youth. But the romance is only with the girl, not with the haggard woman she later becomes. Just like Harry tired of Lucille, Will would likely have tired of Thelma had their romance gone further, and so, too, might Jack Hale and Frank Layson have
tired of June Tolliver and Madge Brierly. Taylor's play suggests that the lively mountain girl at once represents both youthful potential and middle-class nostalgia for a simple time, but that, in the face of harsher realities, the dream must almost inevitably fade should the plot continue beyond the happy ending.

The family and the gender roles ascribed to its members are both crucial to America's perception of Appalachia. As America's hillbilly other, the region has been depicted as more oppressive in its strict gender roles than the rest of the nation. And, while Appalachian gender roles may in reality be more clearly delineated than those of other regions, the extreme way in which fiction, film, television, comics and the theatre have portrayed them allows mainstream America to feel more progressive than it might actually be. At the same time, young Appalachian women are romanticized as rural innocents representative of the nation's supposedly more innocent past, which is in itself a form of objectification and limitation of Appalachian women by reducing them to an idealized, but simple, other. And the romance plot between outsider and insider is, perhaps, the ultimate act of colonization. The hero goes to the mountains to mine for coal and for a bride, and chooses a beautiful natural creature to improve, civilize and rescue from her homeland and culture by shaping her to conform to his wishes. Dramatic portrayals of the Appalachian family, therefore, reflect the region's history of domination by outside interests and its place on the fringe of American culture as the "other" that represents both the idealized and rejected elements of the nation's past and present.
Notes


3 Jones, *Appalachian* 5.


5 Jones, *Appalachian* 135.


7 Jones, *Appalachian* 75.

8 Jones, *Appalachian* 75.

9 Jones, *Appalachian* 75.

10 Jones, *Appalachian* 80.

11 Weller 44-45.

12 Weller 45.


16 Beaver 73.

17 Beaver 97; Weller 75-76.


Batteau 132.


Williamson 21-224.

Batteau 65.

Batteau 184.


Kephart 289.

Campbell 126-127; Weller 76; Beaver 92.

Kephart 331-332.

Campbell 140-141.

Miles 37-38.

Beaver 104, 99.

Williamson 225-247.

Kephart 333-334; Campbell 124-127; Weller 64-68; Beaver 82-85.

Kephart 332; Campbell 133; Weller 72-73.

Campbell 132-133; Weller 70-71; Beaver 93-95.
36 Campbell 129-132; Weller 69-70; Beaver 91-92.

37 Beaver 95.

38 Campbell 127-128.

39 Beaver 84.


41 Williamson 53-57.


50 Weller 71.

51 Jones, *Appalachian* 90.


60 Paula Cizmar, *The Death of a Miner* (New York: Samuel French, 1982).

61 John Fox, Jr., *The Trail of the Lonesome Pine* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1908).


67 Paul McPharlin, “Publisher’s Note: A Bit of History,” *In Old Kentucky*, Charles T. Dazey (Detroit: Blue Ox Press/Fine Book Circle, 1937) 139-143.


69 Batteau 38-56.

70 McPharlin 144-145


CHAPTER THREE:
RIFLES RAISED AND RESOURCES ROBBED:
DRAMATIC TREATMENTS OF VIOLENCE IN APPALACHIA

Appalachia has long had a reputation as a violent place. That reputation is reflected in writing about the region from the earliest local color pieces to Robert Schenkkan’s epic 1992 Pulitzer Prize-winning drama The Kentucky Cycle. Appalachia has been portrayed as a region of blockade runners exchanging fire with revenuers, feudists killing off generation after generation one another’s families, and of war heroes whose bravery and marksmanship are attributed to the gun-toting frontier lifestyle of the mountaineer. But the region has also been the scene of great violence perpetrated by outside economic interests upon the land and its people. All of these aspects of violence in Appalachia have been treated on the American stage, sometimes as comedy, sometimes as tragedy, and often as condemnation of either the people and their culture or of the coal companies and other industries that have exploited them.

In “‘Where Bloodshed is a Pastime’: Mountain Feuds and Appalachian Stereotyping,” Kathleen Blee and Dwight Billings trace depictions of mountaineers as a violent people to the earliest periodical and local color stories about the region:

Nothing captures the popular imagination—then or now—like images of violence. Turn-of-the-century journalists and local color writers were highly adept at satisfying their audiences’ appetites for stories of blood and gore. In the accounts of Kentucky’s violence, blood was a constant leitmotif. The southern mountains, it seems, were steeped in violence and savagery.1

Portrayals of southern mountaineers as vengeful people with little respect for human life or the law “horrified and titillated” readers throughout the country.2 Henry
Shapiro notes that fictional depictions of feuding became common in the mid-1880s and by the early twentieth century were “a conventional element in the popular conception of Appalachia as a strange land inhabited by a peculiar people.” Despite the willingness by that time of many Americans to accept that violence was a part of America’s past, the association of Appalachia with the American frontier made feud imagery uncomfortable to the American self-concept; therefore, the idea of feuding as a survival of Scottish clannishness, rather than the American past, began to emerge. Eventually the idea of Celtic survivals was supplanted by social theory citing isolation and ignorance as regionally specific cultural causes of feuding.

Blee and Billings dispel a number of myths about mountain violence in their study. They assert that the notion that violence was pervasive and overwhelming is inaccurate: “In reality, feuding violence was far more episodic and usually less dramatic than portrayed by these writers. In the most intensive period of violence in Clay County’s feud, in the late 1890s, fewer than two dozen killings are documented.” The notion that feuds were “rooted in poverty, ignorance, and isolation” is also false. The principals in feuds were often educated, “politically connected local leaders.” The perception of feuds as “casual violence, a residue of a distant, savage past” is a misrepresentation of “conflicts structured by the antagonisms between . . . powerful families and by the economic dependency that compelled allegiance to these families by the rest of the populace.” This theory is borne out by Altina L. Waller’s highly regarded study of the infamous Hatfield-McCoy feud. Waller finds that the feud was mostly driven by economic motives and that many of the participants were not even related to either side. The assumption
that feuding resulted from a lawless society is also wrong, according to Blee and Billings; rather than people who "turned to violent means to resolve disputes because they were unfamiliar and inexperienced with the use of civil and criminal courts, we found that so-called feudists were consistent and intense litigators throughout the nineteenth century." Waller also cites many examples of the litigiousness of the residents of the Tug Valley where the Hatfield-McCoy feud took place. Blee and Billings find fault with the depiction of women involved in feuds as "steely, ominous figures," "in the shadows," mostly as widows urging their sons to avenge a father's death, but not active in the conflict themselves. Instead, the women of these powerful families were active in the public arena and sometimes exercised independent legal, financial and property rights. Waller notes that Nancy McCoy Hatfield Phillips was defiant and rebellious, taking an assertive role in her marriages and in making and selling whiskey with her second husband.

Blee and Billings note that the image of feuding is still presented by outdoor dramas, such as Virginia's *Trail of the Lonesome Pine* and West Virginia's *Hatfields and McCoys*, and has had a lasting impact on America's popular perception of the region. Shapiro says the exaggerated picture of feuding in the region helped firmly entrench its status as "other" in the eyes of America, a yoke the region has yet to throw off.

Many feuds are thought to have originated in the Civil War, though Waller disputes the claims of Otis Rice and others that the Hatfield-McCoy feud was among them. While not all feuds had their origin in the war, it did deeply divide the region. Some Appalachians fought for the Confederacy, but many sided with the
Union: the state of West Virginia was founded because the mountainous area refused to secede with the rest of the state of Virginia. The Civil War divided communities, and even families; Kentucky is famous for being the state where the war was truly "brother against brother."

Appalachian men have been praised for their bravery in battle since the Battle of Kings Mountain in the Revolutionary War. Their abilities and courage are typically seen as part of the "frontier" culture of the mountains. The most famous of all Appalachian soldiers was World War I hero Alvin York, whose image was used to sell products and patriotism, and about whom numerous books and articles were written and movies made. Violence is labeled "primitive" when carried out in family wars, but "noble" when done in the name of the nation.

Just as America's armed services have called on Appalachia for soldiers, America's industries have called on the region for resources, both material and human. Outside interests bought mineral rights to many properties, telling Appalachian landowners that they could continue to own and live on the land and were selling only the right to extract coal or iron to the mining company. Most of those who sold their rights did not realize that not only would they be inadequately compensated for those valuable resources but their land would also be drastically altered for the worse by the methods used to extract them. Deep shaft mining did damage, but strip mining did much more, causing erosion, mudslides, water pollution, and permanent alteration of the terrain, sometimes removing hills entirely. The timber industry also went to Appalachia for its vast resources of old trees, often behaving irresponsibly just as the coal industry did. The resort industry
has bought up a great deal of desirable land over the years as well, further shifting the power inherent in land ownership to outsiders.25

The outside industrial interests also mined Appalachia for the human resource of cheap labor. For years miners worked under terribly dangerous conditions, and were economic captives of company towns and the scrip system;26 the lot of workers in the lumber industry was little better.27 Later, the textile industry treated their largely female workforce just as poorly.28 In the 1920s and 1930s, unions finally came to the mountains, but not without a struggle. There were bloody battles between union organizers and company thugs at mines throughout the region.29 Ironically, the national press compared the mine wars to hillbilly feuds, robbing the conflict of its legitimate basis in economics, class issues and labor abuses.30

Appalachia today may not be seen as an actively violent place, but the stigma of violence still haunts the region, both in the negative cultural connotations of clannishness and feuding, and in the price it has paid in the service of mainstream America’s industrial conglomerates. Violence is recycled again and again in fictional portrayals of the region, perhaps especially in film and theatre because violence itself is highly dramatic in performance. In the first section of this chapter, I will discuss several examples of dramatic depictions of violent behavior by Appalachian people in instances of both wars and feuds. In the second section, I will examine several plays which portray the violence done to the land and the people of the region by outside interests and the sometimes violent responses of Appalachian people to that abuse.
"As long as thar is hate, thar will be feuds — and wars": Portrayals of Mountaineers as Soldiers and Feudists in Drama

The mountaineer as participant in armed combat, whether it be military or familial, is a familiar image in American drama. Repeatedly, the conduct of mountaineers in military service is portrayed as heroic, but their behavior in feuds within the region is shown as barbaric. This dichotomy is reflected in Paul Green’s *Wilderness Road*, Thomas Wolfe’s *The Mountains*, and Lula Vollmer’s *Sun-Up*.

*Wilderness Road*

Paul Green’s *Wilderness Road* was commissioned as a symphonic outdoor drama for Berea College and was first performed there in 1955. The play takes place in the Kentucky mountains between 1858 and 1863. John Freeman is a young schoolteacher who has returned to the mountains of his birth to teach. He agrees with the controversial ideas of Berea College that educational institutions should be integrated and arranges to have Berea founder Reverend John Gregg Fee speak to his students.

The Civil War is on the horizon, and many in the mountain community are angered by Freeman’s abolitionist views and support of Abraham Lincoln. Some of the local men ride in klan-like hoods as the “Knights of the White Star.” When the Governor sends the Berea teachers away because he fears the integrated school is a threat to the peace, Freeman personally goes to plead their case, but gets nowhere. Back at home, he loans a book to a black man so he can teach his own children to read, which results in the community’s closing his school. Later, when Lincoln is
elected president, the Knights of the White Star burn the school; when John tries to stop them, they brutally beat him.

Though John opposes slavery, he refuses to take sides in the battle between the North and South. He is a peaceful man from a peaceful family who saw his own father shot while trying to stop a feud. Sadly, John’s father did not live to see the result of his sacrifice; the feudists were so ashamed of killing him that the violence ceased. Freeman has inherited his father’s ideals, and, as the final act reveals, his role as martyr.

When the South secedes, Kentuckians sign up to fight for both sides. Freeman’s prize pupil, Neill, and Neill’s brother Henry, both enlist in the Union army. Although Freeman’s brother Davie fights for the South, Freeman refuses to fight for either, citing the biblical commandment against killing.

Neill is shot and his leg must be amputated. After a tremendous inner struggle, Freeman decides he must go fight in Neill’s place. He is ordered to blow up a bridge he knows his brother Davie is guarding. He calls out to Davie, giving him the chance to surrender first, but the rebels refuse and rush to defend the bridge. In the battle, Freeman is shot and killed. At his funeral, his supporters praise his peaceful nature and his willingness to sacrifice all for his ideals. They vow to rebuild the school and keep his dream alive.

While some of the mountain people in Green’s play practice brutal vigilante justice and are willing to sacrifice their own children’s education to their adult conflicts, the play also argues that even a peace-loving Appalachian schoolteacher can be transformed into a brave and noble soldier in time of crisis. The play clearly
has an agenda, as it was written to be premiered at Berea’s centennial celebration; it
shows the Unionists as all good, and the Confederate supporters, though not the
soldiers, as mostly small-minded and prejudiced. Green does, however, portray one
of the Freeman brothers as a Confederate, which makes the negative portrait of his
side less monolithic.

*Wilderness Road* illustrates the profound effect of the Civil War on
Appalachia. The Freeman brothers are on opposite sides of the conflict, and Green
uses the classic Kentucky motif of “brother against brother” to place the two in an
actual battle against one another. The community is also divided in its opinions
about the war and about how its children should be educated.

The divisiveness portrayed in *Wilderness Road* and the grudges between
families who fought on opposite sides of the Civil War are believed to have caused
some of the mountain feuds that occurred in the years after the war. While feuding is
sometimes used to comic effect onstage, as in hillbilly comedies like Wilbur Braun’s
1948 *Feudin’*, much of the time it is material for tragedy, as in *The Mountains*, or
the more redemptive *Sun-Up*.

**The Mountains**

Thomas Wolfe’s play *The Mountains* was first a one-act, then expanded to a
full-length play which, according to critic Pat Ryan who edited the 1970 edition of
the play, “constitutes its author’s earliest achieved writing on a large, Wolfean
scale.” The one-act was produced in 1921 when Wolfe was a student in George
Pierce Baker’s famous Harvard 47 workshop. The 1922 full-length version, which
will be discussed here, remained unpublished and unproduced until Ryan’s edition.
While Wolfe was a native North Carolinian, he was more familiar with the city of Asheville and the boarding house he used as the setting for Look Homeward, Angel than with mountaineers. He began writing about mountain people as a student of Frederick Koch in Chapel Hill, an endeavor of dubious local color which Ryan notes he later lampooned in the following deleted passage from Oh Lost!, the manuscript that later became Look Homeward, Angel:

He wrote, since he was hillborn, of mountaineers. He knew little of them. . . . But he wrote about mountaineers who went bang-bang. The teacher who taught playwriting called them folk-plays. A folk-play is a play in which people say “Hit ain’t” and “that air.” Eugene wrote about mountaineers who went bang-bang.35

But when his one-act version of The Mountains was produced, a letter home to his mother reveals that he saw it as more than just another folk-play:

It is the real thing. . . . When you read this play I hope you will be aware of . . . the tragedy of the lot of those poor oppressed mountain people, old and worn out at middle-age by their terrific hopeless battle with the mountain . . . shutting these people away from the world, hemming them in, guarding them, and finally killing them.36

Ryan notes that in transforming the play into a full-length work, Wolfe “emphatically shifted the crux of causation” away from the mountain to the protagonist, Richard Weaver.37 But this change, while dramatically more effective, places the blame for mountain violence and other mountain problems on the people and their culture rather than their circumstances, moving Wolfe perilously close to the subculture camp of Jack Weller or the “gene theory” of Harry Caudill. The Mountains opens with a prologue in which Gran’paw Weaver is shot by his neighbor, Mr. Gudger, in a dispute over a property line as his son Ben and fourteen year old grandson Tom watch. Act One begins some years later when Tom
and his older brother Richard are grown men. Tom has remained in the mountains all his life, while Richard has become a doctor and returned with his wife Laura to the mountains to practice medicine. Richard and Laura have lived there five years and have two small children, also named Richard and Laura.

Laura’s father is visiting and expresses concern for her; she has made few friends, as she has little in common with mountain people, and Richard is away visiting patients most of the time. He is also concerned about what might happen if the feud between the Weavers and Gudgers should reignite. He wants Richard to practice at his prosperous city hospital, but Richard feels called to help his own people. During the course of the act he tries to help a malnourished infant whose mother’s pride in not taking “charity” eventually results in the child’s death, illustrating the seeming futility of Richard’s mission.

Act Two takes place several years later at Tom Weaver’s home. He has married Mag, his brother’s former housekeeper, and they have two sons, Sam, age sixteen, and Reese, age eighteen. Reese tells Tom he has seen Sam and their young cousin Dick walking and talking with Clem and Mary Gudger. Tom is very angry, and Mag has to intervene to keep him from whipping Sam. Dick is about to go away to school, so Richard brings him to say goodbye to Sam. Dick voices his frustration with his Uncle Tom’s restrictions on allowing any of the cousins to attend social events where Gudgers will be present. Dick says when he returns to practice medicine like his father, he wants to make sure the Gudgers will be willing to call him for help; they will die before calling Richard because of the feud. Richard expresses hope that the next generation will live without hate. Richard winds up
promising to not to desert the cause if Tom will promise to leave Dick out of the
feud for the rest of his life. Richard offers to send Sam to school with Dick, but Tom
flatly refuses to allow it, much to Mag’s disappointment.

Act Three takes place eight years later at Richard’s home. Sam comes to
alert his cousin Laura that trouble is brewing at the Gudgers’ store, reminding her
that the Weaver family suspects one of the Gudgers fired a shot at Reese a month
before. When Dick, who now practices medicine with his father, returns from seeing
patients, Sam asks him to join in the impending fight, but Dick refuses. After Sam
goes, Dick tells Laura he pities the mountain people who know nothing of the
outside world and continue in their narrow way of thinking. Laura mentions that she
thinks Will Gudger’s father once tried to stop the feud, but could not. Dick explains
how he felt compelled to return to the mountains not out of love for the place, but
because of the horrors he saw on medical visits with his father as a boy. He reminds
his sister that the romantic novels about the mountains she likes to read do not reflect
reality.

When Richard returns, he explains to Dick that he could not escape the
family and must be partisan, but that Dick is free from obligation to the old order.
Will Gudger comes to the house and asks Laura to elope with him and flee the feud,
but she refuses because she cannot bear to abandon her father and does not want to
see Will give up his beloved orchard. Richard suggests Will return the next day to
talk to their father about a proper wedding; he reluctantly agrees.
Tom arrives, hoping Dick will want to fight alongside his father. Richard insists he leave his son alone, and send the men away when they arrive. Mag comes to tell Tom she has sent Sam home and wants to see them all stay out of trouble.

A cousin of the Gudgers comes begging help for his sick daughter, and Richard agrees to go with him. Tom tries to persuade Dick to fight in his father’s place, and even offers him a gun he has been saving for him. Then word arrives that Sam has been killed. As a result, Richard decides to fight and send Dick to treat the sick girl instead. But as Dick watches his aging father leave with the mob, he cannot bear to see him go alone and turns the girl’s father away. He takes the gun and goes to join the feud, leaving Laura and Mag to wait in despair for the end of the battle as the curtain falls.

Wolfe’s play makes an argument of near biological determinism about mountain feuding. In the first scene, Laura’s father doubts that Richard has really grown beyond his family’s violent struggles:

> Are you sure? I have seen the temper of you people here. You are a hot-blooded race. Your training, you think, has somehow changed you. I wonder if it is really able to change you in so fundamental a way. Even now, are you sure you would be able to resist the call of your clan—and that’s a strong call . . . if they were hard pressed and needed you? (114)

Richard is insulted to think his father-in-law believes he “could revert to gun-toting, to animalism, to the level of a killer,” and argues, “I stand on the other side of an unbridged gap. I can talk to my people but never again can I walk with them” (114). But his father-in-law has doubts: “You are too sure” (114).
When Tom insists that Richard will have to join the family if the feud should call again someday, Richard complains to his wife: “Oh, that air of possession! It drives me mad when one of them adopts that attitude . . . just as soon as I came back here, they began to treat me as if nothing had happened. Just as if I was the same ignorant mountain boy who went away” (123). His nephew Sam develops a similar disdain for the people of the region and for his family after being denied an education and a brighter future outside the mountains by his father: “I tell ye, nothin’ can help these people. They’re as sorry, muleheaded an’ low-lived critters as I ever seed. That’s what they air, though I be one of ’em, an shouldn’t say it” (147). Laura tells her brother she almost wishes he had not come home to the mountains where people are “so primitive, so terribly ignorant and so bitter” (151).

Richard tells his son Dick that he, too, was young and hopeful when he returned to the mountains to practice medicine, but that his “fine schemes” have failed primarily because of his family: “I couldn’t get away from them. I became a partisan” (155). Dick cannot understand why, so his father explains: “Your uncle is a primitive mountaineer like most of these people. I’m not. That’s why you don’t understand. But, Dick, your uncle and I were boys together; we grew up on the same little farm; we ate the same food, lived the same lives for eighteen years. That is a strong bond between men” (155). Tom calls on that familial bond when he urges Richard to come with him to battle the Gudgers in the final act, and to bring his son along:

I know ye’ll come. You ain’t goin’ to turn agin your own folks . . . Nor little Dick neither. . . . He ain’t goin’ to let his daddy go out by hisse’f. Not if I know a Weaver when I see one. We’re a family as
sticks together. I'll say that much. . . . He's one of us an' you can't take him away. (164)

As Richard goes with the feudists, his son is shocked to think of his father joining the violence; Richard tells him: "Son, we're not much different from that mountaineer who thought he was a bird. We get wings but we can't fly with them. . . . These are my people—my people" (173). Dick is shattered to hear his father say he has "no choice" but to bow to the wishes of the hateful "ignorant" crowd of men. Richard insists that Dick go with the sick girl's father and let him fight the battle.

Richard is confident in his earlier conversation with Tom that Dick is free from the feud: "He's not one of you and never will be. By God, I saw to that. You wanted me and you got me. But that's all you'll get" (164). But he has spoken too soon. In the final scene, Dick decides to go with his father to fight, saying fatally, "What must be, must be. . . . It's those accursed mountains. They never let go. . . . I was a prophet in the wilderness too soon. The mountains aren't ready to receive prophets" (175-176). When Laura says the men are waiting for him, he says, resignedly, "That's how they get you. They can wait the longest. . . . Yes. You always go when they want you" (177).

Both Richard Weaver and his son Dick are educated men of healing, not violence, yet neither of them can escape the family feud. Whether it is inborn as Dick's grandfather believed, or a result of the cultural trait of familism, the feud is a fate over which education and moral enlightenment seem to have no power. Wolfe's play paints a grim picture of the mountains as a place where even the most
well-intentioned, enlightened people can be reduced to primitive barbarians by the
hold the place and their families have on them.

The Mountains is a significant early achievement in Wolfe’s development as
a writer, but it does show marks of his inexperience as well as his future as a novelist
on the grand scale. Some key plot elements are not fully explained by the action; for
example, it is apparent that Richard’s wife Laura dies sometime after the first act.
and later the dialogue implies that her death may in some way be blamed on the feud,
but how and when she died is never revealed. The leaps forward in time between
each act would render the play difficult to stage, for the time span would require
continual cast changes as the children grow to become adults. Some characters
appear only in the brief prologue and are of an age or type that would prohibit double
casting of the actors in later scenes. Clearly Wolfe refused to be limited by the
practical set, casting or budgetary constraints of the theatre. He wrote instead on an
epic scale, signaling his future success as an author of lengthy, highly detailed
novels. His inexperience, both with writing and with mountaineers, may also
account for the play’s stark, pessimistic, limited view of Appalachians as a people
unable to escape their inborn tendency toward and family training in violence, even
after years of education and the broader perspective on life it offers.

Sun-Up

The vision of Lula Vollmer’s Sun-Up is not as bleak as Wolfe’s. The play
depicts violent people, but also a ray of hope for change. Vollmer, like Wolfe, was
born in North Carolina, and received part of her education in Asheville; she was the

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daughter of a well-off family, but spent summers living among mountain people and drew on that experience in her writing plays.39

Lula Vollmer’s *Sun-Up* was first produced in New York in 1923 and in London in 1925.40 S. Marion Tucker included it in his 1931 *Modern American and British Plays*, appropriately naming Vollmer among Percy MacKaye, Hatcher Hughes and Paul Green as a leading author of “folk-plays,” choosing only Vollmer to represent the American genre in his anthology.41 Tucker writes:

> These mountaineers are a peculiar people, whose prejudices, superstitions, feuds, love of corn whiskey, essential kind-heartedness, courage, and other fine or interesting traits, provide a rich fund of raw material waiting to be transmuted into an important contribution to our stock of folk dramas. *Sun-Up* is thus far the best play that pictures these people, and it is Miss Vollmer’s best known play, though perhaps not actually her finest.42

Tucker admits the plot is melodramatic and flawed, but believes the characterization of Widow Cagle redeems it: “In herself she is the very epitome of the mountaineer spirit. She is local; she is the mark of an epoch, of a rapidly vanishing society. But she will survive that epoch and that society, for she transcends it. She has much in her of the universal.”43

*Sun-Up*44 is set in the North Carolina mountains in 1917 and 1918. The Widow Cagle lives in a cabin with her only son, Rufe. As the play opens, she sits talking with her neighbor Pap Todd, an old mountaineer, and both are smoking pipes. Todd tells her a war is coming, and she assumes he means a mountain feud, but he explains it is of the national variety. Both assume it is another Civil War between the North and South.
Widow Cagle mentions that she wishes her law-abiding son would sell moonshine to supplement the farm’s income, even though his father was shot by revenuers. Todd says based on his own twenty years in jail, young Rufe is right to fear the law. The Widow Cagle thinks it more honorable that the men in her family have been killed rather than jailed.

Rufe and the older, more established Sheriff Weeks are both interested in Todd’s daughter Emmy, and the old folks are curious to see whom she will marry. Rufe asks Emmy to marry him right away because he has volunteered to go to war. The Widow is upset to hear he will fight for the government that shot his own father. The Sheriff thinks Emmy should marry him because he is too old to go to war and will not leave her a widow. Impressed with Rufe’s bravery, Emmy accepts his proposal.

Act Two takes place a few months later as Rufe prepares to leave. He has taken care of the farm, paid Todd’s son Bud in advance to bring in the harvest and asked him to look after the women, and moved Emmy in with his mother to help out. The preacher marries Emmy and Rufe as they hear “The Star-Spangled Banner” playing in the distance; thinking it is a hymn, they take it as a sign of good fortune. Rufe promises to write, and his mother stifles her emotions as they say goodbye. She watches him go, fondly caressing the hoe he left by the door that afternoon.

Act Three takes place during a terrible February blizzard. Rufe’s hoe remains untouched by the door. A stranger calls for help outside, and the Widow takes him in. She asks if he can read because a letter has arrived and Emmy is not there to read it to her. When he sees the contents, he says he cannot.
The Sheriff comes looking for an army deserter, so the Widow hides the stranger. The Sheriff leaves as Emmy returns from nursing her intoxicated father. The stranger is surprised the Widow risked helping him, and says he only left camp because he wanted to go home to his mother in Virginia. He explains that the war is not between the states, but far away in Europe. The Widow asks Emmy to read the letter, but when she sees it is typed, she is afraid; the stranger helps her get through it. When they learn Rufe has been killed in action, Emmy sobs while the Widow sadly but quietly absorbs the news.

The next morning at breakfast, the stranger tells them that, inspired by Rufe’s heroism, he has decided to return to the camp. The Widow offers him Rufe’s hat and coat and tells him to kill the men who shot her son. But the Sheriff returns, so he hides again. The Sheriff thinks Rufe may have come home, and the Widow denies it but does not let on that he is dead. Bud arrives and both men hear of Rufe’s fate. Bud is eager to go to war in Rufe’s place, and asks the Sheriff to look after the women, but they all know the army will never call Bud, who is a bit odd.

The Sheriff informs the Widow that the deserter she is hiding is Zeb Turner, Jr., son of the revenuer who killed her husband. In her grief, she threatens to shoot Zeb. Emmy begs her not to, saying Rufe would not want her to kill. In a mystical moment, Widow Cagle hears Rufe speaking to her and repeats his message to the others. He speaks against hate and in favor of honoring the love between all mothers and sons.

Transformed and deeply moved, the Widow lets the stranger sneak out, and offers herself to the Sheriff for arrest, but he refuses. In a powerful final moment
alone on stage, Widow Cagle thanks her late son for teaching her a lesson of love and carries his hoe out with her into the bright sunshine of morning.

Widow Cagle begins the play with a violent attitude toward survival in the mountains that accepts feuding and dangerous illegal activities such as blockade running as inevitable trials of life and regards participation in them as signs of independence and strength. She resents the law for killing her husband in a battle over moonshine: “Shot him in the back while he wuz protectin’ his own property” (699); she cannot understand why Rufe feels he owes anything to the government that took his father away from him (682). When Rufe tells her he could not shoot his father’s killer when he had the chance because the man was unarmed, she reminds him, “Feud would a said—go with him till he got a gun” (685). When she turns on Zeb in the final act, she says, “If ye’ve got a gun, Stranger, use hit. The feud will give ye a chance the law won’t” (700). She sees the code of the feud as more honorable than the law: “Law! Law! Allus that word, law. Well, Stranger, the feud has a law, and it air a life for a life” (700). She is willing to fight him because her family was all that mattered to her: “My life! Whut does that matter? They’ve took every life that belonged to me. My pap’s—my man’s—my son’s—my little son’s life, they took hit, them that hid behind a thing called law” (700).

Even though she hates the government and doesn’t want Rufe to go to war, she respects his choice because she values individualism and independence: “Ye air yo’ own man, son” (685). Her son tells her he remembers how she made sure he got to school as a boy, even carrying him there when he was still too small to walk the distance himself and, “that little bit o’ larnin’ taught me to respect somethin’ a little
higher than my own way of wantin' ter to do things” (683). He is against whiskey not out of disrespect for his father, but because he saw how it cost his father his life and Emmy’s alcoholic father his quality of life and years spent in jail (685). Rufe has learned patriotic ideals at school, but it is his father’s example that inspires him most: “Mom, it’s because I’m Pap’s son that I want to go. He died fer whut he thought wuz right . . . it’s fer ye, and the ole wimen like ye, that I want to go” (685). He tells Emmy he wants to go to “help defend my hills, and my home, and my wimen folks,” that he would be ashamed if he did not: “I cain’t explain it. I ain’t got no education yet, and I couldn’t understand all the soldiers I talked to told me. But hit’s somethin’ like this, honey, This here country is oum, ’cose God let us be born here” (688). Rufe represents all the naïve but brave “Alvin Yorks” from the mountains who did not make it home alive from World War I.

Education is partly responsible for Rufe moving beyond the feud mentality to a hopeful patriotic desire for freedom and education about the ideals of his country, but he is not just a successful example of mainstream America rescuing a mountaineer from his culture and his supposedly violent instincts. He respects and loves his home, and that is what inspires him to defend it. His mother’s familistic values and instinctual feelings are the keys to rescuing Zeb Turner from death at her hands and her from her own anger.

The morning after she learns Rufe is dead, she tells Emmy: “I kin remember when he used to stump his toe, or hurt hisself, I’d feel the pain as much as him. And jest like he wuz little agin, somew’eres in here [clutching her breast] I kind feel the hurt of a bullet” (695). That instinctive connection to her son provides her epiphany
in the play’s final moments. Only Widow Cagle can hear Rufe’s voice speaking from the great beyond, so she repeats his words to the others:

As long as thar air hate—thar will be—feuds. As long as thar air women—thar will be—sons. You ain’t no more—to me—than other mother’s sons—air to them. Yes, son—whut else? [After a pause] Take keer of—yo’self—yes, son—and Emmy. Whut else, son? . . . [She strains to hear more but it does not come.] (700)

She says “I reckon my love went on—out yonder and reached him,” and lets Zeb go, saying, “the hate of the feud air gone out of me” (700). She even gives the young man her gun to carry for protection (701). As the play closes, she speaks to her son:

I heard ye, Rufe. I never knowed nothin’ about lovin’ anything but ye—till ye showed me hit’s lovin’ them all that counts. Hit wuz sundown when ye left me, son . . . [The morning sun, just rising, comes in through the window] But it’s sun-up now, and I’m a knowin’ God Almighty is a takin’ keer of ye, Rufe. (702)

Family loyalty drives the feud in Sun-Up, but the deep value of familial love ends it as well. In Vollmer’s play, violence is not an inevitable result of living among primitive, degraded people in the mountains. Vollmer’s mountain characters have dignity, as much inner potential for compassion as for hate, and the ability to grow beyond the mistakes of the past.

Vollmer’s mountain characters are typical of folk-plays of the time in their dialect-heavy speech and their ignorance of even major events, institutions and cultural practices outside their small mountain community. For example, they do not distinguish between the Civil War and World War I, have never heard the national anthem, and do not understand that France is far away or even that it is not part of the United States. Vollmer perhaps reveals a bit of the missionary zeal that fueled the establishment of settlement schools in the mountains in her use of Rufe’s
minimal education as the source of his patriotism and his ability to rise above
destructive practices like feuding and moonshining. In fact, she reportedly donated
all royalties from *Sun-Up* to the education of mountain people.

The plot of *Sun-Up* is formulaic in its overly convenient juxtaposition of
Rufe's death in combat and Widow Cagle's unknowing sheltering of her enemy's
deserter son. And the deus ex machina of Rufe's message from beyond the grave
would be difficult to stage convincingly for contemporary audiences. But, as Tucker
pointed out in his anthology, Widow Cagle is a powerful, compelling
characterization whose symbolic role as the universal mother allows the play to
transcend its dated melodramatic qualities and have an enduring, affecting impact on
readers and audiences even today.

"Minning is a dangerous business and we just have to live with this"; Portrayals of
Outside Interests Doing Violence to the Land and the People of Appalachia

The violence perpetrated upon the land and people of Appalachia by outside
interests and the violence that was part of their resistance to that oppression also
figure prominently in drama about the region. The exploitation of the region's
resources and labor has primarily been a topic for contemporary playwrights, but
land speculators buying up mineral rights at unfair prices appear even in the earliest
plays about the region, such as *Esmeralda* in 1881, and *In Old Kentucky* in 1892.45
And some more recent plays, such as the 1979 play *Foxfire* and the 1996 play *Grace
and Glorie*, both of which are more fully treated in other chapters, confront the issue
of the continuing exploitation of the area by resort developers.46
Labor issues are also common topics in contemporary plays about Appalachia. The characters in Elizabeth Stearns’s *Hillbilly Women* speak of the difficulty of being a miner’s wife or daughter, knowing the men in the mines risk death every day. They also talk about the slow, painful deaths from respiratory disease suffered by miners who have “black lung” from inhaling coal dust and textile workers who have “brown lung” from breathing in lint. Paula Cizmar’s *Death of Miner* illustrates the extreme danger inherent in underground mining and the callousness of coal companies who deny pensions and unions that sometimes refuse to strike to help one of their own. And Jo Carson’s 1993 play, *Preacher With a Horse to Ride*, revisits the 1931 hearings held in the mountains by author Theodore Dreiser and his committee to examine the plight of the people of coal country; the hearings were the basis for the book *Harlan Miners Speak, Report on Terrorism in the Kentucky Coal Fields*.

The exploitation of Appalachia by outside forces dominates the second half of Robert Schenkkan’s 1992 Pulitzer Prize-winning work, *The Kentucky Cycle*. Schenkkan was born in Chapel Hill, but raised in a “literate household where his acting and writing talents were encouraged” in Austin, Texas. He was inspired to write the cycle of nine short plays after a friend took him on a brief one-day tour of the eastern Kentucky mountains. He claims to be writing about America, not just Appalachia, but the effect is often that of making Appalachia even more “other” than it was before; as Rodger Cunningham points out, “Appalachia is not a metaphor for America; Appalachia is America.”
Many critics have faulted Schenkkan for his dark, often historically inaccurate portrait of mountain people. *The Kentucky Cycle* traces the history of the Talbert and Rowen families, who seem bent on destroying each other at any cost, from 1775 to 1975. Nearly all of his characters are ruthless, greedy, and prone to violence. Cunningham argues: "What gives the plainest lie to Schenkkan's claims that his play is not stereotypical is its treatment of Appalachian violence. Schenkkan's writing displays the same morbid fascination with that violence as has that of every local color writer from John Fox, Jr. onward."^53

But Schenkkan is also critical of the powerful outside economic interests which oppress the people as the region history unfolds. The remainder of this chapter will examine three plays from *The Kentucky Cycle* that follow the coal industry's invasion of the region from the securing of mineral rights, to deep shaft mining and coal camps in the days before unionization, to the era when unions were well-established and becoming part of the power elite themselves.

**The Kentucky Cycle: "Tall Tales"**

*Tall Tales* is the first play in Part Two of *The Kentucky Cycle.*^50 The play begins and ends with a monologue by forty-nine year old Mary Anne Rowen, who is recalling the events of the play. The action takes place in 1885 when Mary Anne is fourteen. She meets a stranger from a nearby county named JT Wells who tells her he is a storyteller who has come to see her father Jed. JT has dinner with the Rowen family and tells several tall tales for them before revealing his real agenda. He has come to purchase their mineral rights on behalf of a mining company, haggling with Jed over the price and letting him believe he has made a great deal.
When Mary Anne walks JT back down to the road, she asks him to kiss her. He does, only to be attacked with a knife by Tommy Jackson, Mary Jane’s fifteen year old mountain suitor. As the two struggle, Mary Anne kicks Tommy and he drops the knife. JT knocks Tommy unconscious. He thanks Mary Anne for saving his life and in a fit of remorse tells her the truth about the land deal. He tells her the minerals on the property are worth far more than he just paid for them and that mining will leave it utterly destroyed. He tells Mary Anne other unpleasant facts about her own personal history, how the settlers from whom she is descended mistreated the Native Americans, and how the outfit with which her father fought in the Civil War was known for committing atrocities. The adult Mary Anne recalls how she asked her father about those charges, and he said JT was lying to get out of the bargain, so she did not tear up the contract as JT advised. But for once in his life, JT was telling the truth, and now she mourns the destruction of her beautiful land.

Mary Anne’s grief over the results of mining may be emotionally accurate, but the rest of the play is less so. While many Appalachian people were tricked into selling their mineral rights for far less than they were really worth, seldom were they sold to fellow Appalachians like JT, especially in 1885. Finlay Donesky notes that most surveyors and speculators who traveled the mountains on behalf of northern conglomerates were veterans who had become familiar with the territory during the Civil War, not natives of the region; only later did companies begin to employ some locals.\textsuperscript{52} Thus in Schenkkann’s story what was an injustice perpetrated by outsiders becomes even more sinister because JT “is a local boy who knowingly betrays his own mountain people.”\textsuperscript{53} Donesky also points out that JT could not know as clearly...
as he does what the results of mining would be, as large operations had not yet
become widespread in the area, and that the kind of damage he describes is typical of
strip mining, not deep shaft mining; strip mining did not come into use until the
1950s.\textsuperscript{54} Schenkkan allows the impression made upon him by strip mining sites on a
one-day tour of Appalachia to creep into the speech of characters who lived before
the method was even employed.\textsuperscript{55} He relied heavily on the work of Harry Caudill for
his research, and Caudill’s interest in strip mining may also have influenced
Schenkkan’s mental picture of what mining does to the land.\textsuperscript{56}

But, for all its inaccuracy, Mary Anne’s description of springtime beauty in
the mountains at the beginning of the play and her description of how the land and
her world view have been changed by mining at the end of play make for compelling
drama:

They came a couple of years later, just like he said they would, and
the cut down all of the trees, includin’ my oak. I was right about it
holdin’ up the sky, ’cause when they chopped it down, everythin’ fell in:
moon and stars ’n all. Spring’s different now. Without the trees,
you get no color; no green explosion. And you got nothin’ to hold the
land down neither. What you get is just a whole lotta mud. I try to
tell my boy, Joshua, what it was like, so he’ll know, so it won’t be
forgotten, but he just looks at me and laughs. “Mama’s telling stories
again,” he says. [Pause] Maybe I am. (206)

Mary Anne’s speech reveals how profoundly unjust a bargain JT struck with
her father. Not only was the land lost, but a piece of Mary Anne’s soul. And Mary
Anne’s use of the word “stories” is colored by the dual meaning of “story” in the
play: it can mean either a tale or a lie; She seems to doubt even her own memories
of her lost mountain paradise after so many years of looking at the bleak landscape
that remains.
The Kentucky Cycle: “Fire in the Hole”

Fire in the Hole is set in 1920, the same year of the prologue and epilogue speeches in Tall Tales.51 Mary Anne Rowen is married to Tommy Jackson, who is now a miner, and they have been living in the coal camp since the Rowens lost their land twenty-nine years earlier. Four of their five sons have died of fever, one in every rainy season for four years, and their ten year old son Joshua is now ill.

Abe Steinman arrives looking for room and board, and Mary Anne lets him stay after he pays for medicine she cannot afford. He tells her to boil Joshua’s drinking water because it is probably the source of his typhoid fever. Tommy reluctantly vouches for Abe to get him a job in the mine, realizing Abe is a union organizer and fearing trouble with the company.

Abe tells stories of the labor activist Mother Jones, who appears onstage in flashbacks to her speeches, and Joshua is fascinated. Mary Anne is less receptive to his ideas until Tommy hits her for disagreeing with his decision to falsify Joshua’s birth certificate so he can work in the mines; the camp preacher often creates new birth certificates for boys who “suddenly” turn fourteen and have no proof of age. In his anger, Tommy also evicts Abe.

Tommy, Joshua and Abe narrowly escape when an explosion caused by unsafe mining practices kills their coworkers, so Tommy and Mary Anne agree to help Abe organize a union to fight the company. The miners strike and shut down the mines, but they are fired upon from a passing train by company thugs. Tommy helps set up a deal to buy guns from a black bootlegger, but betrays both him and
Abe by naming names to the company in exchange for a promise that everyone will get their jobs back and no one will be hurt.

When the company thugs interrupt the exchange of money for weapons, they execute Abe. Cassius the bootlegger escapes in the confusion, and the thugs release Tommy unharmed, but stunned. Joshua has secretly followed and sees that his father betrayed them all. Back at the strikers’ encampment, Tommy tries to pin the blame on Cassius, but Joshua tells the truth. A furious Mary Anne announces their marriage is over, and Tommy is dragged off, presumably to his death. Mary Anne gives a stirring speech and assumes her new role as the “Mother Jones of Howsen County,” leading the fight for a union and telling Joshua that it will be his family now.

Donesky and other critics note that *Fire in the Hole* does a good job of showing the “brutal power the coal companies used in their attempt to control every aspect of the miner’s life”\(^6\) However, it fails to show any initiative for resistance on the part of the Appalachian people. Instead, it takes an outsider to explain to them that resistance is even an option. Donesky says that while miners in that period accepted help from outsiders, “they didn’t depend on anybody to tell them that they were oppressed and what to do about it.”\(^6\) As Gurney Norman puts it, “Resistance defines the very people Schenkkan portrays as being defeated.”\(^6\)

Herbert Reid regards the combination of Tommy’s lack of anger at the system and act of betrayal against his fellow workers, as well as Mary Anne’s heroic leadership in the strike, as a “sort of ‘PC’ gimmick that slanders the brave rank-and-file miners and organizers involved in the union struggles of the depression era.”\(^6\)
The company values coal and profits over the lives of the men it employs, and the imbalance of power between industry and the people is so great that the company seems all-powerful to the miners in the play. The company owns their homes and pays them in company scrip they must use at the company store. Their children must drink the unfit water from the company supply, and if they do survive childhood, it will only be so they can be sacrificed to the company in their early teens as laborers no better off than their fathers were. The union is an opportunity to correct the imbalance and give the miners a voice, but, as the next play reveals, not a panacea.

**The Kentucky Cycle: “Which Side Are You On?”**

*Which Side Are You On?* takes place in 1954. Joshua Rowen is forty-four and president of the local chapter of the United Mine Workers. His son Scotty has just returned from the Korean War to work for him as a field representative.

Joshua argues about the proposed contract for the miners with the owner of the Blue Star Mining Company, James Talbert Winston. James says the large number of layoffs are not negotiable, but after much debate agrees to reduce them slightly in exchange for a six week extension on improving safety conditions in the mines. Joshua also demands that the company donate land for a new hospital, with service contracts going to Franklin Biggs, the son of Cassius Biggs who helped the union in its early days.

A week later, Scotty brings the miners’ concerns about being denied pension payments to Joshua, who confides to him that the pension plan is underfunded, so the union has been forced to trim the rolls. Scotty is concerned that his father wants to
use him as a rubber stamp and is keeping crucial facts from him. He tells his father about egregious safety violations in one of the mines, and Joshua promises to take care of it.

At a union meeting the following week, the miners complain to Scotty that nothing has been done to solve the safety problem, and he wants to call a strike. Joshua is unwilling to do so for fear of jeopardizing the contract. The miners go on a wildcat strike anyway, and Scotty goes to the unsafe mine to bring the men out.

The mine explodes because of a buildup of coal dust resulting from the company's neglect. Joshua must go before news cameras to read a politically cautious statement about the company's good safety record. He must also read a list of the names of the missing men which ends with his own son, Scotty.

Reid and Donesky agree that Which Side Are You On? is "credible" and in part based on some actual self-serving union presidents. However, it is not without its problems. Again, we see a native of the region betray his own people, and, worse yet, they are people he has sworn to protect as union president, including his own son. And Donesky hears the mountain passivity of Fire in the Hole echoed when Scotty "invokes his experience outside the mountains as the source of his moral strength to depart from the pattern."

The victim-blaming in Schenckkan's work has upset Appalachian audiences and critics and yet seems not even to have registered with those in other parts of the country. Norman is puzzled that so gross a misrepresentation of history "was met with enthusiastic approval by West Coast audiences." Even the dialect in the play is inaccurate and lacks any of the rustic poetry so many other writers have sought to
elicit from the speech of their mountain characters. It is also surprising that a work
frequently described as having the literary value of a television miniseries has been
honored with a Pulitzer; the award seems to have been granted more for the ambition
of Schenkkan's epic vision than for his artistic accomplishment. Cunningham notes,
"though the play's reviews [in New York] were mixed, it appears that little of the
negative reaction centered on the play's portrayal of mountain people," and many, in
fact, saw the play as too far to the left, when it is anything but.69 He is offended that,
even in the cycle's few redemptive moments, Schenkkan "unwittingly deprives
[mountain people] not only of voice but of all agency except insofar as they accept
his terms."70

The great irony of The Kentucky Cycle is that Schenkkan set out to write a
play cycle that would address the wrongs done to the land and the people of America
by capitalist greed, using Appalachia as a symbol, and in doing so wound up
committing an act of colonial abuse of the region himself. Cunningham argues that
"Schenkkan's appropriation is an updated version of the industrial rape he decries."71

Norman says Schenkkan's
gaze not only came from a position of presumed cultural superiority,
it was a naïve, unconscious practice of "Orientalism." . . . I resented
Schenkkan's presumption of his right to appropriate the history of
eastern Kentucky for his own "artistic" use and political agenda
without any consideration of the effects of that use upon the people
who live and struggle in the social matrix he viewed in such a limited
way.72

Norman goes on to say that Schenkkan "seems not to understand that life in the
mountains is not static, that the region is not a museum."73 Appalachia is supposed
to serve a mythic function in Schenkkan's work, and the result is something less than
mythic and less than real. Even in the theatre, and even in a series of plays meant to show the violence done to Appalachian people and Appalachian land by American capitalism, an act of colonial violence is committed, adding an unintended irony to Schenkkan’s use of “Cycle” in the title of the work that has brought him such renown from the institutions of mainstream American culture and such censure from critics in the field of Appalachian Studies.

Appalachia is nearly always shown to be a potentially violent and dangerous place in plays about the region. It is depicted as a land where the rules of the frontier or of primitive culture still apply, where the people use guns to settle disputes with their neighbors rather than turning to the law, where men tote rifles as they hunt or guard their moonshine stills, and where a tendency toward grudges and brutality is so firmly entrenched in the culture that herculean effort would be required to excise it. But the image of mountain man as frontier sharpshooter is also tied up in more positive images of Appalachians as intensely patriotic, skilled, courageous soldiers.

The Appalachian people who seem so fearsome in their easy way with violence and revenge are at the same time shown as victimized by the brutal, destructive tactics of corporate-backed violence perpetrated by outside economic interests mining the region for resources and cheap labor. Ironically, some of the very violence used to fight the unjust practices of mining conglomerates have at times been dismissed as mere survivals of the feuding tradition. America may long have had trouble reconciling the violent truth about its frontier past as embodied in its stereotypical ideas about the Appalachian present, but perhaps has had even more difficulty accepting its complicity in the exploitative violence done to Appalachian
people and their land by mining and other industries in the region that serve the core while abusing the periphery. The body of dramatic writing about the region, as evidenced by this study, both reflects and attempts to reconcile the nation’s discomfort with the violent underbelly of its stereotyping and colonization of Appalachia.

Notes


2 Blee and Billings 124.


4 Shapiro 48-49.

5 Shapiro 49.

6 Blee and Billings 125.

7 Blee and Billings 125-126.

8 Blee and Billings 127-128.


10 Blee and Billings 130.

11 Waller 86-93.

12 Blee and Billings 131-132.

13 Blee and Billings 132-133.
14 Waller 240-241.

15 Blee and Billings 134.

16 Shapiro 52.


27 Eller 86-127.


30 Batteau 112-113.


34 Ryan 17.

35 Ryan 6; Harvard College Library MS *46AM-7* (25).


37 Ryan 22.


42 Tucker, “Vollmer” 677.


48 Paula Cizmar, *Death of a Miner* (New York: Samuel French, 1982).


56 Donesky 292.

57 Donesky 292.

58 Schenkan, “Author’s Note” 333-335.


61 Donesky 293.

62 Donesky 294.


66 Reid 323; Donesky 294.

67 Donesky 294.

68 Norman 328.

69 Cunningham 300.

70 Cunningham 306.

71 Cunningham 305.

72 Norman 327-328.

73 Norman 330.
CHAPTER FOUR: SUPERSTITIONS, SPELLS, AND SNAKES: DRAMATIC TREATMENTS OF FOLK PRACTICE AND BELIEF

Folk belief and practice have historically been very important to Appalachian culture, especially in terms of religious life. Even in the age of cable television, satellite dishes, and chain stores on bypass loops around many small towns, Appalachia is associated with ways long forgotten by or alien to America's secular, "high-tech" national culture. Folk practice is so important to America's concept of Appalachia that the settlement schools established by outsiders in an effort to "lift up" the mountain people while preserving the best of their culture were often called "folk schools." However, as David Whisnant points out in *All That is Native and Fine*, much of the "folk culture" they preserved was projected upon the region or modified by the outsiders’ opinions of what was "authentic."¹ Appalachian folk traditions and beliefs appear in some form in nearly every play set in the region. The plays in this chapter, however, make folk belief and practice a central issue. They deal with witches, charms, spells, astrology and even the mystical and frightening folk religious tradition of snake handling.

To apprehend more fully the context of Appalachian folk practice as it has been embodied in drama, one may turn to a large field of sociological and historical resources on folk belief and its role in daily life and religious practice in the mountains. Emma Bell Miles, Horace Kephart, John C. Campbell, Jack Weller and others deal with their observations of folk practice and belief in the mountains in their books.² Ted Olson’s 1998 *Blue Ridge Folklife* covers all aspects of folklife and folklore in the region throughout its history and into the present day.³ Rodger
Cunningham's *Apples on the Flood* and David Hackett Fischer's *Albion's Seed* trace survivals of Celtic and British culture in the Southern mountains. David Whisnant's *All That is Native and Fine*, Jane Becker's *Selling Tradition*, and Benita J. Howell's *Cultural Heritage Preservation in the American South* all deal with the conflicted attempts to revive or preserve folk culture in the mountains. The entire *Foxfire* series is an attempt to preserve elements of mountain folklife that have been handed down largely via oral tradition. Quite a few researchers, again often biased toward those items that seemed more "authentically" descended from English folkways, have tried through the years to collect and preserve traditional mountain music; among the most notable are Cecil J. Sharp, Olive Campbell, John J. Niles, Jean Ritchie and W.K. McNeil.

Patterson's 1995 *The Sound of the Dove: Singing in Appalachian Primitive Baptist Churches* and Jeff T. Titon's 1988 *Powerhouse for God: Speech, Chant and Song in an Appalachian Baptist Church* examine folk tradition and practice in church music and spoken or chanted ritual.11 A number of books deal specifically with the rare but remarkable practice of snake handling. Among them are Thomas Burton's *Serpent-Handling Believers*, David Kimbrough's *Taking up Serpents: Snake Handlers of Eastern Kentucky*, Weston LaBarre's *They Shall Take up Serpents*, and Dennis Covington's *Salvation on Sand Mountain*.12

The powerful identification of the region with folkways that seem primitive, traditional, mystical, superstitious or even frightening to outsiders is reflected in plays about the region dating from the 1920s to the year 2000. Charms, spells, witches, visions and snakes appear again and again on the stage. In this chapter I will discuss examples of how folk practice and religious belief intersect in a number of plays. In the first section, I will examine some examples of belief in supernatural beings, such as witches and evil spirits, and how religion and folk ritual are used by characters in the plays to combat them. In the second section I will discuss plays that portray mountain people as believing in superstition and folk magic as much as or more than traditional Christianity and how each set of beliefs accommodates or resists the other. In the third section I will discuss plays that examine Holiness "Signs Following" sects which practice snake handling.
Powers a Darkness, Headin' Straight from Hell: Witches and Spirits in the Haunted Mountain Landscape

Appalachian culture has a great deal of folklore about the supernatural. Verna Mae Slone recounts how most “bugger tales” and folk traditions were passed down via oral tradition: “These stories lose a lot in being written — the facial expressions, the movements of the hands, the bending forward of the body, the lowering and raising of the voice by the storyteller cannot be captured on paper.”

Ted Olson says these stories “reflected Old World folk beliefs” and that they have been told not for mere entertainment, but also “in an effort to comprehend the meaning of human existence and to come to terms with death.” He notes that many storytellers have believed strongly in “ghosts and other supernatural forces,” and that while some stories have portrayed ghosts as “violent and vengeful,” many others do not.

David Hackett Fischer also sees the magical beliefs of what he calls the “American backcountry” as Old World survivals:

Magic has persisted in the backcountry even to our own time. . . . The people . . . brought with them the magic that existed on the borders of North Britain in the early and middle decades of the eighteenth century. These beliefs included an interest in witchcraft, wizardry and other forms of diabolical magic — but not the same sort of witchcraft obsession that had flourished among the Puritans a century earlier. . . . The folklore of the southern mountains was full of witches and goblins for many generations. As late as the 1930s, collectors of folk beliefs in the southern mountains were told of many witch beliefs.

Fischer also notes widespread “pragmatic use of conjuring, sorcery, charms, omens, spells, potions, incantations and popular astrology to change the course of events, or to predict them.” In addition to Celtic beliefs, mountain lore also grew “by
borrowings from Indians, Africans, Germans and other cultures” and new practices
were created within mountain culture even in the twentieth century.\textsuperscript{18}

Fischer sees magic as distinct from religion,\textsuperscript{19} but in plays about the region
heightened dramatic conflict is achieved by confrontation and confusion between the
power of a Christian God and the magical powers that seems in these plays to come
from Satan.

One of the early Carolina Playmakers folk-plays records the mountaineers’
belief in witches. \textit{When Witches Ride} by Elizabeth Lay (who later married Paul
Green) was a brief sketch produced in 1919.\textsuperscript{20} Many of the elements of witchcraft
presented in that brief play are also documented in other works, so Lay’s play will
not be examined at length here.

In this section, I will discuss two plays from two different time periods that
deal with the supernatural side of Appalachian folk belief and culture: Howard
Richardson and William Berney’s 1945 \textit{Dark of the Moon} and Deborah Pryor’s 1987
\textit{The Love Talker}.

\textbf{Dark of the Moon}

Howard Richardson and William Berney’s \textit{Dark of the Moon} premiered in
New York in 1945, after many rewrites of an earlier version that had won Stanford
University’s Maxwell Anderson Award for verse drama.\textsuperscript{21} It played on Broadway for
nearly two seasons and then had an extended road tour. In the years since, it has seen
numerous professional and amateur productions, and is performed by many school,
college and community groups every year.
In the play, John, a male witch, goes to the Conjur Man and asks to be made human, but the Conjur Man refuses. The Conjur Woman realizes he wants to be changed so he can marry his human love, Barbara Allen, who is already carrying his child, so she gives John a list of ingredients she will need for the spell, including “a ring from the finger of a cold, dead hand” (7), and says she will do it on the condition that Barbara Allen be true to John for one year. If she fails the test, he returns to being a witch.

At the Saturday night dance, a storm is brewing as Barbara Allen sings a sad ballad she cannot finish about a witch who loves a human. John arrives in human form and fights Marvin Hudgens for Barbara. Lightning flashes as John uses magic to defeat Marvin. The storm begins during the dance, but no rain falls on John and Barbara as the others flee.

A few days later at the Allen home, Barbara’s parents worry that no one will marry their pregnant daughter. Preacher Haggler tells them she should marry John the newcomer. John arrives, Barbara accepts his proposal, and her parents agree. Later, the Dark Witch and the Fair Witch taunt John, but he resists. Then Marvin arrives to propose to Barbara, only to find he is too late.

At the general store, people gossip about the grave-robbing of Agnes Riddle’s ring and how signs point to it having been the work of a witch. Marvin Hudgens challenges John to another test of strength, whereupon John effortlessly lifts a barrel of apples to shoulder height with one arm, which sparks suspicion in the others. John and Barbara ask to be married on the spot in the store rather than the church,
and the crowd is horrified when the ring John uses is obviously the one stolen from Agnes’s grave.

Barbara asks John about the rumors that he is a witch, and he assures her they are false. However, when their child is born dead and looks more like a bat than a baby, the women take it as proof that the rumors are true. They burn the body because a witch cannot have a church funeral, and Preacher Haggler comes to pray for Barbara. John comes home, orders everyone out, and is forced to admit the truth to Barbara. She still loves him, and he plans to stay with her, again resisting the tormenting witches.

The Fair Witch and Dark Witch tell the Conjur Man that they think Barbara will betray John. The Conjur Man requests that if Barbara remains faithful they leave John alone. They agree, but on the condition that they will win the life of Barbara Allen if their prediction proves right that John will come begging for a second chance at being human.

Preacher Haggler is holding a revival, and Barbara’s mother forces her to attend. Several of the town’s residents are “moved by the spirit” to confess their sins and ask for prayer, and Mrs. Allen asks for help for Barbara. Barbara tells the congregation that if she remains faithful for the rest of the night, the year of trial will be over and John will be human forever. Preacher Haggler says God is commanding her to break the spell. Marvin confesses to lusting after Barbara, and the crowd sings, prays, and physically traps Barbara until she breaks down and gives in to his advances.
John tells the Conjur Man he still loves Barbara and wants a second chance. When John learns Barbara must die because of the wager, he asks to die with her. Denied that, he asks that she not be allowed to see him as a witch. Barbara asks John to always wear her ring so he will not forget her. She dies, and John becomes a witch again. The Fair Witch asks for the ring, and he gives it to her with only a moment’s hesitation. He runs his fingers through Barbara’s hair one last time, and as he turns to follow the others, he pushes her body with his foot. Already he has begun to forget.

*Dark of the Moon* reflects much of what was expected of a “hillbilly play” in the 1940s. The characters speak in heavy dialect and engage in stereotypical behavior, which some critics at the time took as highly authentic, but others thought was a bit heavy-handed or simple. Ward Morehouse of the *New York Sun* praised the play for providing a “real feeling of the mountain country” and bringing “the lore and the legends, the chants and the square dances, the hymns and the prayers of the mountain people of the Great Smokies of North Carolina to the 46th Street.” John Chapman of the *New York Daily News* likewise admired the way in which the play and its scenic design “has evoked the darkly brooding quality of the Smokies and the primitive state of their inhabitants, with their stores and cabins and churches.” And Burton Rascoe of the *New York World-Telegram* hailed the play as effective after going on at length about his own familiarity with the region. But Lewis Nichols of the *New York Times* wrote, “As the scene is a ridge in the Smoky Mountains, the play is in dialect, an occasional scene being too coyly folksy,” and Howard Barnes of the *New York Herald Tribune* observed, “Numerous tangents to the plot satirize
Baptist revival meetings and general hillbilly doings... Too often it is rather ridiculous.\textsuperscript{25} And Louis Kronenberger of the \emph{New York Newspaper PM} was most disappointed that "so primitive and unearthly a story" which "welcomes music and dancing and ritual" was not better realized: "For myself I balked less at the eerie phases of the play than at the folksy ones... the folk doings and dialect, and even the folksongs and dancing, seemed just about what those things usually are in uninspired folk drama; they didn't have the right fetching air about them, or the right fresh accent."\textsuperscript{26}

While \textit{Dark of the Moon} is eerie, at times brutal, and does deal in stereotypes, it does not summarily dismiss the beliefs of its mountain characters or portray them as being too primitive or degraded in order to evoke human sympathy. The play's primary co-author, Howard Richardson, an alumnus of Frederick Koch's Carolina Playmakers, wrote in the foreword to the 1966 edition of the play: "The actual writing of the first draft was accomplished in two weeks during my Christmas vacation in 1941, when I decided not to go home to North Carolina, but instead stay to work on a play, which was the assignment in a writing class I was taking at the state University of Iowa" (vi). So perhaps the play owes some of its humanity to Richardson's nostalgia for his home state.

The world of \textit{Dark of the Moon} is governed by both folk beliefs and the religion of Preacher Haggler and the Church of God. Their religion may be ecstatic, primitive, and sometimes dark, and their superstitious fear may seem backward, but the mountain people are correct in their assessment of their world in this play. Witches do exist, they do not have human souls, and involvement with them does
lead to destruction. If the people of Buck Creek are in any way at fault, it is in their failure to honor John and Barbara’s love for each other and see that John’s intentions are not evil. But it is significant that this tale is set in the Smoky Mountains and not in some other geographical location. Audiences and readers can accept that witches ride the night sky in Appalachia, but they doubtless would have balked had Richardson had set the play in Iowa instead. Appalachia is a mysterious place with mythic qualities. Americans see it as part of another time when elements of fantasy and legend were still part of the landscape.

In the play, the people of Buck Creek still cling to their customary folkways, despite influences from outsiders. The older characters seem most resistant to change. They have been told about “better,” more modern ways to live, but are stubborn, steadfast in their belief in the old ways, and suspicious of education:

FLOYD: Be glad when hit hawg-killin’ time.
MRS. ALLEN: The signs ain’t right yet, son. Got to slop the hawgs till the signs git right.
FLOYD: But hit already frost, Maw.
MRS. ALLEN: That don’t make no never mind. Scorpio ain’t outen his eighth house yet, and the zodiac don’t lie.
FLOYD: Social worker say the almanac don’t know.
MRS. ALLEN: Social worker say a heap aside her prayers. She edicated. (18)

Folk practice is used for medical purposes as well as planting; Uncle Smelicue claims, “My rheumatism’s kinda calmed down sinst I been totin’ them horse chestnuts around in my pocket” (9).

The folk culture also incorporates a good deal of singing and dancing. Folk ballads and traditional hymns appear throughout the play, which draws its heroine’s name from a version of the traditional ballad, “Barbara Allen.” 27 When Barbara
cannot finish singing it, Smelicue warns, "Hit bad luck not to finish a song," one of many superstitious beliefs he expresses in the play (12).

A strong belief in dark supernatural forces is also part of the culture of Buck Creek. Religion is seen as a weapon against witches, but the witches are seen as having great power, too. It is as though witches are an inevitable part of nature in Buck Creek. When the night of the dance is stormy, some see more in it than lightning and thunder:

ATKINS: Hit ain’t no natural night fer a dance.
MRS. BERGEN: You right thar, Mr. Atkins. Like I said to my husband, hit more like a night fer witches to fly.
MR. BERGEN: Don’t you go startin’ on that, Gabby Bergen. That ain’t no way fer a Christian to talk. (9)

And as the sky grows darker later in the scene, conversation turns to the supernatural again:

EDNA: The clouds is mean and black-like. This ain’t no night fer dancin’.
ATKINS: Hit jes like the night Agnes Riddle were kilt.
HANK: Hit the gawd’s truth, Mr. Atkins. Hit were plumb like this. The clouds was low on the mounting, and a hoot owl was a-screechin’.
MRS. BERGEN: Hit shore a night fer witches to fly.
MISS METCALF: Don’t talk about hit. Hit make me feel quare. (15)

Dark supernatural forces are again associated with the weather in the final scene of Act I:

MR. BERGEN: Frost come early this year.
SMELICUE: Hit a bad sign, a bad sign. Frost in September, a death afore November.
HANK: Aw, folks is a-dyin’ most anytime. [He laughs]
SMELICUE: Hit ain’t no laughin’ matter, son. You hear what I'm a-sayin’. Things is a-happenin’ that ain’t the will a Gawd.
MR. BERGEN: Why, ain’t nothin’ happenin’ without Gawd first a-willin’. All He gotta do is make up He mind.
SMELICUE: But thar still some several that got the jump on Jesus. They got the powers a darkness, headin’ straight from hell.
ATKINS: You ain’t wrong thar, Uncle Smelicue.
SMELICUE: I know what I'm a-sayin'.
BURT: You right, Uncle Smelicue. They got the powers a darkness headin' straight from hell. (32)

The people who are gathered in the general store go on to discuss the grave-robbing of Agnes Riddle and who they suspect could do such a thing:

SMELICUE: Ain't no doubt about hit. Hit were a witch, as shore as the Lord.
ALL: Hit were a witch, all right, hit were a witch!
BURT: I'm skeered!
MR. SUMMEY: Why, thar ain't nothin' to be skeered about. Ain't you been saved by the grace a the Lord Jesus Christ?
BURT: Yeah, but witches they is different. They kin conjur folks. and a-chase 'em and a-hound 'em and a ride 'em till they're dead. (33)

The preceding dialogue might read as foolish superstition on the part of unenlightened people were it not for the fact that Richardson and Berney establish the existence of witches before ever introducing the townspeople. In the play's first scene, John asks the Conjur Man to make him human. The Conjur Man tries to explain that the change would be more difficult than John thinks:

CONJUR MAN: Thar more difference than you know. They got souls and go to heaven. They gits born, and live and die.
JOHN: I was born, too, Conjur Man. And I'm gonna die.
CONJUR MAN: No, you ain't gonna die, witch boy. You jes' like all the other witches. You git jes' three hundred years, and then you nothin' but mountain fog. (2)

The Conjur Man tells him that work is harder than he thinks, and that no matter how much he enjoys the singing he will not be able to go to church:

JOHN: I could go thar if I wanted. I could go be sanctified.
CONJUR MAN: Witch boy, listen at me talkin'. Witches can't be changed completely. Thar's allus somethin' 'bout the witch they wunst was that's left inside 'em. That thar somethin' can't be changed. Hit lies sleepin' thar inside 'em, sleepin' and a-dreamin'
a the days he was a witch, dreamin' a the nights he rode a-screamin' and a-cryin' 'gainst the blackness a the sky. And thar jes' one thing that wake him, and that the Lord Gawd Jesus.

JOHN: I ain't skeered a no Gawd Jesus. I ain't got no truck with him. (3)

Ultimately the Conjur Man refuses to change him, but the Conjur Woman agrees on the condition Barbara be faithful. She warns him of the difficulties he'll face, too:

"But yer eagle, he'll still be thar waitin' fer you — waitin' and a-longin' fer the night when you come back. You'll miss the moonlight. As long as you're human you'll never see the moon. You'll get so sick and tired of earth" (6).

But John is convinced he can make the change work. When he appears at the dance, he obviously still has some powers beyond the human because he uses them to fight Marvin Hudgens and to keep rain from falling on himself and Barbara as they dance in the storm (14, 16). Barbara realizes she does not even know his name:

JOHN: But we met afore, Barbara Allen. The night the wind came up and the moon went dark. Remember?
BARBARA: I remember. And thar ain't no moon tonight.
JOHN: And thar a wind. [Pause.] My name John. (16)

Barbara realizes that is the same name in the ballad she was singing. John asks why she stopped, and she explains that she does not like sad songs, but John sees hope for the outcome, arguing against pessimism just as he did with the Conjur Man and Woman:

JOHN: Hit don't have to be sad. You never know the endin' till hit sung plumb through.
BARBARA: Then we'll make hit a gay one, and sing our own endin'. (16)

But singing a happy ending will prove impossible. The warnings will all prove true.

In keeping with mountain fatalism, the ending is largely beyond their control.
Fatalism is also reflected in the Allen’s acceptance of a virtual stranger chosen by Preacher Haggler as their son-in-law. Mrs. Allen does not allow her husband to question the solution to Barbara’s predicament, insisting it is the right one “if Preacher Haggler say hit the Lord’s will” (27). And later in the play when Barbara wakes to find her baby was stillborn, Mrs. Allen shows that same sense of fatalism in her choice of comforting words: “I’m sorry, honey. The Lord he give, and the Lord he take away” (50).

Religion is important to the Allens and to the rest of the town, and John’s inability to attend church presents problems. When he mentions the Conjur Woman in passing, it upsets Barbara, who had assumed John’s world view was as Christian as hers:

BARBARA: You got stay clear a them conjur folks if you and me is married. The blood a the Jesus Lamb give us all the power we need.
JOHN: No Jesus Lamb blood gonna hep me out.
BARBARA: Ain’t you a Christian?
JOHN: I reckon not.
BARBARA: I ain’t never knowed no one who weren’t a Christian afore.
JOHN: You mean you won’t marry me lest I’m washed in the blood?
BARBARA: I didn’t say that, did I? Thar time enough later fer you to git salvation. Jes’ so you love me, that all I ast. (29)

When filling out their marriage license, Preacher Haggler says John must put down his age, and John’s answer leads to a discussion that reveals how important salvation is to becoming a part of the community:

JOHN: I’m twenty-three, then. But if things work out, I’ll git eternal life.
HAGGLER: Amen, brother. That a fine way fer a Christian to talk. . . . You been baptized, ain’t you?
JOHN: Nope, I ain’t never been baptized.
OTHERS: Ain’t never been baptized?
HAGGLER: Have you been sprinkled?
JOHN: Not as how I remember.
HAGGLER: I pray to Gawd fer the Holy Ghost to move you.
     We be havin’ a revival in another month.
MR. SUMMEY: Amen, Preacher Haggler. Holy Ghost’ll git him
     when you start preachin’ hellfire, sin and damnation.
SMELICUE: He be right thar on the mourner’s bench, shoutin’
     halleluiah and a-callin’ to he Gawd.
ALL: Amen, praise be holy name, halleluiah, etc. (40)

The people are shocked when John insists he and Barbara be married there in the
general store rather than in the church, but Preacher Haggler agrees to it as long as he
can perform a Christian ceremony (41). Haggler says a long prayer, and Barbara
bows her head along with the others: “John looks at her in surprise, and in growing
fury at the others, who are getting the spirit of salvation” (41). Finally, John
“explodes” and interrupts the prayer, demanding that Haggler hurry and finish the
ceremony (41-42). The crowd is horrified when they see that the ring John puts on
Barbara’s finger is the very one believed stolen from Agnes’s corpse by a witch (43).

Before the wedding, John won a bet by easily lifting a barrel of apples to his
shoulder with one hand. Some of the people who had dismissed Marvin’s claim of
John using lightning against him begin to suspect the worst after seeing him perform
this new feat:

MISS METCALF: Look! Hit the doin’s a the devil.
HAGGLER: Ain’t that somethin’ else!
MARVIN: What I tell you ’bout spell? [He runs out the door.]
HANK: He got the powers a darkness. (38)

Obviously the events at the general store raise suspicion in the community.

Barbara tells him that people at church have been saying he is a witch. Barbara begs
him to come to church and prove them wrong: “But if you jes’ do hit wunst, John.
Jes' do hit wunst and git fire from the Lord. Git washed in the blood and saved by the grace, and then they know fer shore you ain't no witch” (46). But John says that that is something he can never do, not even for her. Barbara reaffirms her trust in him and promises never to ask him again (46).

Even John's few defenders are unable to deny the physical evidence of his true nature discovered when Barbara's baby is delivered. Mrs. Summey tells Barbara's mother that the "young un" was born dead and that in her fifteen years of midwifing she has never seen anything like this before (49). Mrs. Allen is upset to hear Mrs. Bergen has taken the baby to be burned, but then the women explain why:

MRS. BERGEN: Hit warn't no baby, Miz Allen. Hit were a witch.
MRS. ALLEN: A witch?
MRS. BERGEN: Ain't no baby ever looked like that. Hit were black all over and didn't have no face hardly, and hit arms was all twisted like the claws of a bat.
MRS. ALLEN: Like the claws of a bat!
MRS. SUMMEY: John a witch, Miz Allen. Ain't no doubt about hit. He a witch shore enough, and he done spelled he own wife. (50)

They burned the body because a witch cannot have a church funeral or burial. Mrs. Allen is upset when they tell Barbara the baby was not human, as she was hoping to postpone the bad news until Barbara was stronger (50-51).

Preacher Haggler arrives and they all pray over Barbara. Barbara refuses to believe John is a witch, so they pray for God to take away her sin and make her repentant (52). John arrives and angrily demands that everyone leave (53).

Earlier, Mrs. Bergen had guessed at an explanation for John's absence: "He out ridin' with the eagles. He out diggin' in the graveyard" (51). While he was not doing that, he was at least thinking about it:
I can’t explain, Barbara. You wouldn’t understand. But sometimes after plowin’ all day in the sun, I jes gotta go somewhar alone when hit night — somewhar far off, whar hit dark and black. So I go to Old Baldy. Up thar on the mounting. I look at them stars, all them planets a-twistin’ and changin’ out thar in space. Then I know that this’n I’m standin’ on, hit ain’t so much, hit little, hit twistin’ and changin’ too. And I wanta be somethin’ more’n jes’ that! So I pretend that things is different, that I ain’t the same as I am in the day. (54)

At last he admits to her that he was a witch when they first met, but promises that he is human now and “the next time we have a baby hit’ll be a human fer shore” (54). He also explains his bargain with the Conjur Woman about Barbara’s fidelity (54). His honesty about the terms of the agreement will be his undoing.

The fourth scene of the second act is a full-blown revival at the Buck Creek Church of God. The scene features singing, praying and many other elements of mountain religion. Those who have sinned go to sit on the “mourners’ bench” when they feel moved by the Holy Spirit to repent (59, 65). The congregants use the phrase “convicted of sin,” terminology common to mountain churches. The congregation is very vocal in responding to Preacher Haggler’s statements and in the their own contributions to the service. Many mountain churches do not follow a precise order of service, but let the spirit guide their expressions of worship. The leaders and congregation often “line out” hymns and chants in a call-and-response style common in small mountain churches.

In the later scenes of the play, characters both human and witch repeatedly assert that it is the will of God that Barbara be saved and betray John. Before the revival scene, the other witches tell the Conjur Man that Barbara will “git redemption” at the revival and that John will be a witch again because “hit the will a
heaven” (58, 57). As Mrs. Allen physically pulls Barbara into the church, Preacher Haggler remarks, “Hit the will a Gawd. Lord carry He sheep right into the fold,” and Mrs. Allen explains: “Hit tuck a fight, Preacher Haggler, but the Lord won out” (60). Barbara is defiant as her mother prays for God to break the spell and save her soul, and lets slip the condition upon which John may remain human. Immediately Preacher Haggler pressures her to leave John with the same tactic he used to encourage the marriage in the first place: “The Lord He speakin’, in a mighty voice. The Lord He tellin’ me what to do! . . . Barbara Allen, you a handmaiden a Gawd. You got to hep this valley and rid us of a witch. . . . You gotta break the spell and change him back” (67). But Barbara still loves John and continues to resist the urging of the congregation. The pressure increases:

HAGGLER: You can’t go agin the will a Gawd. The Lord He speakin’ in a mighty voice.
MARVIN: Preacher Haggler! Preacher Haggler! I come here tonight to repent a my sin, but the Lord He tell me hit ain’t no sin.
GROUP: Ain’t no sin. Ain’t no sin.
MARVIN [As Barbara watches in growing horror.]: I come here to repent a sin a lust. I been lustin’ after a married woman, lustin’ fer the flesh a Barbara Allen. But the Lord He tell me hit ain’t no sin.
GROUP: Ain’t no sin. Ain’t no sin. (68)

Barbara tries to flee, but the congregation traps and surrounds her as Preacher Haggler orders her to get on her knees and “hear the voice a the Lord” (68). They continue to press in on her and chant religious phrases until she breaks down and begs God to take her sin away (68-69). Then they basically force her to accept Marvin’s advances:

HAGGLER: Marvin’s here to hep you, jes’ turn to him.
MARVIN [coming down to Barbara, who is sobbing]: That right Barbara, hit the will a Gawd.
[He picks her up and holds her against him despite her attempts to make him release her.]

GROUP: It the will a Gawd! The will a Gawd!
MARVIN: Feel my arms around you. They fer comfort and joy. (69)

The congregation shouts “Halleluiah” and “she saved by the grace a the heavenly Lamb,” as the two “sink to the floor” (69).

When Barbara goes to look for John on the mountain, even the witches tell her about the will of God:

BARBARA: But I gotta see him. I gotta explain.
DARK WITCH: Ain’t no explainin’ the will a heaven.
FAIR WITCH: Ain’t no explainin’ that to a witch. (70)

When she finally does find him, she discovers the witches are right:

BARBARA: I couldn’t hep it. They made me do hit. They said it were the will a Gawd.
JOHN: The will a Gawd. I don’t know that. I ain’t no Christian. (74)

John can’t even promise Barbara he will try to find her in the afterlife, as she asks him to once she knows she must die. He has to tell her, “I can’t promise that. A witch got no soul. Three hundred years, then jes’ fog on the mountain” (75).

He does, however, promise to take her wedding ring and wear it forever. He speaks with great and genuine emotion about how much he will treasure the memories of his life as a human with her (75). Barbara apologizes for spoiling the ballad, but John assures her, “Hit ain’t spoiled. Hit jes’ ends sad. What matters is the singin’, and hit still a good song” (74); however, as she dies in his arms and the moon reappears, he gently puts her down, saying, “Hit the end a the singin’. Ain’t nothin’ left. None a the words” (75). Barbara’s song has died with her. What for her was her life itself, for John is fast becoming just an old song that is fading
quickly from memory. After a few longing glances back at Barbara, he gives away her ring to a female witch and even pushes her body with his foot as he turns to run back toward his life as a witch (76). The gulf between humans and witches is just as wide as the Conjur Man had warned, and both the power of religion and the powers of darkness have ironically conspired in Barbara’s tragic death.

*Dark of the Moon* has enjoyed repeated success at the box office, despite the doubts of critics dating back to its 1945 premiere. The play makes heavy use of dubious dialect and stereotypes, but at the same time seems to have captured for audiences the magical qualities they associate with the folk culture of the mountains. Certainly audiences do not generally believe that witches really ride the night sky in Appalachia, but, like any good story of the supernatural, the play allows them to safely confront their fears about dark forces beyond their control in the context of a region where superstition is portrayed as an integral part of the culture. And, while it might not be of the highest literary caliber, the play entertains, which helps account for its original success and continued frequent revival.

*The Love Talker*

Deborah Pryor’s *The Love Talker* was first produced as part of the 1987 Humana Festival of New Plays at Actors Theatre of Louisville. It was directed by Jon Jory and starred Suzanna Hay as Bun and Lili Taylor, who would go on to become a well-known and critically acclaimed film actress, as Gowdie (3).

*The Love Talker* is set in the present in the Clinch Mountains of Virginia. The characters are fourteen year old Gowdie Blackmun, her twenty year old sister, Bun, and two supernatural beings, the Red Head and the Love Talker.
Bun and Gowdie live in the woods in a very old house; all of the action takes place in the house and its small yard, which show signs of having been protected against spirits with various folk techniques. The Red Head points dramatically at the house to begin the action.

Gowdie enters and draws a suggestive picture in the dirt. When Bun realizes what she's drawn and sees that Gowdie has not brought back the “osh taters” she was supposedly digging, she is suspicious. When she quizzes Gowdie, the girl tells her how a rabbit led her through the woods to a springhouse in a field. The interior was covered with sexual drawings of men and women, and when Gowdie looked at herself in the water, the springhouse disappeared. Bun urges her to forget the entire episode.

When Gowdie is alone, the Love Talker appears to her briefly, then the Red Head tells her not to be afraid. Bun returns armed with charms to ward off evil spirits, and lectures Gowdie about the danger she is courting. Bun sends Gowdie to bed wearing a charm, but Gowdie removes it and removes all the charms from her room and opens the door. The Love Talker comes to her.

The next morning, Gowdie is washing herself when the Red Head tells her the seduction she experienced the night before was not a dream. The Red Head tells her that the Love Talker will return, and jams her thorn wreath down on Gowdie’s head. Bun wakes and knows Gowdie has let something terrible into the house. She tells Gowdie that their mother let it in, too, and that she has to stop.

Later, as Bun reads an old book on how to defeat spirits, an invisible force, presumably the Love Talker, touches her in a frightening and sexual way; she uses
charms to stop it. Gowdie has been out drawing pictures of the Love Talker all over the woods, which terrifies Bun because their mother did the same thing.

When the door bangs open and other sights and sounds herald the Love Talker's return, Bun flees to hide under a blanket in the yard. There, she grabs the Red Head by the hair and demands to know the Love Talker's name. The Red Head tells her if she looks him in the eye and says his name in his ear three times he will be gone forever. The Red Head and the Love Talker try to tempt Bun so she will not use the name, but they do not succeed.

When Gowdie arrives home looking half dead like their mother once did, she begs Bun to let the Love Talker come back. Bun ties Gowdie to the bedposts and makes herself look like attractive bait for the Love Talker, who freezes her in a tight circle of light. Meanwhile, the Red Head goes to Gowdie, tells her she must choose the Love Talker over Bun, unties her, and leads her into the woods.

Bun manages to say the Love Talker's name in his ear twice, but on her third try she is spellbound and kisses him instead. As he runs off laughing, she warns that she still knows his name. As Bun tries to restore the charms, Gowdie returns and kills Bun with a mattock. The Red Head stands up, and Gowdie looks over her shoulder to see the Love Talker appear in the door as the lights go down.

Like Dark of the Moon, The Love Talker concerns a young woman who is "bewitched" by a supernatural being, but this time the story is without well-intentioned romantic love, and instead of the seducing spirit longing to become human, he seems to want to bring the girl into his world of darkness.
The play also has echoes of other well-known tales of initiation in its folk elements. A brown rabbit first leads Gowdie off the path and to the springhouse, just as a white rabbit lured Alice into Wonderland in Lewis Carroll's classic children's book.\textsuperscript{32} And in order to save Gowdie, whom she often refers to as her "baby," Bun must say the Love Talker's name to him three times, just as the heroine in Rumpelstiltskin must learn the magical gnome's name so she can keep her first-born child.\textsuperscript{33} References like these place the story in a centuries-old worldwide tradition as well as in the tradition of Appalachian folklore and myth. They also locate Appalachia and its people in a mythic place separate from contemporary reality and its constraints, even though the play is explicitly set in the present (4).

As in the other plays in this section, superstition is part of the fabric of life in Bun and Gowdie's world. Bun's first lines establish how such beliefs have been handed down through the generations. The cows have given very little milk: "They all got blue tits, too. The old people used to say it means Something's been sucking them dry" (6). The capitalization of "Something" tells us that the word is meant to indicate some unnamed spirit rather than serve as a vague reference to a more mundane culprit; it is analogous to the capitalization of "God."

Bun often refers to her grandparents when discussing how to fight evil spirits like the unnamed "Something." The charms she hangs all over the house when she realizes what Gowdie has become involved with are "Grandma's old charms" (10). As she hangs the charms on the walls, door and bedposts, she recites a sort of spell, telling Gowdie, "Grandma taught me that before I was three. Don't you undo a one of them. No telling what you been calling up" (11). She lectures Gowdie about the
many forms taken by “things that would wait all day for the chance to hurt you” (11). Last on her list is, “something like a old man, only brown-leathery and haired all over, following you ten paces behind and stopping when you stop. It got in Granddaddy’s car once. He booted the thing out. That’s what I say, boot ’em all out” (11). When Gowdie says she doesn’t know if she would “boot them out,” Bun says “I’m glad your grandma ain’t alive to hear that talk” (11). Although Bun is only twenty, she plays the role of the older generation in their little two-person family, telling “bugger tales” from the oral tradition like Verna Mae Slone’s elders did to teach children to behave; but these “buggers” are all too real. Bun learned from their grandparents how to deal with evil, but there is no one but Bun to teach the vulnerable Gowdie.

Grannies are very important to mountain folk culture. The term is often used for wise, older midwives who were revered and held the “most respected position for females,” and carried important knowledge of folk beliefs and medicine; Ted Olson notes, “More empowering were the regional beliefs which encouraged midwives to believe they could magically control the forces of life and death.” Mountain culture often sees its senior females as sources of great knowledge transmitted by oral tradition. Even Bun and Gowdie’s grandmother learned about the supernatural from a grandmother figure: “She and her sister went to this granny that lived over the ridge to get their fates told. And the granny touched spit on Grandma’s eyes and not her sister’s” (11). On the way home, the sister sees a beautiful little chair in the woods that their grandmother could not see, and when she leaves the road and sits in it, it turns out to be “a big nest of brownie spiders” and their grandmother has to
rescue her. Bun says, "That granny’d set your Grandma’s eyes so she could see it
was a trick. Them People couldn’t never pull a thing over on her from that day on”
(12). Bun also turns to “a worn, handwritten book” for ways to defeat the Love
Talker. Perhaps it is a book left behind by her grandmother, or at least by some wise
member of a previous generation (16).

Bun has a definite, healthy fear of the “old people in the woods,” as the worn
book calls them (12). She warns Gowdie: “Tricks and glamour. Food-stealing,
empty-handed-jealous baby-switchers. They can take one look at you and know
what’s written on your last page. . . . It ain’t good even to speak of them” (12). She
fears them because she was well-taught by her grandmother’s generation, but also
because their mother failed to heed those warnings and Bun is old enough to
remember how terrible the consequences were. When Gowdie asks, “Did Mama
ever see one?” Bun replies, “God knows what she saw” and refuses to say anything
more about it (12). Later, when she realizes Gowdie is still calling the Love Talker
to their home, she tells more in a desperate attempt to save Gowdie. When Gowdie
says he was nice and that Bun doesn’t know anything about it, Bun reveals: “I know
his voice sure enough. . . . Mama let him in. When you was a baby. I hid in my
room and sat up all night holding you in my lap, listening to her laugh and him trying
to get in, pressing on my door like the wind bellying a sail. You put us in danger.
You got to slam the door in his face (16).” But Gowdie continues to seek out the
Love Talker, who by now is also aggressively pursuing Bun while invisible (17).
When Bun tries to explain to Gowdie why she must stop, we learn why she
immediately recognized Gowdie’s sexually explicit drawings as a sign of a problem
that goes far beyond the need for a talk about the birds and the bees: “You want to be like your mama? . . . When Daddy died her eyes got dark. She holed up in the back room, rocking, facing the window. . . . And she called Something. . . . He killed her. He turned her mind til she went milk-white from wanting him. I was the one who took care of you! . . . She drew things on the walls I had to scrub off every day ’cause if you looked at them too long they made you crazy” (18). Bun says their mother even cut “nasty” images into stumps and branches everywhere: “I hacked down every one I found and burned it” (18).

Bun is prepared in advance for dealing with evil spirits, probably as a result of her mother’s encounters with the Love Talker. She uses the sorts of charms, spells and incantations David Hackett Fischer describes as old world survivals in *Albion’s Seed*. The house bears signs that it has been “spirit-proofed”: “Into the lintel wood above [the door] are carved a row of crosses. The door knob has been painted red. The windows all have red thread or yarn tacked from top to bottom of the sills” (5). Bun has a cardboard box in the house filled with “ash-wood crosses, red ribbons, bunches of dried yellow flowers,” all charms to be used against supernatural beings (10). She even knows a sort of chant that instructs her how to use them:

Cold steel they cannot stand,  
Crosses made of ash,  
Rowan berry, red thread,  
Nor knife in door may pass. (10)

She uses knives as charms as the poem suggests. As she and Gowdie prepare for bed, “She takes a big knife from the cupboard and lays it on the floor in front of the
front door with the edge facing out” (12). Later in the play, when the invisible “Something” is touching her, she uses blades like a charm to make it stop: “She grabs a pair of big iron shears from a corner, opens them in the form of a cross and lays them under the bed and sits on it. The touches stop” (17). In the play’s final moments she tries desperately to restore the charms in the house, and unwittingly provides Gowdie with a handy murder weapon: “Bun starts hurriedly back to the house, grabbing the mattock from the yard. She spits on it, places it in the doorway: a charm” (28).

Often, religion seems to go hand-in-hand with folk magic, as with the frequent use of crosses as charms. But prayer is also a weapon against evil. The first day she knows Gowdie has met the Love Talker, Bun tells her before bed, “Forget what you seen today and you’ll be happy. And say your prayers so the light comes back quick” (12). On the second night when the chum bubbles over, the walls creak, the door flies open and the noise signals the arrival of the Love Talker, Bun flees from the house and prays: “Father father father, deliver against all wild things, all runners in darkness and tricking spirits, night-whisperers, dream-pressers, things there but not to be seen — !” (19). The next night, when she is locked in fierce battle with the spirit, he has her trapped in “a tight little circle of light,” disoriented and in a panic. Again, she turns to prayer:

Father-father-father, deliver against all wild things, all runners in darkness and tricking spirits, night-whisperers, dream-pressers, things there but not to be seen, crawlers in the leaf mold, the rager with dark blood on its face, the love talker that touches the brain with cold and burns the body, from these deliver me. All creation is in your power and all these dangers you made too. [She stops, frowns.] These you made . . . too. (26)
Her prayers do not save her from the Love Talker. The final words of her prayer hint at a God who refuses to save her from “dangers” because for some reason he created them. Perhaps the danger of the Love Talker is sexuality itself, perhaps the dark side of spirituality. But in any case, religion is reduced to a set of charms and rituals that ultimately cannot protect against dangers seen or unseen.

The Love Talker comes almost as a dark messiah, delivering a perverse gospel of otherworldly sexual passion for which one must sacrifice one’s soul, and, if necessary, even the lives of one’s dearest family members. When he first appears to Gowdie, he seductively says only “I have good news for you, Gowdie Blackmun,” as his annunciation before turning out the light beside her bed (13). Gowdie says the next morning that it seemed the feeling of floating might be bad, that she might not come back; desire has not yet completely overtaken her sense of danger (14). The Red Head recounts the previous night’s events to Gowdie in terms that evoke Biblical anointing and the idea of being born again or transformed by a spiritual power: “He poured the running oil of gladness over your head, in your eyes, down your throat and between your breasts. . . . he called you to come out of the old skin” (14). But what follows sounds much more ominous and violent and much less like a resurrecting encounter with the divine: “And at first . . . you held on to the bed post. . . . But you let him drag your soul right up from the bed and when he dropped it, you fell for miles back onto the mattress. But not back into the little girl. She’d shrunk like a curl of ash. You were humming like something lightening’d struck alive” (14). Even the message she delivers from the Love Talker promising his
return reads like a passage from the Song of Solomon: “He says: you’re prettier
than the apple tree in the west corner of the yard” (14). The Red Head’s final gesture
before parting is to jam a crown of thorns onto Gowdie’s head, causing her great pain
(15). At the end of the play, the Red Head reminds Gowdie, “He didn’t promise
pretty. He promised you everything” (26). When Gowdie asks about his promise of
good news, the Red Head indicates to Gowdie that she will die if she doesn’t kill
Bun because, “That is the good news, creature. Him or her. You got to choose”
(27).

Despite supposedly being set in the present, Bun and Gowdie’s world seems
primitive, almost mythic. In this play the Appalachian landscape is filled with
mysterious ancient powers of a supernatural quality, and is peopled with characters
that seem to have stepped out of a pre-technological time in America’s rural past. It
is difficult to imagine such a tale being set in an urban apartment building or a quiet,
but well-populated suburb, unless perhaps it were told by Stephen King. But an
American audience, even one as sophisticated as that attending the Humana Festival,
where The Love Talker premiered, is much more willing to accept the existence of
dangerous and powerful ancient magical beings in an Appalachian setting.

The Love Talker is artfully written and if staged well can be a mesmerizing
theatrical experience. It creates a magical, frightening world where supernatural
forces always lurk in the shadows waiting to devastate human lives. It does not even
remotely portray contemporary life in Appalachia accurately, but it does not purport
to be realistic or documentary. Pryor’s choice of the region as the locale for what is
supposedly a contemporary tale of terror and unearthly lust speaks powerfully to
Appalachia’s mythic place in the American consciousness and its function as a primitive, dangerous other upon which the nation may project its darkest fears.

"Don’t Ye Put no Stock in Witchery; Put hit in the Bible": The Battle between and Blending of Superstition and Religion

Although David Hackett Fischer and Verna Mae Slone both see folk magic as a phenomenon separate from mountain religion, many writers do see an important interaction between folk practice and religious tradition in the mountains. Jack Weller writes that “it is really difficult to separate religion and culture,” especially in the Holiness and Pentecostal sects that he says meet the particular needs of the lower social and economic strata of mountain society. He sees mountain religion as encompassing “the basic belief systems that operate in this culture, whether they be particularly Christian or not: the value systems, the things that people hold dear and that are accepted by faith, the cultural assumptions, etc.” In his typically condescending style, Weller goes so far as to says that mountain people see the Bible as a “magical book,” which:

results in a folk religion, not in a Biblical Christianity. This folk religion is based on sentiment, tradition, superstition, and personal feelings, all reinforcing the patterns of the culture. It is self-centered, not God-centered. Folk prayer becomes a tool to serve my needs and to help me. The folk church becomes a group whose main purpose is to reiterate the accepted religious ideas and to satisfy personal ego needs, not to bear a witness or do a work for God.

Ted Olson does not discount folk traditions as illegitimate forms of religious practice, but his chapter on customary folklife includes “religious rituals and ceremonies, folk beliefs, social customs (for rites of passage including birth, courtship, marriage, and death), holiday celebrations, festivals, dance and games.”

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Some of the practices he examines are footwashing, full-immersion baptism, “signs following” practices like snake handling, superstitions about the weather, planting by astrological signs, faith healing, midwifery, and unique Christmas traditions.  

Verna Mae Slone does indicate some degree of tension between religion and folk belief in her description of how her father refused to allow his children to believe in “haunts” or “buggers,” which many parents used to frighten their children into obedience: “We were taught to be good because that was what Jesus wanted us to do. He told us there was a Devil, but not one you could see with your natural eyes.”

This tension between the power that comes from a Christian God and the power people invest in folk magic receives more prominent attention in the theatre than in sociological or historical texts. In this section I will discuss two plays that illustrate how the intersection of folk belief and Christian religion has been portrayed in works written for the stage: Percy MacKaye’s 1924 Timber and Romulus Linney’s 1987 Heathen Valley.

Timber

Percy MacKaye’s Timber was written in the early 1920s and published in the three-play collection Kentucky Mountain Fantasies in 1933. The play is set inside a cabin “in the Kentucky mountains at the present time,” which would be the 1920s (110). The cabin belongs to Clabe Vanover, “an old bee-man” (110). Other family members are Granny MacNab, Clabe’s sister; Nancy, Granny’s daughter-in-law; Timber, Nancy’s son; and Margit, Timber’s wife.
As the play opens, the family waits by the fire for Timber to come home as axe-strokes and the crash of falling trees are heard in the distance. We learn from the dialogue that many men have died serving the timber industry, including Nancy’s husband and Timber’s father, Clyde. Nancy named her son Timber and had a “charm-doctor” christen him with a spring of witch hazel he carries at all times in the hope of protecting him (113-14). In spite of this “insurance” Nancy still worries because it is “the thaw-time jist settin’ in,” which can be dangerous (114-15).

Clabe tells a lengthy Genesis-like parable in which he depicts the long line of deaths as punishment for the “Eden gyardin despiled” by logging (123-24). Then the family hears an avalanche outside, and Nancy is sure Timber is “agoner” (124-25). Granny faints and Clabe helps her as the others rush outside. He is the only one who sees a stranger in goggles who appears for a moment in the doorway.

The women return, and the pregnant Margit prays that God let her baby be a boy so she can name him Timber after the husband she fears may die. The family rejoices as Timber walks through the door, covered in slush, but alive.

As Part II opens, Timber tells a fantastic tale about his brush with death. He claims to have dreamed a dream in an “eye-wink” as he and his mules tumbled (138). In the beginning of the dream he was sitting under a tree with Margit nearby. Then a wingless angel wearing yellow goggles appeared and took them in an automobile to a place called Paradise Park; his description of the bright lights makes his mother conclude he may have been dreaming of a trip he made to Memphis. He responds, “Nay, hit were more hivven than Mimphis” (143). He describes a structure like a beehive with men instead of bees working in it. Inside, he describes people sitting in
the dark watching silent events shown on a cloud. His mother guesses this is one of the “pictur movies” she’s heard of (144).

Then the “cherubin” took him in an elevator to the “Paradise Roof-Gyardin” where men and women danced to jazzy music (144-45). Just as Timber was refusing to let the “angel feller” dance with Margit, he came back to reality as his mules hit the icy water, and they weathered the avalanche (145-46). Timber attributes his survival to his mother’s “witch-wood” charm, which pleases her (146-48). Clabe, on the other hand, credits God and the “white-popple,” and warns Timber to trust the Bible, not magic (150).

When Margit is alone with Timber, she asks about Memphis and whether Paradise Park was there. She asks to go to Memphis, and he says if he goes he will not take her, but she persists until he says he will not go at all. She makes him promise never to go anywhere without her by his side.

Margit goes to get the coffee, and Nancy enters, asking her son not to go anywhere without her again, either. As she comes in and out of the room, he sneaks drinks from a flask, and soon begins to sing and use his prized hazel sprig to strum the food trencher as if it were a musical instrument. The mysterious visitor with the goggles appears in the doorway and Timber leaves with him in order to talk business at the still, trailing Margit’s knitting wool behind him as far as the door. Margit enters and is very upset to find her baby blanket unraveled. Nancy enters and sees the untouched coffee and spilled food and knows her son must be drunk and gone to the still. Then she sees Margit with the hazel sprig he left behind and accuses Margit of stealing it from him.
Two women and the goggled visitor enter carrying Timber’s body. The stranger disappears, and the women explain the stranger is the keeper of Paradise Park and was “drivin’ business” with Timber when the automobile flipped and the iron axle crushed Timber (170-71). Nancy feels reassured that iron, not timber, killed him, and returns the hazel sprig to Margit, asking her to lay it with him. Margit vows to christen her child Timber with the same magic charm, just as Nancy christened her husband at his birth.

Religious imagery pervades Timber. As the Vanovers listen to the trees fall in the play’s first scene, Clabe says, “They never stops drumblin’ that-a-way, like hit were the ole Deevil studyin’ on the first fall” (112). Clabe equates honey with manna from the Bible (112). These kind of references are most typical of Clabe’s speech, but can be found in the lines of other characters throughout the play as well.

Although the characters in Timber seem familiar enough with the Bible to view many elements of their world as analogous to elements of biblical stories, their faith seems blended with and sometimes surpassed by their simultaneous belief in superstition and magic, not unlike the sort of corrupted, self-centered folk religion described by Jack Weller. Nancy’s precaution to spare her son Timber from the “curse” of death that seems to haunt the male members of the family is a perfect example of the blurring of magic and religion:

Named him Timber I did for to take the old spell off. I sended for the charm-doctor the day he were borned. He tuck the sprig of a witchhazel what he cut him in the dark o’ the moon, and he jist tetchet the babe with thyt-thar sprig three times — skelp, loins and heel — and he christened him Timber thar in the Three Highest Names. . . . Ye see, that kindly blood-kinned him with the tree tribe.
Hit tuck the spell offen him. So hinceforthly he cain’t be hurted, nothin’ in the world, by nary thing what’s borned of the timber stock. (113-114)

Nancy may put her faith in magic, but Clabe firmly represents an opposing view. He, like Verna Mae Slone’s father, puts faith in God above all: “Never mind her, what-all she says. Hit ’tain’t no charm-doctor kin turn the vingence of the timber. Hits rootses goes down more deeper yit and grabbles the Word o’ God hitself” (115). This opposition between the power of God and the power of magic is crucial to the play.

Seen through Clabe’s eyes, magic is but a feeble attempt on the part of humans to avoid the wrath of God, which they have brought upon themselves by putting their own worldly desires ahead of God’s wishes. Clabe describes the abuse of natural resources by the timber industry as a second fall from Grace. He tells Margit: “‘Keep offen my timber,’ God he says to old Adam and Eva. ‘Yander Tree and hits fruitses is mine. Don’t ye nivver despile hit! Beautiful on this airth hit is. Go your ways. Here and yan, back and forth, you kin squanter wahr ye likes in the world, only mind ye this: — Don’t nivver dar’st to spile my timber!’” (116). He retells the story of the Garden of Eden from Genesis to a puzzled Margit, then adds his own chapter:

Man he were damned nigh on six thousand year. All the whiles he never got another chancct to repent till financiously he come to Amerikee. Then God he turned him in his heart, and he says to man: “Man, ye poor damned critter, I’ll chanct ye onct more.” So God he onbarred his gyardin agin, and led man in, on up, and sot him down in the middist of the Kaintuck mount’ins. And ri’chere the same hit were bloomin’ still, His beautifulest timber: the timber of knowledge of his ontameless wonders. (117-118)
But the second Eden does not come without conditions; in Clabe’s tale, God
tells man:

“You’re here for to talk with me, under my timber. You’re here for to
commune with my Sperrit, not to despile hit. You’re here for to shape
your dreams to the likes of mine, and mine are revealed in this-yere
mountainy world ondespoiled. — Amerikee: yere’s my new gyardin
“Build ye a new world here, but build hit accordin’ to my beauty.
Ilsewise I’ll distroy ye ag’in — for a corruptin’ canker-worm and no
kin o’ mine!” (119)

According to Clabe, God was sitting under a poplar tree, or “popple” as he calls it,
descended from the stock of the tree in Genesis, a tree that served Clabe well as a
collector of honey: “Clabe hisself war New Adam in Eden gyardin, but onlonesome.
Rich kin and neebors he had, and all honey-raised. Our bee-gums feeded our folkses,
and God’s white popples feeded the bees. — Yea, Margit: White Popple she were
Queen of Amerikee, whin me and your Granny us were your age. Then lo and beholt
— the gret fall!” (122). Clabe says the second fall came when Satan “despiled” the
garden. He explains: “Hit’s a parable, Margit. Yan sarpent he were jist old Sattan
in the shape of a lumber contractor” (123). Clabe believes God has punished
humankind again because they destroyed the forests in exchange for a pittance from
the wealthy lumber industry (123-124).

After they hear the sound of the avalanche, a confused Granny MacNab asks
who is outside the cabin, and Clabe, as usual, reads the events in religious terms:

CLABE: Sattan.
GRANNY: [Dazedly] Is he comin’ in here?
CLABE: Yis.
GRANNY: Visitin’ here?
CLABE: Yis; evenly to the third and fourth gineration. (127)
When he sees the goggled visitor in the doorway, again, he sees him through the lens of his parable, and calls to Granny: “Sis! Did ye seen hit slippin’ by? — Ef thot-thar were the same old Sarpent, he wored frog’s eyes in his haid” (129).

When Margit fears Timber has been killed in the slide down the hill, Clabe tries to comfort her as she prays. Her prayer reflects the mingling of magic with religion that she shares with Nancy:

Godamighty! Godamighty! Let that hit be a man chile — like him. . . . Let that I can name it Timber — like him. . . . Let that I git to charm-cure mine the day of hits borndin’ — like Maw-Nancy done hern! Yea, let that mine and hisn mought grow to bloom gloryful — like him, my man! Dear Godamighty, amen! (130)

When Timber returns alive, Clabe says, “Lor’ be! — Jedgment has riz him!” (133), but Nancy credits magic rather than God: “Charm-curin’ has riz him afore Jedgment! Hit’s me, his Maw, what kin blast the trump for Gabriel” (133). Timber seems to agree with his mother, even asserting that “charm-curin’” is more powerful than God: “I had God agrabblin’ one shin o’ me, and Old Horny the t’other. But I skun loost o’em both, thanks be to my christ’nin!” (133).

At the beginning of the second act, Timber recounts the “dream” he had as he fell. It bears striking resemblance in many ways to Clabe’s parable. It begins in an Edenic setting with Timber and Margit enjoying a day in the natural beauty of the mountains. Timber is sitting under one of Clabe’s beloved “white popple” trees and bees are swarming all around (139). Then, “plumb betwixt us thar drapped outen the tree boughs a leetle quar two-legged angel feller, and him wingless. . . . He were one o’ these-yere Bible cherubins. Pieded he was as a wild turkey rooster, and preened hisself slick and chesty, toe-steppin’ like a bantam. And clippit round his forehead
he wored big, roundy, yaller goggle eyes” (140-141). Clabe startles at the mention of
the goggles, connecting the “angel feller” with the devil in the doorway. It is fitting
that Timber describes a Satan figure as an “angel feller” without wings, as Satan is
typically identified as a fallen angel. When Timber tells how the “tree-drapper”
offered to take them in his car to a new country if they were interested in “wanderin’
for pleasure,” Clabe makes the association with Satan explicit: “Old Sattan shore got
ye in his divvil-waggon” (142).

The stranger takes them to “Paradise Park,” an urban landscape filled with
earthly pleasures. It is so clearly representative of contemporary urban America that
Nancy even guesses it is a memory of a trip Timber made to Memphis; but he
claims, “Nay, hit were more hivven than Mimphis” (143). Timber tells of a brightly-
lit structure the stranger called “Eden Timple”: “Painted hit were — black and rid-
scarlet, all over — with Mother Evas, withouten nary a fig-britch” (143). Finally, the
stranger takes them to the roof:

“Hit’s Paradise Roof-Gyardin,” he says. “Jine in!”
Well, right thar Margit, you was stumped. The hivven-made music
was jazz-razzlin’ hit, and thar wint the Injun-painted Evas and
Adamses clinch-steppin’ in pairs, swarmin’ and scuttin’ thick as
chinch-bugs on a sick-abed preacher.
“Won’t ye dance, lady?” says the angel feller, nosin’ at
And jist as I were liftin’ up for to lamm his snout, whin I heerd a
roarin’ like as Jedgment was under me, and “Co-oop!” I hollered,
“Co-oop, yes hell-damn mule brutes!” (145)

This final part of the dream just before Timber returns to reality is a scene of
temptation. Satan in the form of the goggle-wearing stranger is tempting man, not
with an apple or with fifty cents a log for timber, but with the modern, urban

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temptations of a speakeasy. The scantily clad, heavily made-up women, the wild
events in the silent films and the couples “clinch-dancing” (155) all are contrary to
the traditional culture and fundamentalist religion of Timber’s mountain home.
Satan is a bootlegger, not a serpent or a lumber baron, in this third re-telling of the
fall.

Timber does not credit God with his survival, but even hears the sound of the
avalanche as “God hollerin’ Whoa!” (146). Instead, like his mother, he believes his
life was spared because he was charm-doctored and carries his hazel sprig (146-147).
Clabe cautions him:

Old Sattan mislicked ye this time, and I’s God-thankful for ye. But be
wareful, boy. Don’t ye put no stock in witchery; put hit in the Bible.
The Bible knows what busted your log-skid this day. . . . What did
done hit — you was setting right under her in your dream. Yan angel
feller draped outen her boughs thar. The white popple done hit —
and she’ll git to do more yit. (150)

Clabe views Timber’s dream less as a wild tale and more as an allegorical vision: a
warning from God like the dream in Revelation.

Margit explains Clabe’s idea about the second fall to Timber, and when she
mentions the fifty-cent temptation out of context, Timber reacts with ridicule: “Fifty
cints! — Poor ole bee feller! He’s gittin’ nutty as a chinkapin. That sittles hit. The
Bible kin wait. I’ll resk my chanct on witchery” (151-152). Margit agrees that Clabe
is “gittin’ moughty old-timish” and wants to hear about the “up-and-comin’der”
ways of Memphis (152). She has been won to the side of witchery and has been
hooked by the temptations in Timber’s dream, perfectly in keeping with her role as
Eve in the impending “third fall.”
When a drunken Timber has left for the still in the visitor’s “divvil-waggon,” the women find a mess left behind (164-166). Margit picks up the forgotten hazel sprig, looks at it “intently” and asks, “Is they witchery in the Bible, Maw-Nancy?” (167). Nancy says yes, but Clabe insists the Bible does not endorse it (167). Nancy is horrified when she sees the sprig, even accusing Margit of stealing it, because she fears Timber is unprotected without it. Clabe argues with her that the sprig is meaningless next to God and the Edenic “white popple” (168). He warns, “This time, hit’s bringin’ the third fall” (168). Nancy refuses to listen to him, so he says, “Listen at God, then,” and “makes an eerie gesture” (168). Clabe and Margit have heard a rustling sound coming, and they listen as it grows nearer. In her terror, Nancy says, “O Lor’ Mighty!” (169). However, when the people bearing Timber’s body explain that the axle killed him, suddenly witchery has power for Nancy once again: “Yea, iron! — The timber wouldn’t never tetch him! ’Twarn’t my doin’s. Lay hit back to him, Margit — the hazel sprig” (71). Once she has the hazel sprig, Margit “starts from her wild dumbness, and speaks to the body, low voiced, in a strange ecstasy,” promising that Paradise Park will never take their baby as it took him, and neither will timber because she will christen the baby with the same sprig (172).

Nancy and Margit have missed Clabe’s point, and only Granny listens to him as he speaks the play’s ominous final lines:

GRANNY: Did he come yit, visitin’?
CLABE: Yis.
GRANNY: Is he goned?
CLABE: [Slowly] Yis Granny. — But he’ll be back ag’in! (173)
In the battle between the Bible and witchery, witchery has won with the women. But Clabe sees God's judgment in the events. He sees man the eternal sinner, refusing salvation for pleasure, falling again and again.

MacKaye's play uses thick dialect, often almost unintelligible when read on the printed page, and portrays Appalachian people as highly superstitious and sadly unsophisticated in their world view. However, the play does weave together a complex and compelling fabric of religious and supernatural imagery in its cautionary tale about corruption and exploitation within the region. MacKaye had a strong interest in using folk materials to spin poetic tales about several of America's regional cultures, and *Timber* clearly reflects his extensive travels in Appalachia in search of folklore and inspiration while he was writer in residence at Miami University in Oxford, Ohio. MacKaye understood the coexistence of religion and folk belief in the region and the mountains' role as exploited periphery better than most playwrights of his time, even if the result of his investigation is sometimes unflattering to Appalachian people.

**Heathen Valley**

Romulus Linney adapted *Heathen Valley* for the stage from his own 1962 novel of the same name, which was loosely based on the history of a mission founded at Valle Crucis, North Carolina in the 1840s. It was given a staged reading at the Denver Center Theater, then produced by the Philadelphia Festival Theater for New Plays in 1987, and in its final version at the Milwaukee Repertory Theatre in 1988; both full productions were directed by the author. The Milwaukee production
won the National Theatre Critics Award for an outstanding new play in the resident theatres of the United States (3).

*Heathen Valley* is set in the Appalachian Mountains of North Carolina in the 1840s. Its action is narrated in flashback style by Billy, who is described as “a man of any age” who also plays himself as a younger person throughout the play (4). He names the other characters, who join him on stage as the play opens, and says he must “find [them] again, from the beginning” (7).

In the first scene, we see the Episcopal Bishop of North Carolina hiring William Starns, “a plain, homely, awkward drifter, in his thirties” from the mountains near Boone and Blowing Rock, to be his church janitor (4, 8). He once led a rough, wild life, even killing a man in self-defense, but has since reformed, though he is not at all a religious man. The Bishop enlists Billy, an orphan who attends the church’s school for boys, to teach Starns to “read and write and study the government” (8).

Soon, the Bishop hears of Heathen Valley from a botanist who traveled in the mountains, and he asks Starns and Billy to come help him begin a ministry there. As the Bishop, Starns and Billy arrive, Starns recalls how many families used to live in the valley, but can’t remember how they killed each other off. As the people of Heathen Valley are introduced, the reports of their wild and troubled existence prove true. The local people do not receive the Bishop very well, so Starns steps in, explaining who he is to Juba, the very midwife who helped with his birth.

When the Bishop expresses horror at the local midwife’s assertion that the people in Heathen Valley are just fine without law or religion and they would sooner...
shoot him than have his church, Starns steps in to help the Bishop explain how a mission might be a good thing for the valley. The Bishop focuses on more spiritual ways of helping the people, but Starns is more practical, wanting to “give them a decent life,” so he agrees to be ordained a deacon, in spite of his doubts about Christianity (20).

Starns helps the people in many practical ways, even if his methods are not quite in keeping with the church’s. He solves many of the social ills and personal problems of the people, and accommodates their folk beliefs in his ministry. Meanwhile, the Bishop has given the mission work lots of publicity in big cities, and finally comes to visit, pleased to find that Starns has helped the place become a more healthy, happy community.

As Act Two opens, Billy narrates as Starns gives his detailed report to the Bishop. The Bishop is concerned that the mission’s work has become more about the community than about God. The Bishop demands that they focus on God instead, and begins by banning work on Sundays. Then he demands that everyone at the mission wear cassocks like medieval clergy. He prays in Latin, and has the children sing in Latin as well. These strange ways do not sit well with the people and they begin to fall away from the mission community. The Bishop walks away from the mission because he thinks it does not serve God, and goes to Rome to convert to Catholicism.

After the Bishop leaves the Episcopal Church, the funding for the mission is cut off, and despite Starns’s pleas for the people to continue, they leave, and Billy
tells him he is only a tenant and janitor and must obey the church's orders because it
owns the land.

Starns takes ill and has to live in the grist mill. As he watches the people
regress, he dies yelling in despair. As the curtain falls, Heathen Valley has become a
bleak place again, and Billy wonders where he will ever find another place to call
home.

*Heathen Valley* pits organized religion against folk practice, and for a brief
time, in Starns's mission work, the two combine to create a better life for the people
of Heathen Valley, but it does not last.

The Bishop has purely religious goals from the moment he describes the
place he wants to save:

> A valley, closed in by ridges, where the few people . . . have forgotten
their religion. Evidently, they live dreadful, primitive lives, debased
into savagery. They are violent, carnal and heathen. At Christmas,
Gray said, they celebrate the nativity in drunken riots, feuds, and
sexual orgies. He called the place Heathen Valley. I am going to
climb those mountains, find those people and take them to the Word
of God. (9)

The Bishop uses Starns as a liaison to the people of Heathen Valley, and without his
help probably would not only have failed to establish a mission, but also have been
killed on his first visit.

From the start, what the Bishop sees as a religious problem, Starns sees as a
socio-economic one. When they arrive, they find people who believe in witches,
ghosts, charms and spells, who commit acts of incest and murder, and who dislike
interference from the outside world. Starns tries to explain: “Bishop. It is true we
are way up the mountain. It is true hard things happen here. But that is not because
nobody is heathen savages or no kind of foolishness like that. They are just poor. Poor folks have poor ways” (17). Juba tries to explain the independent nature of the people that will surely doom the Bishop’s mission:

Bishop, nobody here has forgot the church. We just wish we could. Once upon a time, we know we come here to git away from churches. I can’t tell you when or just why, but we did. The worst of them was called the King’s Church, and people here hated it. There may be a Bible or two around, and a body or so, like me, thank ye, who kin read . . . but no schools, no sheriffs, no Bishops, no Kings, and thank God, no churches. (17)

Despite even a threat of death, the Bishop insists the mission be founded. He has Billy sing the Doxology as he pontificates about how great the church will be. But he is still focused on God and on his own goals, not on the more mundane needs or wants of the people he has come to save (18-19).

In fact, he does not plan to stay among the people to do the hard labor himself, but to leave it to seemingly ill-equipped underlings while he raises money and achieves personal fame. Billy the orphan is willing to stay because he so desperately wants the feeling of family and home he hopes it will bring him. And Starns agrees to be made a deacon and run the mission for his own reasons, too: “I still got trouble believing virgins ever have babies. But Bishop Ames, of the Christian Church, poor folks have poor ways. Mine do here. If you can give them a decent life, then I will believe what you believe. I will serve you as best I can, and ask you to take a sinful man into your church today” (20).

Once the Bishop leaves, the mission work is driven less by his concern for the people’s souls than by Starns’s concern for the people themselves. Starns explains his role to them: “I’m a missionary. That’s half preacher, half hired
help” (21). Starns solves problems by working with the people and the beliefs they already hold rather than judging them and trying to force them to worship in the “right” way. When Harlan, who makes no distinction between religion and “charms and spells,” objects to building a church because devils and witches live in church corners, Starns builds an eight-sided church that has no corners (23). Starns teaches the “half-wit” Cief how to make a comb, then wins Juba, the midwife, to his side by giving it to her (24). When Grandpa Jacob believes that he is being haunted by a “demon” razorback hog that will kill him, Starns does not try to dissuade him from that belief. Instead, he gets the hog drunk and asks that it be slaughtered after Grandpa Jacob sees the incapacitated beast (25-26). Starns strengthens Cora and Harlan’s relationship by rescuing their baby from choking; Harlan had neglected her while trying to hide her from his late wife’s ghost (26-27). When a traveling preacher makes hateful remarks about women from the pulpit, Starns bodily throw him out (29). Starns himself is “the worst preacher in the history of religion,” yet he makes do by reading haltingly from *The Confessions of Saint Augustine* every Sunday (28). He allows Juba to tell tales of Old Bertha the witch in order to get people to love and baptize their illegitimate children, and he even blesses charms for Harlan. He accepts as progress the reduction rather than elimination of behaviors like promiscuity, infidelity or incest. Starns makes whatever compromises need to be made in order to build his congregation, accommodating rather than condemning some of peculiarities of their way of life.

By the end of the first act, the people have formed a real community and are participating in communal sacraments like funerals, weddings and christenings.
Starns himself has begun to truly believe in God, not because of the Bishop’s otherworldly ideals, but because of the people of Heathen Valley. Starns prays: “I give You thanks . . . for my own, on this earth” (32), while the Bishop declares, “This is only a beginning . . . Earth will lead us to heaven” (32).

Three years later, the Bishop is making his perfunctory annual visit to “his” mission, and balks when Starns recounts the year’s accomplishments to him. He is pleased at the sacraments performed, but questions both Starns’s compromises and the need for a clinic or social activities: “It is for the glory of God, not for a settlement of farmers, that we are here” (33). The Bishop thinks his focus is on God, but in reality his mission work is very self-centered. He was raised by atheist parents and proving them wrong became his life’s work:

BISHOP: I knew I would find God while I lived, and for that day, for that moment, all my life on earth was only a preparation. All my studies in school, nothing else. All my advancement in the churches, nothing else. All my good works, nothing else.

BILLY: And all that happened here, nothing else? Only a preparation for you to find God?

BISHOP: Exactly! Look no further Billy. This is why everything had to be as it was. (35)

The Bishop does not believe in human happiness or achievement: “It does not really exist. Human life, by itself, is nothing. Worse than nothing. It is dirt” (40). He tries to transform the mission into a model of a medieval monastery, complete with Latin prayers and cassocks: “This cassock teaches us humility. It makes us look the same before God. The way to salvation is to become no one, for God” (41). But it is still not enough for the Bishop, and the strange practices are driving the people away from the church. The Bishop abandons the mission and moves his personal quest on
to Rome and the Catholic church: “I was first a Baptist, then a Methodist, then a Presbyterian, then an Episcopalian. None of it was enough” (44). Harlan sums it up as having “left one set of spells, joined another” (45).

When the Bishop leaves the church, the church pulls out of the mission in political embarrassment. Starns’s hard work crumbles around him. The people leave the church and return to the way they were before, for the most part. But Starns cannot go back. He has found a real faith somewhere in the mix of charms and folkways and religion that the people practiced. He had tried to tell the Bishop that the message had to come from something that was meaningful to their lives: “I can’t say here’s Almighty God with a Daddy-white beard, sitting on a golden throne divided in three parts of some Trinity while a Virgin never touched goes and has his divine baby and then turn around and tell them they are a-living in some barbaric illusion” (37-38). He argued that their ways were not lesser in the eyes of God, as people like the Bishop or Jack Weller might believe, because they were less formal and more emotional: “Mountain people ain’t religious like you are. They feel it! They worship! But they don’t bend no knees. It ain’t in their nature!” Starns cares more about the present in his community than about historical church practice (41). He puts people ahead of God because they need him, but God doesn’t (44). He confronts the Bishop about his true agenda: “Maybe you love God, all right, but you shore don’t love us” (43).

The Bishop lectured Starns that “God is not fellowship! God, Starns, is love!” (44). Starns disagrees strongly:
Whatever God is, that he ain't! Because I know what that is! That is my square, scored off beams, set so flush an ant can't get between. . . . That is Cora's hand on my shoulder, and Harlan decent for the first time in his life. You can't fool me about God and his love. That is up there in the thunder and the rain somewheres. It ain't my brother's hand. It ain't my sister's song. I know what love is. (44)

The Bishop thinks God's love is not human in nature, but Starns sees love as something that must by its very nature be human. And when the people lose the fellowship of the mission, they lose God and much of the personal progress they had made.

Some critics condemn Heathen Valley as dangerously insulting to the Appalachian people it portrays. Daniel F. Hurley says that, while Linney claims to dislike the stereotypical depiction of hillbillies, "his aversion to this stereotype, however, has seemingly led him to invent instead characters, relations, and events that include nearly all of the slanders against isolated mountain people ever invented by their contemptuous, fearful, and fascinated urban chroniclers." He notes that "Incest, moonshine, whiskey drunkenness, impenetrable ignorance, superstition, and recurrent, bloody, 'rifle gun' violence are standard-issue hammers in the hillbilly-bashing trade, and they are all here in Linney's play (and even more richly in his novel)," and he sees this as a dangerous part of the play's appeal: "If Linney's works cause stereotypes to become more firmly embedded in our general cultural consciousness, the harm done is less to the memory of the long-dead settlers of Valle Crucis than it is to living mountain people." He sees the play's treatment of women as especially negative, and sees its underlying thesis that the bishop "made
no mistake in coming to this place but only in leaving it” as “ethnocentric” and
inviting invasion of the region by “superior” outsiders:

America has a long history of improving the lot — and controlling the behavior — of its minorities (women, for example) and isolated subcultures (small mountain settlements, for example). It is a history worth investigating, no doubt, but not for the purposes of middle-class “tragic thrills” or a nostalgia for a barbaric female depraved “other” that never existed.46

Despite Hurley’s valid criticisms, Heathen Valley does have some positive things to say about genuine community-building efforts that work from within the existing culture’s traditions instead of trying to erase that culture in favor of something totally foreign and supposedly “better,” like the Bishop’s pseudo-Catholic, pseudo-European impositions on the church and school. Linney’s play confronts complex issues and is thought-provoking and dramatically interesting despite its too frequent reliance on negative, degraded stereotypes of Appalachian culture.

“Power that could Lock a Serpent’s Jaws”: Rituals of “Signs Following” Pentecostal-Holiness Churches

Snake handling is a comparatively rare practice in the mountains, but it garners a great deal of attention because it is sensational and controversial. Thomas Burton notes that, while serpents have been symbolically important to many religions since ancient times,

Serpent handling by Christians in modern times, however, has been evidenced for less than a hundred years, although contemporary adherents trace their belief to the words of Jesus to his disciples immediately prior to the ascension as recorded in Mark: “And these signs shall follow them that believe; In my name shall they cast out devils; they shall speak with new tongues; They shall take up serpents; and if they drink any deadly thing, it shall not hurt them;
they shall lay hands on the sick, and they shall recover” (16:17-18). Because of the initial words of this text, serpent handlers are often referred to as “sign followers.” They consider themselves simply Christians who are following the will of God.47

George Went Hensley is generally accepted as the founder of the “signs following” movement. Hensley began handling snakes after he said he had a vision from God in 1908 telling him to interpret the passage from Mark literally.48 Other “signs” practiced by the Pentecostal-Holiness sects who believe in them are speaking in tongues (or glossolalia), touching fire in the form of hot coals or a torch, and drinking poison, usually strychnine.49 Ted Olson explains that at these services “collective emotion would be raised high by a combination of religious music, preaching, testimonials (often spontaneously delivered)” and glossolalia, and then the handling would begin.50 Those who participate in these rituals believe that they will be kept safe from harm if their faith in God is strong enough.51 Not only are snake handlers not deterred by laws forbidding the practice, but, Burton notes, “An especially compelling quality of most serpent handlers is that they are willing to die for their beliefs. Not only are they willing, they repeatedly verify that commitment directly and concretely.”52 Snake handling services are such powerful experiences that, while researching Salvation on Sand Mountain, author Dennis Covington even took up serpents himself.

Obviously, the danger and spectacle of snake handling make it attractive material for performance, and a number of plays have made use of that dramatic advantage. Robert Schenkkan of Kentucky Cycle fame has recently written his first full-length play since his 1992 Pulitzer Prize; it is entitled Handler, and in it he
returns to his controversial examination of Appalachia, this time on the subject of snake handling. *Handler*, not to be confused with the Jane Martin monologue of the same name, which will be discussed in this chapter, premiered at Actor’s Express in Atlanta in 2000 and has not yet been published.53

In this section I will discuss two well-known plays that feature snake handling: Romulus Linney’s 1971 *Holy Ghosts*, and the monologue “Handler” from Jane Martin’s 1982 *Talking With . . .*, a play made up of a series of monologues for women.

*Holy Ghosts*

Romulus Linney’s *Holy Ghosts*54 was first performed in 1971, had its first New York production in 1973, and had numerous regional performances, including one directed by the author at Houston’s Alley Theatre in 1983, after its publication in 1976. It was brought to New York again in a production by the San Diego Repertory in 1987 (3).

It takes place in the Amalgamation Holiness Church of God with Signs Following, pastored by Obediah Buckhorn, Sr. It is a simple church by contemporary standards: “a one room clapboard house located off a highway in the modern south. Some battered folding chairs are stacked against one wall” (5).

Nancy Shedman has recently joined the church after leaving her young husband of one year, Coleman. Coleman arrives with his attorney, Rogers Canfield, who has come out of retirement to handle his request for a divorce from Nancy. They discover Nancy is already engaged to Obediah Buckhorn, and when Buckhorn’s son Oby arrives, Coleman mistakes him for Nancy’s intended. Nancy
recounts how, on the night she met Oby, Coleman came home drunk and angry, as was his habit, and passed out while attempting to make love to her. Nancy complains that she wants a baby and, after a year of this pattern, feared they would never have one. As she stood naked and crying in the living room, praying for a sign, Oby appeared in the open doorway, asking for a match to light his campfire. She dressed and went with him to help cook his trout. They talked about Jesus, and Oby comforted her as she told him about her marriage. Oby helped Nancy move out, and took her to see his father for counseling and a place to stay. Coleman is shocked to learn that it is Obediah, Sr., not Oby, who has proposed to Nancy.

Coleman becomes even more unsettled as he meets the members of the church: Carl Specter, who is haunted by his beloved murdered bird dog; Cancer Man, who is terminally ill just as Coleman's own parents once were; Orin Hart and Howard Rudd, two rugged blue-collar workers who after years of drinking and fighting and unhappy marriages to women, found love with each other; Bonnie Bridge, who slept with any willing man in every previous church she attended and who was blamed when her sister died trying to handle snakes; Mrs. Wall, who was forced out of her role as a Methodist Sunday School teacher after thirty-one years because the new pastor had more progressive ideas; Muriel and Billy Boggs, a young couple who married because of an unplanned pregnancy and are overwhelmed by the responsibilities of marriage and parenthood; Lorena Cosburg, a timid woman who is visiting the church without her disapproving family's knowledge; and Virgil Tides, a young boy who brings in the snake boxes, reads the verses from Mark regarding "signs following" to begin the handling, and speaks in tongues. The pastor's son,
Oby, is a simple, childlike man who works at a bowling alley and sees a connection between bowling and Jesus.

Nancy is distressed when Coleman’s prying questions reveal that Reverend Buckhorn has had six previous wives, not two as she had thought. Five of the six died (the other ran off), partly from the strain of working to raise Buckhorn’s seventeen children. Nancy explains how Buckhorn and his church taught her to trust again after her dreams of married life were shattered by Coleman; but once she learns more about Buckhorn’s marital history she doubts that marrying him is the solution to her problems. Coleman tries to win her back, promising everything would be different this time. But he strikes her in a flash of anger just moments after promising he never would again. Carl, Canfield and Cancer Man each gently confront him and Coleman breaks down, sobbing for his dead parents. In the intensity of the religious ecstasy that follows as the congregation works the signs, Coleman, like Canfield, is converted. Nancy, however, is ready to move forward with her life, and leaves, promising to visit again someday. Muriel, holding her baby, sings a hymn about mercy as the lights go down.

James F. Schlatter sees Linney’s play as an attempt to “reclaim the rejuvenating power of the southern revival meeting through the collective action of theater.” For Schlatter, the play is remarkable for its ability to make the audience feel a connection to something as presumably alien to their experience as a snake-handling church: “Linney invites his audience to step into the light that encircles his characters and his play and to become converts in the redemptive power of theater. An audience may enter his church/theater as unbelievers, ready perhaps to smirk at

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these evangelical hillbillies." But, Schlatter notes, even prominent critics like Frank Rich, who might be the toughest audience to sway, are moved and inspired by *Holy Ghosts*. Linney himself says the religious elements in his plays, and particularly in *Holy Ghosts*, are not a result of any interest in religion itself on his part, but of the pervasive influence of religion in his native South: “People under the stress of religion are brought to a pitch of human passion and emotion rather more quickly. . . . I didn’t like church, but I loved it when an evangelist came to town in those days . . . . these people needed some kind of strong support, and these evangelists gave it to them.” He sees the raw emotions in the play as the key to its success with very diverse audiences:

*Holy Ghosts* works really quite well when the audiences are sophisticated, such as in colleges. Or once I saw a Puerto Rican audience in New York, and they all came in speaking Spanish, and I thought, “I’m dead, what are they going to care about southern Pentecostal people?” Well, they understood it immediately. The same things go on in their churches, the same emotions, so they got it.

Coleman Shedman serves as a sort of surrogate outsider through whom the audience experiences Reverend Buckhorn’s church; in fact, he is probably even more of an outsider and more intent on staying one than audience members might be, which makes his conversion all the more powerful. He is skeptical at every turn, even before he realizes midway through the play that they are snake handlers. He is a stranger not only to this church, but to any church. He arrives cursing profusely at Nancy and anyone else who crosses him, and objects when Oby repeatedly calls him “Christian”: “Don’t call me no Christian. I’m not one” (8). He mocks Nancy’s desire for “a Christian honeymoon” (12). His behavior is so out of place that when
he says, “God damn it, Nancy,” Bonnie Bridge recognizes him without introduction: “Oh, Nancy, it is your husband” (20).

Coleman is suspicious of everyone’s motives. When Nancy describes how she saw Oby in the doorway the night she left, Coleman asks, “Doing what preacher? Whacking off?” (14). He wrongly accuses Reverend Buckhorn of misusing his role as pastor: “I know what you really want, preacher. And you’ll use snakes, elephants, anything that moves to get it. It is now time, friends, for the holy offering! That’s what you want! Gimme, gimme!” (31). He also accuses Buckhorn of sexually manipulating Nancy (24). Coleman is disrespectful during the service. When the congregation responds “Amen, brother,” to Buckhorn, Coleman shouts out, “A-fucking men, and how, brother” (23). He takes Canfield’s whiskey bottle and drinks from it, and Canfield scolds, “Put that away, son. We’re in church” (25).

Coleman questions the sanity of the congregation as well. He cannot imagine why Cancer Man would go to church rather than a hospital (21), though it is clear from Cancer Man’s dialogue that the two are not mutually exclusive. When Buckhorn compares Muriel and Billy’s baby to the infant Jesus and the congregation gathers around the baby to sing “Fairest Lord Jesus,” Coleman says they are “not all right in the head,” and asks Canfield, “What are they doing up there, pretending that damn baby is Jesus? I tell you, something is dead wrong about this whole thing” (27-28). When Virgil politely delivers boxes marked “shotgun shells,” which, unbeknownst to Coleman, actually hold the snakes, Coleman asks Nancy, “What the hell kind of strange kid was that?” (10). He reacts to Carl’s visions of his dead dog as madness from the first moment he hears of them, and later says to Nancy: “Is that
man crazy or is he not?” (42). When she says he is not, Coleman insists, “He’s a lunatic. And you all know it” (42). Coleman says he would not turn to Jesus, but take revenge on whoever killed the dog (43). Canfield chides Coleman: “Client, the man didn’t do what you’d want to do. Does that mean he’s crazy?” (43). Coleman is especially troubled by Orin Hart and Howard Rudd’s loving relationship. He cannot understand why no one else is bothered when they embrace and kiss, and asks Canfield, “But what are they doing in church? Why ain’t they in a bus station somewheres?” (41). He is shocked by Canfield’s answer: “Lots of men love another man, somewhere along the line. I did, once. It didn’t hurt nobody” (41). Finally, Coleman attacks them: “Fruits ain’t always like girls. They can look like truck drivers, and be queer, my Daddy always said. I don’t care about your damn story. You’re fags, using a church to fuck each other. It wasn’t no Holy Ghost that annointed you” (45).

But the thing that bothers Coleman most about the church is their snake handling. He argues that it is against the law and potentially deadly, but that does not matter to Buckhorn or his followers (31). He calls them maniacs (30), and begs Nancy: “Come on with me. I’ll get you out of this craziness. I want a divorce, but I don’t want to leave you in no insane asylum” (33). When Hart and Rudd threaten him, he says, “So beat me up. I still say this is a sideshow. . . . I won’t be put off by lunatics in a circus!” (46). He not only doubts the sanity of the church members, but the validity of the practice of snake handling itself. The moment he discovers they handle, he wants to know, “Well, what’s the trick? There’s got to be one. You drug them snakes? Or you milk them first? Or what?” (30). Later Buckhorn asks how
Coleman can still mock their church after hearing testimony from members, and Coleman, shaken and almost crying, continues to maintain, "Because you’re fakes. My Daddy would know. What you do with them snakes is a lie. Unless you want somebody to get bit, and die. You drug them, or something. And then you go crazy in here" (46-47). Not only does Coleman think snake handling is dangerous and illegal, but it violates his very view of the world. He claims he can see the truth better than the others can:

This crazy religion is a lie, Nancy. It just ain’t true . . . . I won’t lie to myself! With everything else wrong about him, my Daddy taught me to see life as it is! And it is mostly god-awful hard! That’s the truth. Never mind snakes and Jesus. We just have to grow up, and grit our teeth, and face it! . . . I don’t whine, or cry, or beg help from Jesus, like a coward. (49)

Coleman makes a case against snake handling, but his statements are balanced by Buckhorn’s rebuttals. When Coleman first questions their practices, Buckhorn explains:

You are right in this, Mr. Shedman. Many question us. Write articles in newspapers. But the truth is, we only do what God plainly told us to do. It is right here in the Bible, in the words of the Lord. Yet other churches say it isn’t. Why they can’t read, I don’t know. But we can read. We know what we need, and what we want! (31)

He addresses Coleman’s legal arguments by reminding him that “state law is not the last word,” and that they are left alone because state governments are reluctant to get involved with issues of religious freedom (30-31). When Coleman says they must either be fakes or want people to die, Buckhorn shows him a photo clipped from a newspaper of a key figure in the history of snake handling:

The white haired man on the floor was named George Hensley. In nineteen hundred and nine, on White Oak Mountain, he was the first
to read in the Bible, “They shall take up serpents,” and then go out and do it. He founded the Dolley Pond Church of God, With Signs Following, in Tennessee. He founded this church, in nineteen forty-eight. Yes, people have died. Laws were passed. And we are still here. (47)

Coleman’s comment about the church wanting people to die upsets Bonnie because she was blamed when her sister died handling after Bonnie brought her to church. Her graphic tale of how her sister was bitten when she ignored Bonnie’s warning “not to move without the power” speaks to the dark and dangerous side of working the signs. Bonnie’s sister refused medical help, insisting she would trust that “her faith in Jesus Christ would save her life” (47). The church tried to respect her wishes, but Bonnie’s account shows they did not wish death on her: “We prayed with her. She commenced to swell. Her color changed. We made her go to the hospital. But that night Jesus took her. [She weeps.] She’s with Him now, in heaven” (47). But, as with George Hensley’s followers, Joann’s death does not diminish Bonnie’s faith, despite the wrath she faced: “Awful things were said about me. My own family tried to have me arrested. But I’m still here. I still worship in this church! [She weeps.] Some people say I killed my own sister! It’s not so! I brought her to God! I brought her to God!” (47).

Buckhorn makes another speech strongly defending the practice of handling, and it is the final word from him on the subject before Coleman finally witnesses the power of handling for himself:

We are persecuted. We are against man’s law. George Hensley, who led us to his church finally died, and of snakebite. But he’d been bit and lived over four hundred times! [Passionately.] You don’t believe it? All right, don’t! Lots of people like you say we’re crazy, to need this worship this strong this bad! But we do! That is our nature! The
Lord Jesus understood us, and in his own sacred word, he told us what to do. [He points to the altar.] You see that jar? On the altar, by the cross. That is strychnine poison. If your faith in Jesus Christ is strong enough, you can drink that, and live. That’s what the Bible says, and that’s what we believe, whether you do or not! Stay here, if you want. But don’t let me hear you say anything more about a circus! (47-48)

The snake handling and other signs worked in the service give the people of Buckhorn’s congregation a profound sense of divine power, and many cite that power as what drew them to the church and saved their souls. Mrs. Wall tells of her search for religion after leaving the Methodist church: “I couldn’t find my religion anywhere. I went to a baseball stadium, to hear about the Lord. But it was religion I wanted, not baseball preaching. All empty smiles and no power” (34). But at Buckhorn’s church, she found that power: “I don’t need to teach children miracles anymore. I found the miracles here. I always believed them, and I was right” (34).

Bonnie’s life was changed when she says she finally found “a real church. Stronger than anything. That’s what I wanted to tell Joann. What happens here” (40). She tells the meek Lorena as she approaches handling for the first time: “The first time I seen the snakes, I nearly died. I couldn’t run. I couldn’t move. I stood there, praying. Then the Holy Ghost gave me the power” (54).

Lorena has felt enough power just from listening outside the church night after night that she has found the courage to attend the service, in spite of her utterly powerless place in life: “My husband tells me what to do. My children tell me what to do. Delivery boys and clerks at the five and ten tell me what to do. The only time I ever crossed anybody in my life was coming here tonight. I want to know what you believe” (36). She wants to handle, too, by the end of the service. Bonnie describes
the numb, cold, itchy feeling she had in her hands when she first felt the power to handle, and when Lorena says she has it, Bonnie says, “Then if you have the power, grab him” (55). Mrs. Wall seconds, “It’s the best feeling you’ll ever have!” (55). All three of them handle the snake together as they “scream with pleasure” (55).

Many of the church members experience the power of handling as a victory over death. When Coleman reacts negatively to the idea of handling, Carl tells him, “You don’t understand. When something is real, then something is real” (31), and later explains how his dead dog began appearing to him after he started attending the church: “When we pray to Jesus, and the serpents are taken up, she’s here. And so I live again, in the blood of Jesus, who conquers hateful men, and gave me back my darling in this church. I praise his name forever” (42). Buckhorn recalls how he connected with the power: “I remember! I thought I would die. But the heavens came open, and wave after wave of God’s love broke over me! I held the serpent, and I spoke in tongues!” (52-53). Cancer Man tells Coleman while handling a serpent: “You see! I’m still alive! They said my life was over! But I feel the power of the Lord. I hold the serpent! I defeat him! God gives me this victory! I feel wonderful. And see. The snake is still” (53).

Orin Hart tells how, in a desperate attempt to save him from his violent urges, Howard Rudd brought him to church at gunpoint, saying, “I heard about a place where crazy people play with death, and rattlesnakes. If that’s what you want, we’ll do it there” (45). And the experience is so powerful that both men are utterly transformed; Hart recalls:
I thought no other man could yell and scream like me. But when the serpents appeared, I'd never seen nothing like it. And the worship. . . . And I said, "Oh, this torment will end, or I will!" In the music and the singing, I said, "Give it to me! Jesus Christ, you know my evil heart. Give me that snake, you know I want it!" And I took one up. I held my death here, in these hands. And of all the people in the world that night, the Lord annointed Orin Hart (45).

Later in the service, Billy faces death and asks for power after confessing his pain over resenting his own baby. He admits he is scared, but will handle anyway: "I can be free. Lord Jesus, anoint me. Give me the power. [He takes a deep breath.] I believe. I’m not afraid. [A hideous rattle. He takes out a huge rattlesnake. He holds it directly in front of his face.] Strike. Kill me, if you can" (53-54). But the snake does not, and Billy cries out in praise of the Holy Ghost (54).

Unlike Nancy, who says she was able to trust again because she felt "safe at home again, with [Reverend Buckhorn], and the church, and the serpents” (50), Coleman connects with the power of the signs through the danger of death in much the same way Hart and Rudd did. When Carl tells him, “God is my father. Everybody’s here, but yours. He is Jesus’s father, too, and His right arm is the Holy Ghost. You’re still praying to your mortal father who’s dead. That’s bad,” then Canfield says he’s joining the church because “to find friends like this at my time of life and in the condition of my heart, is not something I’m going to hesitate about,” and finally Cancer Man consoles, “I’ll be dead, soon, like your daddy. That’s all right. You don’t have to worry about that,” it brings on a catharsis (51). At long last Coleman lets loose the grief, anger and fear that haunt him: “He sobs, grabs a box or a chair, and sobbing, at the same time filled with black rages, smashes it. He cries out and sobs: ‘Mama! Daddy!’ It is useless. He kneels amid his little ruin,
trembling and weeping” (51). Moments later, inspired by Billy’s intense experience, Coleman moves toward the snake boxes:

    COLEMAN: Get out of my way! Get out of my way!
    NANCY: No, Coleman! No!
    BUCKHORN: There’s death in that box!
    HART: You’ll risk your life!
    RUDD: You’ll put it on the line!
    CANCER MAN: If you believe, you’ll live!
    BUCKHORN: But if you don’t, you can die! Right here.
    [At the boxes, Coleman spreads wide his arms.]
    COLEMAN: Then I’ll die! Right here! (54)

He takes out two snakes and holds them in terror at first, but then he convulses and turns to face the audience again: “His face is amazed. He looks up, past the snakes. Coleman cries out. He is converted” (54).

    Early in the service, Nancy fervently prays on her knees: “Oh, Lord! Let me pray to you right now, for my husband, Coleman! Forgive my evil thoughts against him. You know I can’t stand him anymore, and he is a terrible mess, but maybe he can’t help that, Lord, and I pray that you will come into his life and do him some good and show him the way! Amen, Lord Jesus” (26). It would seem her prayer has been answered.

    Reverend Buckhorn begins the service in Act One by saying: “What is real religion? One thing I know, it don’t have no beginning, and it don’t have no end. It is happening all the time, and tonight I hope it will happen to us” (25). At another point, he tells Lorena, “Worship don’t have much order to it, not if it’s real. No preacher can schedule the Holy Ghost, shorely not me. He will come, Sister Cosburg, all the same. The answer to that, is wait, and be ready” (36). At the climax of the service, as people dance, cry, laugh, sing, scream and work the signs in what

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might seem to an outsider like chaos, there is a transcendent moment when they have
the experience of God Buckhom had hoped for:

They all release to their Lord the tensions and the sorrows of their
lives, moving about as if in some tremendous storm. Then they stop.
A light shines down on the threadbare altar cloth. A different music
is heard: an organ, or perhaps some strange cosmic sound. They all
simply look up, stilled, and for a moment, their great God himself
comes into their church, and into them. For an instant, they are
blessed, and delivered. (55)

But just as important as the ecstatic power of snake handling is the quiet
power of acceptance and unconditional love the congregants experience at
Buckhorn’s church. The members are all welcoming to the newcomers they meet,
and they accept and embrace one another in the context of their faith, no matter what
their peculiarities. The church’s very name, “Amalgamation,” means a uniting or a
merging into a single body of different elements. They do not judge, exclude or
condemn others. Buckhorn, Oby and the others welcome even Coleman and
Canfield, and encourage them to stay for the service; and, despite Coleman’s earlier
behavior, they allow him to remain with them in the end. Buckhorn says to Coleman
early in the play, “We are both equal creatures of God. You may not like that, and I
don’t reckon I do, neither, but that’s the way God made us” (33), and later he denies
Nancy’s request to throw Coleman out: “Throw him out? . . . I must confess, I am
tempted. But friend, in forty-three years of Christian ministry, no human soul has
ever been cast out of a church by me” (37). When Coleman vents his prejudices
against various church members, Nancy lectures him: “Coleman, since I left you,
and came to live with Reverend Buckhorn, I see how limited you really are. You
can’t tolerate nothing in the slightest human way unusual. You have got a lot to
learn” (20). It is the acceptance and compassion Coleman learns about in the church that transforms him, even if the means of change is snake handling. And it is the kindness of the Buckhorns and the church that gives Nancy the strength to move on and make a life for herself as an adult instead of a child longing for children or a child bride cared for by a pastor/husband/father figure: “I’m leaving. I don’t want to be a child no more. And my babies will just have to wait awhile. [She kisses Buckhorn on the cheek.] I do thank you. [She looks at the congregation.] All of you. I’ll come to church again, some day” (56).

Schlatter sees Nancy’s departure as an essential part of the brief but powerful experience of Linney’s audience:

Significantly, Nancy does not stay with the cult but continues on her way, leaving Coleman and her old life behind. She leaves having gained spiritual strength and emotional sustenance from that community of gentle misfits. She becomes, by leaving, and appropriate analogue for the audience, who also stay on only briefly and who undergo not permanent initiation but, as Gerald Weales writes, “a mass conversion to life.”

Holy Ghosts is a difficult play to stage because it requires a skilled director and talented sophisticated cast to execute the scenes of religious ecstasy in a way that provokes interest and emotion rather than laughter or ridicule. But when the production meets the challenge of the Linney’s script, it makes for a fascinating, riveting, and potentially transforming evening of theatre. Linney gives his snake handlers a dignity and an intensity that require the audience to examine their beliefs about ecstatic folk religious practice and allow them to experience its power in an immediate and intimate way.
"Handler"

Talking With . . . is a play made up of eleven long monologues for women. The eighth monologue in the show is called “Handler” and is spoken by Caro, “a young woman in a simple, country-print dress” (49). The stage directions indicate that “on the floor before her is a handmade wooden box about two feet long and eighteen inches high with a sliding wire screen top” (49); it holds a snake.

Caro explains how her great-grandmother learned snake handling from a minister and passed the tradition on to her whole family. She says her father, whom she calls “Dada,” pronounced “Dád-aw,” “was gonna do this tonight but the Lord froze his face so he sent me” (49).

She explains the practice of snake handling and its religious significance, and recounts her personal experiences with it. In the end, she actually handles a live snake on stage. She reveals that she has lost her faith in God, but has found other beliefs that will lock a serpent’s jaws.

Jane Martin’s “Handler” catalogues many of the classic features of the variety of Holiness religion that believes in “signs following.” Caro quotes the verses from Mark upon which the practice is based, and in the course of the monologues gives examples not only of handling, but also of drinking strychnine, handling fire, healing sickness through laying on of hands, and speaking in tongues. Everyone in her family participates in certain of the signs, but all of them have handled snakes for generations: “All my blood does it” (50). It is a testament to the strength of their faith: “Snake handlin’, with the Holiness Church. Down where I come from we take
God pretty serious. If you got the spirit, snake don’t bite. If he bites you, you know you ain’t got the spirit. Makes the difference real clear, don’t it?” (50).

Caro has been handling snakes nearly all her life: “When I handle, I keep ’em in this box. Dada gimme this and some Heidi doll on my ninth birthday” (50). As a result, she is quite an expert on the particulars of the practice. She speaks at length about the qualities of different varieties of snakes:

This here is water mocs. Jamie, he said they got the dirtiest, nastiest bite of all . . . well, rattlers is yer biggest. Lotta venom. You milk you a rattler, you can half fill up a juice glass. Dada said Jamie should do rattlers, but he never. Did ’heads, copperheads. Now they’re slower and safer but it ain’t such a good show. You know those dang snakes smell like cucumbers? . . . Miss Ellie, she favored mocassins. Dada too . . . well, Dada he did all kinds, all ways. Your mocassin now, he’s your good ol’ boy snake. Flat out mean an’ lots of get up n’ go. Heck, they’ll chase ya. They will. Ol’ Dada he didn’t like Miss Ellie doin’ em . . . Lotta handlers think mocassins are slimy. Couldn’t get me to touch one. They’ll do rattlers . . . got him a nice dry feel. Little bit sandpapery. Rattler can find ya in the pitch dark though. They git on to yer body heat. (49-50)

The preceding passage gives a sense of the real danger involved as well as the element of spectacle. Caro says some churches use strychnine instead of snakes, which is the “same idea,” but “ain’t much of a show. Not like snakes” (50).

Caro has real experience with the dangerous consequences of handling, and is almost matter of fact about it: “Durin’ service we take ’em right out, pass ’em around. It is more dangerous than a single handler. Snake gets to comparin’ who got the spirit a whole lot an’ who jes got it some. Somebody’s jes about bound to come in second” (51). She has been bitten seven times herself, four times by one snake her father says has a “sweet tooth” for her. Her father has been bitten thirty-two times: “Never saw him a doctor. Used to let me kiss him on the marks” (51). The last one
bit him in the eye: “Froze him right up. Dada says he’ll thaw but I don’t know” (51). Finally she comes to her mother, who died of snake bites: “Dada layed hands on her but she died anyway” (51). But even that trauma does not shake their faith: “There was ten of us handled right there at the funeral” (51).

Then the monologue takes a remarkable turn. Caro gives a kind of testimony that her father surely must not have anticipated when he sent her in his stead because “the Lord froze his face” (49). Caro admits that something has changed for her since her mother died: “Tell you what though . . . I don’t believe in a God. Left me. Gone with Miss Ellie” (51). She tells how she was at a service where people were shouting, speaking in tongues and handling, “And it came on me, heck, there ain’t no God in here. There’s just a bunch of shouters gettin’ tranced. There ain’t no God in here at all” (51). When the snake comes to her, at first she is terrified, knows the snake can tell, and senses it getting “leverage” (51-52). But then she finds another source of strength to draw upon:

I said, “Snake. You Satan’ hand-maiden. You’re right, there ain’t no God in me. I’m just a woman, but I’m the only woman in my Dada’s house and he needs me home. Outta his faith and his need, you lock yer jaws.” I let that snake feel a child’s pure love and it sponged it up offa my hands and then ol’ wiggley went limp. I tranced it. (52)

Then she takes a live snake out of the box that has been onstage throughout the monologue and handles it as she tells what she has learned: “Yes, you got to believe. Holiness Church is dead right about that. Makes me wonder, you know? I git to lookin’ at people and wonderin’ if they got anything in ’em could lock a serpent’s jaws. Any power or spirit or love or whatever. I look at ’em and I wonder, could they handle?” (52) She says that now she, like the snake, can read a person’s
heart: “Maybe you could handle and maybe you can’t, but there’s but one sure thing
in this world . . . yer empty, yer gonna get bit” (52).

In Caro’s view, it does not matter so much what is faith and what is
superstition, what is sanctioned religious ritual and what is folk magic. To her it
would not matter if a man like Starns allows organized religion to be “diluted” with
folk beliefs for the sake of bettering the community or if Bun uses superstition and
magic along with prayer to try to save the little sister she loves so much, so long as
there is power behind the practice. Just as John Human tells Barbara Allen that the
sad ending doesn’t spoil her ballad because “What matters is the singin’, and hit still
a good song,” perhaps what matters is not the form of expression or the outcome, but
the belief itself.

_Talking With_ . . . features a series of female characters who at first seem
aberrant or even grotesque, but ultimately evoke sympathy and respect from the
audience. Caro is an example of Martin’s technique of drawing the audience into an
identification with and understanding of characters they might otherwise consider
dreadful or laughable. The transformation of power from an exclusively religious
experience to an intensely personal and humanistic phenomenon in Caro’s journey
from girlish faithful follower to a woman with a deeper understanding of life’s
mysteries is artfully rendered and thoroughly surprising to audiences who are
prepared to see a snake-handling mountain Christian as limited and unreflective.

Mountain folk belief and folk practices may be used by playwrights to
ridicule the Appalachian people and show them as primitive, or to create a mythic,
eerie context for a frightening tale of the supernatural, to titillate audiences with the
thrill of witches, demon lovers or snakes, or to examine the nature of powerful ecstatic religious experience. In many instances the magic in these plays is tied to traditional mountain religion, but in reality the only practice examined here that is legitimately religious is snake handling; and that is only practiced by a tiny minority of mountain Christians. Folk tradition is very important to mountain people, but the theatre tends to exaggerate the superstitious elements of folk belief in the service of a more dramatic tale, just as they sometimes do the more negative stereotypes of mountain religion, as shall be demonstrated in the next chapter.

Notes


Olson 74.

Olson 74.

Fischer 709.

Fischer 711.

Fischer 713-714.

Fischer 714-715.


28 For a thorough explanation of conviction, see: Jones 135.

29 For a description of expressive worship practices see: McCauley 92.

30 For more information on lining hymns, see: Patterson 52-53.


34 Olson 112.


38 Olson 104.

39 Olson 104-120.

40 Slone 445.

41 Slone 448.


45 Hurley "Low-Down" 180.


47 Burton 5-6.

48 Olson 107.

49 Olson 108.

50 Olson 108.

51 Olson 108.

52 Burton 11.


56 Schlatter 76.

57 Schlatter 76-77.


59 Wilmeth 199.


CHAPTER FIVE: FALSE PROPHETS AND FIRM FOUNDATIONS:
DRAMATIC TREATMENTS OF TRADITIONAL MOUNTAIN RELIGION

Religion is a vital and integral part of mountain culture and of the nation's concept of the region. Many plays about Appalachia feature characters, often preachers, who practice traditional mountain religion. "Mountain religion" is distinct from national "mainline" church denominations that have membership or ministries within the region. Loyal Jones explains in *Faith and Meaning in the Southern Uplands* that the denominations he is concerned with are "indigenous" and, while there is variety within them, exhibit a "similarity of beliefs." Deborah Vansau McCauley explains in *Appalachian Mountain Religion* that her book is not about "religion in Appalachia" or even "Appalachian religion"... It is about Appalachian mountain religion, "mountain religion," being the distinguishing term accepted by Appalachian studies scholars such as Loyal Jones and American religious historians such as Catherine Albanese. Mountain people also accept the term without pause when they hear it but do not use it themselves, though they often talk about "mountain churches" when speaking in general. I distinguish between those churches that are in the Appalachian region but not largely of it... and those church traditions that exist predominantly — or almost exclusively — in the region and are very special to it. The historical echoes of what is unique to religious life in Appalachia are much weaker in the Appalachian churches of American Protestantism in general, but they are there.¹

Much of what mainstream American culture believes about mountain religion is marked by the shallow understanding of its fundamentalist beliefs and practices found in the writings of those wishing to do mission work in the mountains in the late nineteenth and the early twentieth centuries. Deborah Vansau McCauley sees the image of mountain religion as having been permanently and adversely affected by the agenda of early missionaries who
habitually dismissed the religious culture unique to mountain people as if it were virtually nonexistent or proclaiming it deviant: mountain people were “unchurched,” indeed, they were “religiously destitute,” or their religious culture reduced them to a state of “moral and religious degradation.” This willful blindness to the pervasive presence of mountain religious culture and its vital importance in the lives of mountain people, coupled with a posture of offended sensibilities in reaction to its defining features such as strong emotional piety, have persisted until today and permeate much of the very limited literature on mountain religion.²

Loyal Jones says that while outsider missionaries certainly had the best intentions of improving the lives of Appalachian people, “some of these workers never really understood or liked the people they described and to whom they tried to minister,” and that mainline churches tend to mistakenly assume the area is either unchurched or simply part of the Bible Belt “with many small unacceptable fundamentalist churches and fervent believers.”³

Much of what was written about religious life in the region was written by representatives of mainline churches who advocated either a social gospel meant to make Appalachia culturally more like Middle America or a brand of liberation theology meant to help mountain people fight oppression and injustice.⁴ McCauley argues that the flaw in both of those viewpoints is that they see mountain religion as merely a component of a social system, not “as religion.”⁵ Loyal Jones believes that “well-educated, compassionate people from mainline churches . . . have trouble in seeing ordinary Upland people as legitimate in their culture and faith in their time and place, regardless of the problems they face.”⁶

One source of misrepresentation is the domination by outsider authors in writings about the religious life of the region; Jones points out that, while outsiders
John C. Campbell and Elizabeth R. Hooker wrote somewhat sympathetic treatments of the subject, until recently "no native had written on religion for a national audience" since Emma Bell Miles's 1905 *Spirit of the Mountains*. McCauley concurs:

Until the late 1980s, most of the material on Appalachian mountain religion was written by home missionaries and social scientists. Social scientists in particular have promoted a subculture of poverty model for understanding religious life and traditions in the Appalachian region. Moreover, social scientists have interpreted Appalachian religious traditions in terms of "alienation," compensation for deprivation, and church-sect typology.

While researching his 1982 book, *Better Felt Than Said: The Holiness-Pentecostal Experience in Southern Appalachia*, Troy D. Abell lived in the mountains as an active community member, attended five Holiness-Pentecostal worship services each week for a year, and conducted numerous interviews. As in Jones's *Faith and Meaning in the Southern Uplands*, excerpts from interviews with Appalachian Christians make up much of the book, thereby allowing the people to describe their religious practices in their own voices. Abell emphasizes in his conclusion that these practices have deep meaning missed by some earlier observers:

Even though I have described the worship behavior of Holiness-Pentecostals in detail, I feel that the most crucial element is not the behavior itself, but its role in the lives of the people. Worship is not just a release of energy. These are not secular people — God is their all. This not energy to be spent elsewhere; this is the main event. All of life is hanging in the balance.

In the oral history *Our Appalachia*, a similar assessment of the importance of faith is made by interviewee Lawrence Baldridge, a native-born Missionary Baptist preacher who, unlike most preachers in the Old Regular Baptist church in which he was
raised, finished college and did graduate work at Southern Baptist Theological
Seminary:

Even though they don’t have a formal structure of teaching, there is
more of a God-consciousness in this society than almost any society
in America. Almost everyone here believes in God. The reason for
this is you’re close to nature, alone with the stars, the mountains, and
with the streams... When you have concrete buildings and concrete
streets, and all your food out of cans, how can you have a strong sense
of your identity with nature? If you can’t identify yourself with the
creation, you can’t possibly identify yourself with the Creator. Here
we do.11

If America perceives the area as largely “unchurched,” it may be due in part to the
prevalence of small, independent churches and to heavy reliance on oral tradition in
many mountain churches. McCauley writes of having shown students photographs
of some of the “thousands” of “tiny, often unmarked one-room” independent
Holiness churches in Appalachia which “are all but invisible to the untrained eye,
escaping attention and eluding any awareness on the part of the outsider of their
prominence, history, and importance in mountain religious culture.”12 An excited
student called after traveling through the region to tell McCauley she had been right,
that only when you know what to look for do you realize that “Holiness churches are
everywhere.”13 McCauley says that traditional mountain religion, like its church
buildings, is in a sense “invisible” to the eyes of outsiders and “such invisibility
belies [its] importance in the overall religious life and culture of the Appalachian
region.”14

Jones describes how traditions, hymns, and even scripture itself are all passed
down through oral tradition rather than written documents much of the time.15 Lack
of publications and written artifacts, just like inconspicuous church buildings, also
renders traditional mountain religion “invisible” to religious historians who do not actually travel to the mountains to carefully interview the faithful.¹⁶

Those who have done firsthand research have identified traits that are common to many, though not all, traditional mountain churches. Abell sees in the Holiness-Pentecostal tradition emphasis on “four concerns which set it apart from other religious traditions: sanctification or holiness, the baptism of the Holy Ghost, healing and prophecy.”¹⁷ McCauley lists several typical characteristics found in the story of one church:

the central place divine inspiration (“God laid on my heart”) holds in the active faith life of the believer; the religious credence given to dreams and visions; the spontaneity, autonomy, and religious authority assumed by the individual, whether ordained or not; the absence of institutional or denominational structures for the founding of churches and church communities in a neighborhood, as well as respect for one another and each person’s individual relationship with God, “fellowshipping” among denominations, and the importance of the doctrine of grace.¹⁸

Most traditional mountain churches believe in God and the trinity just as mainline Christian churches do, but the emphasis on the Holy Spirit or Holy Ghost is far greater. God is seen as loving, but also judging, all-knowing and all-powerful.¹⁹ Jesus and his personal nature are given great emphasis by many mountain churches, and people often pray to Jesus rather than directly to God as a result of this sense of approachability.²⁰ Abell notes: “The nature of Jesus is seen not so much as a victorious Savior, but as the Man of sorrows. It is with the suffering of Jesus that the people identify.”²¹ The Holy Ghost is important in mountain religion in a way it is
not in mainline churches. In churches that practice glossolalia, or speaking in
tongues, it is seen as a gift from the Holy Spirit. The Holy Ghost enables people to
“do extraordinary things” and is viewed by some as the way God works in the world
today, just as he did through Jesus during his time on earth. The “power” of the
Holy Ghost or Holy Spirit is very important; the power is in one sense a power of
divine insight, but primarily of boldness or courage to express, feel, act on or testify
to one’s religious convictions and experience.

Another important feature of traditional mountain religion is its emphasis on
heaven over life in this world. Some observers view this negatively as an example of
mountain fatalism. Charles H. Lippy argues, however, that to dismiss “the hope of
heaven” as somehow backward is a limiting view:

To take this stance is to miss the way in which the strong
conviction of a heavenly afterlife serves to give meaning to the
present. Simply put, the heavenly sphere becomes the plane of
authentic existence; present reality pales in comparison.
Indeed, even the constant struggles of everyday existence here
and now take on fresh meaning when viewed from the
perspective of eternity. The triumph in this life over troubles
of whatever sort may be transient, but the signs of God’s
providence and the presence of spiritual power serve as
indicators of what will be the ordinary reality in God’s
heavenly dominion — where adversity, sickness, pain, and
death will have vanished. The present may be a time of
preparation and testing, yet those whom God has chosen, or
those to whom God has given the gift of the Holy Spirit, know
that for them there awaits an eternity where all will be well.

The hope of heaven is a powerful thing in a place where life is often hard and even
tragic. Troy Abell found that in the view of Pentecostal-Holiness believers, “life on
earth is mainly a testing ground for either heaven or hell, and the purpose of being
alive is to serve and honor God.”
The emphasis on the afterlife helps to explain the lack of involvement in social issues by traditional mountain churches, as opposed to the strong emphasis on “social uplift” by the ministry of mainline churches in the region. Being separate from “the world” is important to mountain faith. Jones cites concerns about television evangelists expressed by a mountain Southern Baptist minister who felt their crusades were blending religion with the world and drawing people and resources away from local churches. Reverend Buell Kazee complained that Billy Graham and others use famous people who have been “a ‘success’ in the world” in their crusades, which he did not see as “sinful,” but “that sort of thing is just not of the Lord” and will “pass away.”

Worldly things are often viewed as sinful, however. Among the sinful worldly behaviors listed by Abell’s informants are: “drinking; cursing; adultery; gambling; dancing; women wearing short dresses, short hair, makeup, or jewelry; men wearing long hair; not attending church; not trusting Jesus as Savior; and blaspheming against the Holy Ghost.” Loyal Jones’s informants list, among other things, sex, drugs, “prurient entertainment,” dancing, movies, sports, bluegrass music, and secular music in general. Lawrence Baldrige left the Old Regular Baptist Church in his youth because he felt their definition of sin was too strict; he felt he should be allowed to go to chaperoned dances, see movies, play musical instruments, listen to the radio, and play sports without fear of damnation. Jones sees this distaste for the things of the world as one of reasons for mainstream America’s negative view of mountain religion.
Many of the religious groups in the Uplands see the natural world and our natural state regressing rather than progressing. This contrasts starkly with the mainstream educated world's usual belief that each generation is improving through religion, education, counseling, or whatever (ignoring the probability that this has been the bloodiest century). In many Upland churches there is a latter-day mentality, and evidence is always at hand to support the view that we may be regressing toward the imminent end of the world.32

Salvation is a very important issue for traditional mountain Christians and is a much more complex process than what might seem to outsiders an isolated moment of emotion or ecstatic religious experience. The first step is a phenomenon called “conviction.” It is a moment, often attributed to the action of the Holy Spirit, when a “sinner” realizes he or she is “lost” and needs to be forgiven by God. It is described as a profound and dramatic personal experience which one makes public by responding to an “altar call” to go before the church, confess and repent.

Repentance is very important, for in mountain church tradition there can be no salvation without it.33 Abell points out how important this process is in the scope of eternity: “Since man has the chance to repent and follow God while he is on earth, he is responsible for whether he receives forgiveness or judgment. After a man dies, he no longer can expect mercy from God.”34 Abell’s informants see God as loving and forgiving, but also demanding; repentance must be “sincere and deep” in order to receive divine forgiveness for sin.35

People are saved by the grace of God, so the doctrine of grace is, as Jones puts it, “all important to Upland Christians.”36 McCauley sees grace as so central to traditional mountain religion that its traditions regarding the doctrine “mark what is perhaps most theologically distinctive about Appalachian mountain religion when

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compared with the broader religious developments of Protestantism in the United States." She draws the distinction between the mountain view that grace is a result of "God's initiative and divine providence" that requires human cooperation, and the modern revivalist view that the experience of salvation depends on "human initiative and God's cooperation." Television evangelists and revivalist preachers who ask followers to "make a decision for Christ" are at odds with the traditional mountain belief system; in Appalachian traditional churches all religious experience is subject to "God-centered control" rather than "human-centered control." McCauley argues that the "drumbeat of ridicule and misapprehension about the nature and necessity of grace in Appalachian mountain religion has yet to end in writings on mountain religious life. Its most popular label is 'fatalism.'

Full immersion baptism is a crucial ritual connected with salvation in mountain churches. The symbolism of death, burial and resurrection in the practice has great meaning for people, so much so that many believe it is the only true form of baptism. Traditional mountain churches do not typically practice infant baptism, believing instead that the ritual must be reserved for those who have reached an "age of accountability" at which they can truly understand and receive a "believer's baptism." There is some disagreement as to whether baptism is absolutely required for salvation, but unquestionably it is seen as a vital part of the process.

Some mountain churches also believe in sanctification, which is sometimes described as a "distinct experience" and sometimes as a "growth process" whereby one is cleansed of sin in an even greater way than by simple salvation. It is perceived as a separate, new "second blessing . . . that can perfect your life and

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enable you to live above sin." Once a person is sanctified, he or she is supposed to have reached a point where even the desire to sin is taken away, a step forward in the salvation process that is very important to many traditional mountain Christians.

On the opposite end of the scale from sanctification is "backsliding," a state of lapsing back into sinfulness. McCauley is careful to point out that neither "sinner" nor "backslider" is a pejorative term; they are simply used to describe "people in need" who should be invited by the church to come forward and "be prayed over." McCauley is careful to point out that neither "sinner" nor "backslider" is a pejorative term; they are simply used to describe "people in need" who should be invited by the church to come forward and "be prayed over."

Many people, after having "backslid," rededicate their lives to remedy the situation, a ritual in which they "go forward and renew [their] commitment." Abell notes that this is a common phenomenon in Holiness-Pentecostal churches because they believe "a person can get saved, but then go sin and be lost again. . . . The idea of 'once saved — always saved' is repugnant to Holiness-Pentecostal people and their concept of holiness." Abell observes that no matter whether one is saved or even sanctified, "there is a constant call to rededicate one's self; life is a continual striving." Some of Jones's informants also say that it is dangerous to feel too strongly that you are permanently saved or invulnerable to sin because even "fine Christians" can "fall away from the faith" and wind up in hell.

The ultimate step in becoming right with God for many mountain Christians is the doctrine of the Second Coming and the Rapture, when they believe the saved will go to be with God in heaven as the world ends. This belief is based upon a literal fundamentalist reading of the book of Revelation from the Bible, in which John describes his vision of the end of the world as we know it. Jones notes that for
traditional mountain Christians this is not simply an allegorical or spiritual event, but something understood as very concrete:

Many people believe in a literal resurrection and have no patience with the notion that at death the soul flies off to heaven and that the body is no longer important. Elder Steve Casteel, Primitive Baptist, said that he would hate to miss the Resurrection, explaining that "some of God’s people will not experience that because they will be changed right here, when the Lord comes down 'in the twinkling of an eye' to be caught up with those others who have come out of the grave."51

The literal reading of Revelation so key to belief in the Rapture is an example of the importance of scripture in traditional mountain religion. Bill Leonard notes that while mountain Christians often claim to be “People of the Spirit,” others claim to be “People of the Book,” and some are both. He explains that Primitive, Old Regular, and other Baptist subdenominations may be called people of the book because they adhere closely to the Bible and reject "'man-made' dogmas discerned to be outside the bounds of biblical Christianity," sometimes even viewing churches that follow them as "heretical."52 Jones cites his informants’ belief that God directly inspired the prophets to write his Word in the Bible, and that it is complete and without error. As a result, “Most groups emphasize the Bible as the sole authority for faith and practice, not priests, not seminary-trained preachers, or other earthly ecclesiastical authorities installed by human beings.”53 McCauley notes that the Bible is known in mountain churches “primarily as oral literature,” even by those who are literate, and that this may account for both their devotion to the poetic language of the King James Version and the way they interpret the text, which is
more rooted in language and “intuitive discernment” than in rational abstracted ideas:

Mountain people’s way of interpreting the Bible is normatively more concrete, more midrashic, allowing texts to “interpret” each other, following the lead of a text by listening deep within to its own embedded literary structures (which is possible only through a comprehensive oral memory of the Bible).\textsuperscript{54}

Music is also passed down via oral tradition. Some traditional mountain churches do not use standard hymn books, but “line-out,” a method whereby a leader “chants unaccompanied two lines of a hymn at a quick pace and then the congregation sings the same lines at a much slower, more drawn-out pace (also unaccompanied by any musical instruments).”\textsuperscript{55} According to McCauley this style of singing was ridiculed by early observers and thought to be a function of illiteracy, when in fact songbooks containing only words do exist; it is the unique quality of the modal melodies, which do not follow standard notation, that requires this unusual method of oral transmission.\textsuperscript{56} Jones explains that hymn tunes vary widely because they are passed down exclusively through oral tradition in each church or geographical area, a phenomenon examined thoroughly in Beverly Bush Patterson’s *The Sound of the Dove.*\textsuperscript{57} Lining of hymns was once a widespread practice, but is now practiced primarily by Old Regular Baptist and by some Primitive Baptist congregations.\textsuperscript{58} Jones emphasizes that the words of mountain hymns are very important because they carry the “theology and philosophy of the people;” he names several important subjects for hymns: death, grace, our role as pilgrims, the redeeming blood of Jesus, the glory of heaven as distinct from the troubles of the
world, the idea of heaven as home, and “love for the Lord or longing for a peace that comes with acceptance of Him.”

Music is one of several distinctive elements of traditional mountain worship services. The congregation may be very emotional and expressive in a church service. In some churches worship is very spontaneous and even “ecstatic” and does not follow a predetermined order of service. People may pray, shout, speak in tongues, dance, fall on the floor, or sing as the Spirit moves them. McCauley observes that while some outsiders are startled by or react negatively to such practices, anyone who has been to a mountain worship service where ecstatic expressions break out and has grown comfortable with such forms of worship is more likely than not prepared to call the combustion of sounds and actions a “melody.” . . . Highly emotive, nonrational religious experience centered on the heart rather than the head: not only did ritual ecstasy displace rationality but it was fundamentally a religious leveler, the great equalizer of all the participants, regardless of background or communal standing, that carried over into the ordinary aspects of church life.

She emphasizes that these practices are not just a release from stress and sorrow or a form of entertainment as they have often been described, but are “transformative and confirmative” and provide an immediate and unconditional experience of ideal community and commitment to ideology.

The leveling and ecstatic aspects of mountain worship are reflected in the role of the preacher as well. Preachers are rarely paid, or paid very little, and, while they are held in high regard, are not seen as “above” the rest of the congregation. Preachers are humble, giving all credit to God for their sermons, often relying on direct inspiration from God rather than planning any remarks in advance. Just as
God called them to preach, they trust him to put words in their mouths as well. Frequently mountain preachers were wild and reckless in their youth, or at the very least did not aspire to their current vocation, until God called them to deliver his message. In fact, many speak of resisting the call and being pursued relentlessly by God until they were forced to accept it, sometimes likening themselves to Jonah, who was swallowed by a great fish while fleeing God's call to preach to the wicked people of Nineveh. As one pastor put it, after five years of fighting the call, he had a change of heart and realized, "It was preach or die."

The style of preaching practiced by mountain clergy is also distinctive. Jones lists some common characteristics: "a chanted and cadenced musical tone, spiritually revealed inspiration, and an energetic delivery." The chanting style is called the "holy whine" or "holy tone," and probably has its origin in a Welsh traditional style called "hwyl" that is chanted and intoned in a minor key. Emma Bell Miles wrote in 1905: "I must say that the strained, slightly nasal pitch of a mountain preacher's voice, and its cadence, rather like an energetic chant, is well calculated to put anyone to sleep; there is more than a little mesmerism about it." McCauley notes that in accounts of "sing-song" preaching, the preacher himself is deeply moved, as opposed to just the congregation, and that even outside observers are able to sense the powerful appeal of the style of delivery. Several of the preachers Jones interviewed even used the word "entertainment" in reference to the ability to move people with a powerful sermon.

Some other distinctive features of the mountain worship are the lack of a strict order of service (preferring to "led the Spirit lead"), public delivery of
testimony by believers in services, footwashing, healing by laying on of hands, the holy kiss and speaking in tongues. All these practices have some direct connection to the scriptures and appear quite often in nonfiction accounts and fictional portrayals of mountain religiosity.72

Religion plays an important role in America’s concept of Appalachia, and in the depiction of the region’s people on the stage. The varieties of religion depicted are typically either the type brought by outsider missionaries to a nearly pagan people who seem more reliant on magic and superstition than the church, or the extremely fundamentalist and dark brand of religion preached by smooth-talking hellfire and brimstone evangelists. Only rarely is the religious life of mountain people depicted as equal to mainstream religion, sophisticated, or even positive.

Many of the most religious characters in plays about the mountain South are dark, even dishonest figures. When religious people are seen as having genuine intentions, still religious practice is depicted more as an ecstatic release, superstitious use of charms, or a simplistic and limiting set of unenlightened values, than as true worship of a deity as commonly understood in mainstream American religion. Yet some later plays written from a sympathetic point of view paint a more positive picture. If they satirize the “old-time” religion of the characters, these plays do it gently and with respect for what that religion means to the lives of its adherents. In the first section of this chapter I will examine plays that depict traditional mountain religion in a negative light by focusing on their religious characters’ obsession with damnation and misuse of religion in hypocritical and often villainous ways. In the second section I will discuss plays which present traditional mountain religion in a

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more sympathetic and respectful light, granting their religious characters more depth
and humanity than those in the first section.

“What we did had nothin’ to do with God”: Hellfire and Hypocrisy

Dark portrayals of religious mountaineers appear in drama almost from the
time playwrights first turned their attention to the region. In many instances either a
preacher or a supposedly deeply religious lay person uses religion to manipulate
other characters in order to achieve some personal, secular goal. Rufe Pryor of
Hatcher Hughes’s 1924 play, *Hell-Bent Fer Heaven*, is a prime example of a portrait
of a misguided and dishonest follower of mountain religion.

*Hell-Bent Fer Heaven*

*Hell-Bent Fer Heaven* by Hatcher Hughes opened at the Klaw Theatre in
New York on January 4, 1924, in a production directed by Augustin Duncan, who
also played David Hunt in the play, and starring John F. Hamilton as Rufe Pryor,
Clara Bandick as Meg Hunt, George Abbott as Sid Hunt, Burke Clarke as Matt Hunt,
Margaret Borough as Jude Lowry, and Glenn Anders as Andy Lowry. At the time,
many critics, including Burns Mantle and John Francis McDermott, hailed the play
as one of the finest examples of “folk drama,” which was experiencing a period of
great popularity in the American theatre of the 1920s and 30s.

The play received the Pulitzer Prize for drama in 1924, amid great
controversy. The original recommendation of the special jury favored George
Kelly’s *The Show Off*. The vote was close, and the recommendation was reversed
after further deliberation and a letter of protest from Hughes’s fellow Columbia
University faculty member, Brander Matthews. There were accusations of favoritism to Columbia, but the prize was awarded to Hughes.75

_Hell-Bent fer Heaven_ takes place in the Carolina Mountains, where Matt and Meg Hunt, a middle-aged couple, live with Matt’s elderly father, David. As the play opens, Meg and David are preparing to welcome Meg and Matt’s son, Sid, home from World War I. During Sid’s absence, Meg has taken in Rufe Pryor, a “shifty” young man, to help tend the family store. Rufe has dodged military service on what is probably a trumped-up medical excuse, as well as a religious one. Meg has taken a maternal interest in him, but Matt doesn’t care for him or his lazy behavior, and tells him he must leave now that Sid has returned.

Soon, Sid’s friend Andy Lowry arrives carrying the mail. Andy’s parents pushed him to take an exemption to stay home and work for the government, but he feels he has missed out on the excitement of war. Sid and Andy are friends in spite of a long-ago feud between the Hunt and Lowry families. The feud has even cooled enough between these branches of the two families that Andy’s sister, Jude, is Sid’s sweetheart.

Rufe has been hoping since Sid’s departure for the war that he might be able to win Jude for his own, and he schemes to rekindle the feud in order to split up the couple. When he has pushed the men into enmity and still gets nowhere with Jude, Rufe stirs up conflict between her and Sid as well. However, Jude decides she loves Sid so much she will marry him even if her family objects.

Matt and David Hunt manage to smooth out the feud, only to have Rufe fuel it again with more lies. Sid and Andy depart for the Lowry home, facing rising flood
waters; Sid thinks all is well, and he is going to ask Mr. Lowry for Jude’s hand in marriage, but Andy is angry as a result of Rufe’s manipulation.

Meg is sure Sid is dead when his horse returns to the barn alone, and the men set out to find Andy, whom they suspect has shot Sid. Soon, Meg and Jude leave, too, Jude swearing that if Sid is dead she’ll kill his murderer, even if it should be her brother. Rufe is startled when Sid returns alive; Andy was so drunk (on liquor given him by Rufe) he only shot through Sid’s hat. Sid suspects Rufe is behind the misunderstanding and plans to ask Andy, whom Rufe promptly says can’t be trusted. Sid decides to go to the telephone at the dam to call ahead and hopefully prevent a confrontation between the two families. When Rufe cannot stop him, he resolves to dynamite the dam while Sid is under it, which in Rufe’s mind is God’s will.

In Act Three, David and Matt return to the cabin, holding Andy at gunpoint. Rufe reacts with excitement and rushes outside when he hears an explosion he knows is the dam blowing, telling the others it is only thunder. The men tie Andy to a chair, ready to punish him for trying to kill Sid, even if the shot missed as he claims it did.

The family hears the flood waters rushing and goes outside to see, leaving Rufe alone with Andy. When Rufe refuses to help Andy, Andy threatens to tell of Rufe’s role in the conflict, and when the others return, he further angers Rufe by mocking his assertion that the flood is “Jedgement Day” (146). The family is divided in their opinion about Rufe and as they argue, Andy starts to tell the truth, only to be drowned out by Rufe’s hasty effort to lead the women in a hymn. At Rufe’s suggestion, the Hunts put Andy in the cellar. Rufe preys on the bereaved
Jude, trying to win her love by comforting her grief over Sid. Meg asks Rufe to make sure Andy doesn’t drown, and he promises to do so, but still does not help.

Sid appears, pretending to be his own ghost, trying to terrify Rufe into confession; when he hears Andy in the cellar, Sid goes down to him. A desperate Rufe realizes there is nowhere to run and tells the family he has seen Sid’s ghost.

Everyone is shocked when Sid and Andy emerge from the cellar, both alive, friendly with one another, and telling how Rufe caused the quarrel and has now blown up the dam with dynamite. Meg defends Rufe at first, but when she discovers his claim of innocence is based upon God having instructed him to dynamite the dam, even she threatens Rufe with death. Rufe runs to hide in the cellar, and, rather than kill him, the others decide to leave in the only available boat and let him suffer the flood he has created alone, saying Rufe can just keep on trusting in God’s will.

As the play closes, Rufe begs God to save him, but when he emerges from the cellar and sees the water outside, he damns God, collapses in despair and cries in vain for help.

The play was widely praised, particularly for its characterization of the villain, Rufe Pryor. John Corbin of the New York Times wrote; “Iago is no more deeply dyed in villainy, no more torturous in destructive plotting; Tartuffe is no more loathsome in amorous piety. And as regards Iago, certainly, the motives attributed are distinctly less comprehensible. If the American drama contains a more powerful and vividly illumined character than the self-deceiving saint, I do not know where to find it.”

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Though the focus is on Rufe Pryor and his misuse of his fundamentalist faith to justify his own evil deeds, *Hell-Bent Fer Heaven* does have some more benevolent religious people among its cast of characters, people against whom the audience may compare Rufe and people whose faith Rufe tries to use to further his own plans.

Meg Hunt is a woman of faith who hopes her son has been reading his Bible during the war, as she has read in the papers "about our soldiers a-goin' into battle a-prayin' an' readin' their Bibles" (6). She is horrified to hear someone stole the Bible she had given Sid: "An' you went through the whole war like a heathen, 'thout so much as a Testyment?" (30). Like all good mountain Christians, scripture is of paramount importance to her. David asks Sid if he was given one by the many church workers he has heard were handing them out to the troops, and Sid explains they did not get to him until "after the fightin' 'us over. An' I didn't need one so bad then" (30). Despite the gentle teasing of the men in her family, Meg's faith is steadfast, but her devotion also makes her vulnerable to Rufe's deceptive ways. As Rufe makes his first entrance, Meg is responding to David's remark that she pays more attention to runts: "They need more — jist like humans. When the Saviour was on earth he ministered to the halt an' blind an' didn't bother about t'others" (11). Meg looks to God to stop the violence of war and feuding, unsuccessfully trying to stop Matt from taking vengeance on Andy for Sid's "death"; she despairs, "If they is a God an' He's almighty like they say, I cain't see why He don't stop things like this" (114).

Meg continually defends Rufe to the others out of maternal instinct and approval of his strong faith (22-25). When Matt fires Rufe and Rufe talks of his
reward in heaven, Meg snaps at her husband, “It’s the truth that hurts, Matt. Your reward ain’t in heaven” (26). This is perhaps a sore spot for Meg, as heaven and its rewards are crucial to mountain faith; she shows similar frustration with her family’s lack of reverence at other times as well. Rufe frequently quotes scripture and defends Meg’s moral statements to the others, so that even in the final act she defends him in return: “If you’d ever experienced real religion yourselves, you’d know what’s the matter with him! . . . By their fruits ye shall know ’em. When I mourned fer Sid you an’ Matt didn’t bring me no comfort. All you thought of was vengeance. But I feel comforted some now [she pats Rufe’s hand protectingly] an’ Rufe done it” (149-50). When Rufe says Andy is courting damnation, and Andy mocks Rufe’s piety and says “Hurrah fer hell!” Meg calls Andy a “blasphemer” and tells him, “You’ll be beggin’ Rufe yit fer a drop o’ water to cool your tongue in Torment!” (150). When the men scoff at the idea Rufe has heard God’s voice, she says, “Don’t pay no ’tention to them Pharisees, Rufe! Go right on an’ tell what happened!” (177). This invitation to give testimony is typical of mountain religious tradition, and Meg probably has expectations about the sort of message she will hear based on her experiences with testimony in church. But when she learns the message from God was to blow up both the dam and her son, she turns on Rufe and threatens his life (179-80). Rufe’s false piety has her fooled almost to the last.

David Hunt, Meg’s father-in-law, also has some faith, but he is not taken in by Rufe. Though his view of God is vengeful, he takes a more lighthearted attitude toward religion at times, teasing Meg that it was the “fightin’ parts” of the Bible Sid liked to read (6); that she’s like all women, who, “when they find a man’s got a little
sap in him they think he’s headed straight for the devil” (7); and, when she fusses at him about chores, “It’s a quair thing to me that woman, ever since the Lord made her out o’ man’s crookedest part, has allus considered it her main job to keep him straight!” (108).

David is critical of Rufe’s religion because it is misguided, and jokes with Meg about religious matters, but will not stand for Sid and Andy’s mockery of Christianity: “You two young jackasses think you’re mighty smart a-runnin’ down religion! . . . they ain’t nothin’ to be ashamed of in bein’ a Christian!” (40). He says they think only “women an’ runts ever gets religion” but that he once saw a Baptist preacher who “could pick you both up by the scruff o’ the neck an’ shake you down to your nachel size!” (41). As a young man, David slapped that preacher for saying he was going to hell, then slapped him again when he turned the other cheek, after which the preacher knocked him out: “He said the Saviour never told us what to do after we’d turned t’other cheek once, for he took it fer granted any dum fool’d know!” (42-4). He said the preacher gave a sermon about how Christ was a tough man, not “weak an’ womanish” as some believe (44). David supports the men when they turn vengeful against Andy, saying, “Even God cain’t smite evildoers ’thout a fist!” (114).

David’s faith is not as blind as Meg’s, so he is suspicious of Rufe’s piety from the beginning: “I cain’t make him out. If he ’us jist a plain hypocrite I’d know how to take him. But he ’pears to honestly b’lieve everybody’s got to be like him afore they’re saved” (26). David pulls no punches when attacking Rufe’s claims to be holier than the others: “Shucks! Jesus wouldn’t know your religion if he met it in
the road! *He* didn’t wait till the war broke out an’ skeered Him afore He got His! . . . as fer the sort of religion most folks has got around here, it’s a stench in the nostrils o’ God!” (45). When Meg calls Andy a blasphemer, David argues, “The Lord’s will’s too big a thing fer any one man to git a strangle hold on it. Rufe’s dead certain that God allus sees eye to eye ‘ith him on every question. Fer all we know, God hisself may consider *that* more blasphemous ’n what Andy’s doin’!” (148).

At the end of the play, it is David who stops the men from killing Rufe and convinces them to leave him behind in the cellar instead: “I hain’t lost my belief in the Lord on Rufe’s account. Fact is, I ain’t so shore but what I believe in Him more ’n ever. . . . He didn’t punish him. But He may do it yit if you give Him a chance. . . . An’ arter what’s happened here to-night we’d orter be willin’ to foller the Lord uphill back’ards ‘ith our eyes shet! . . . Take it right straight through from beginnin’ to end an’ the Lord’s been on our side every pop — even to blowin’ up that dadburned dam that had never orter been put in!” (183). While he may see his faith as different from Rufe’s “camp-meetin’ brand o’ religion,” his God is still a God who takes sides and exacts an almost vengeful sort of punishment.

Rufe’s hypocritical religion serves him partly as a tool he uses to curry favor with women like Meg or the object of his affections, Jude Lowry (who has also “got religion” (51)), but also perhaps as a delusional way to justify his evil deeds to himself. David describes Rufe as “hell-bent fer heaven,” a phrase that captures the duality of his religion (23).
The focal point of Rufe’s theology is the certain damnation he believes awaits others. When Matt says Rufe’s help is no longer needed now that Sid is home, Rufe preaches at him with “a malicious expression” on his face:

I’m a-goin’ to tell you somepen fer your own good, Matt. God so loved the world that he give His only begotten Son to die so ’at everybody ’at wanted to might be saved. But you’ve never took advantage o’ His offer. I cain’t understand that in a close trader like you, Matt . . . Understand, I’m a-sayin’ this in a true Christian spirit — fer your own good. The Scripture says to love our enemies an’ do good to them that despitefully uses us. . . . You can hector me an’ bully me about the things o’ this world, but you cain’t keep me from lovin’ your immortal soul. An’ you cain’t take away my reward which is in heaven. An’ you cain’t escape yourn — which ain’t! (25-26)

Rufe frequently makes comments to others like, “Thank God, I’m not headed to’ard hell, like some folks!” again reflecting the emphasis on the afterlife in mountain religion (33). When the Hunts have Andy tied up, Rufe comes running ahead of the flood waters “pointing toward heaven, his eyes rolling in a frenzy of excitement,” crying, “It’s come! It’s come! . . . The day o’ His Wrath — when the saints an’ the sinners shall be parted right an’ left! [He shakes his finger at Andy] Brother, will you be able to stan’ on that day? That’s the question every man here’s got to answer — an’ every woman, too!” (141). He worries at one point that Jude will make good on her threat to kill Andy if he has murdered Sid: “I couldn’t marry a woman that had done that! . . . O God! Don’t let her commit a sin that she could never git forgiveness fer!” (117). When a captive Andy threatens to tell of Rufe’s involvement in the conflict, Rufe threatens, “If you break your oath an’ tell ’em, you’ll lose all chance o’ gittin’ to heaven!” to which Andy responds, “Heaven be damned! I ain’t like you Rufe! We’re both a-goin’ to hell, but I’m a-goin’ thar by choice!” (145).
Rufe threatens Andy again later: “The Good Book says that them that reviles God’s handiwork shall die! [With a convulsive gesture] An’ they shall, too! . . . On that day, Andy, the wicked’ll be scattered like chaff afore a mighty wind, an’ there’ll be weepin’ an’ gnashin’ o’ teeth! Selah!” (147-48). “Selah” is a Hebrew word of uncertain meaning that often appears at the end of a psalm, so Rufe has probably heard it at church and is using it here for dramatic effect.78

But Rufe’s belief stretches beyond judgmental hellfire and brimstone fundamentalism. He is so arrogantly sure of his righteousness as to believe not only that he is saved, while all who oppose him are damned, but also that God speaks directly to and works through him. Visions are given great credence in mountain religion, and perhaps Rufe wants to believe his actions are being guided by divine revelation. Conveniently, everything Rufe claims God instructs him to do, Rufe does with the intent to harm others and further his own interests. When Sid discovers Rufe is to blame for Andy shooting at him, Sid throws Rufe across the room and leaves, shouting, “God damn you!” (123). Rufe prays on his knees, asking, “Did you hear what he said God?” as if turning Sid in for his offense (124). Rufe delivers a lengthy monologue in which he talks to God. First he complains, “You let the wicked prosper more’n the righteous. They git the best o’ everything in this world now. It wusn’t so in Bible times, Lord. Then you cut the wicked down afore the congregation o’ Israel. An’ the dread o’ You an’ the fear o’ You wus on all people” (124). He tells God his name is nothing but a swear word now, as exemplified by Sid’s outburst, as if trying to anger God just as he angered Andy earlier (124). The stage directions indicate that Rufe’s voice has been growing louder and louder “until
it culminates in an emotional climax” and that he gets up and crosses to the door “trembling in every limb” (124). He starts to tell God how to take revenge, again in keeping with the pattern he established with Andy earlier in the play: “I ain’t presumin’ to give you advice, Lord! . . . But if You’d make an edzample o’ this blasphemer—if You’d strike him down in the abomination of his wickedness by a bolt o’ lightnin’, it ’ld serve as a warnin’ to all like him” (124). Rufe offers that such an event would cause a great revival of “ole-time religion” in the mountains, as if trying to make the bargain more attractive to God (124-25). Then he is “struck by a new thought” and falls to his knees, saying “I know You commanded your servants to slay all blasphemers. . . . But I’d druther You’d do it Yourself, Lord” (125). He says it would be better executed and have more impact if God did it himself (125), displaying the same sort of cowardice in the face of danger as he has previously; Rufe has schemed his way out of a war and into having others do his “dirty work” for him before. But then he reassures God that he’s no coward, and offers to do the deed himself if it’s God’s will, even if it means paying with his life (125). In fact, he already has a plan: “If it’s your will that this blasphemer shall die, I’ve got a whole box o’ dynamite out in the store, with a time fuse long enough so I can git back here afore it explodes. I can blow up the dam while he’s under thar a-telephonin’, an’ the waters o’ Your wrath’ll sweep over him like they did over Pharaoh an’ his hosts in olden times! An’ the fear o’ You an’ the dread o’ You’ll be on all nations ag’in!” (125-26). This is a gesture of human initiative looking for God’s cooperation, rather than the traditional mountain religious idea of God’s will seeking out human cooperation; either this is evidence of the influence of outsider evangelists in the
region, or, more likely, Rufe is just grasping at straws, looking for justification for his own terrible scheme. A storm begins outside, and Rufe takes the thunder and lightning that come at the end of his prayer as a sign, and says, “I hear you Lord! An’, like Joshua o’ old, I go to do Your will!” (126).

Rufe continues to insist to others and to himself that his murderous and destructive act is God’s will. As the flood waters approach, he cries “in a sort of prophetic ecstasy” that Judgment Day “has come! This is the beginnin’ of a new world! To-morrow ’ll be the dawn of a new day!” (147). When the others criticize him and say he is drunk on either “licker er religion,” he says he doesn’t care what they do, “Fer verily I say unto you it’ll be better fer Sodom an’ Gomorrow on the day o’ Judgment than fer them! An’ that day ain’t as fer off as it has been!” (150-151).

He launches into a full-blown, one-man revival service. He gives a lengthy sermon about the end of the world during which he “rolls his eyes mystically” toward his critic, and “gazes about him impressively in the fashion of one ‘possessed of the Spirit,’” until he has “gradually worked himself up to an emotional singsong like that of the old-fashioned mountain preacher” (151-52). Meg and Jude are almost hypnotized by the rhythm and begin to shout “Amen” and other affirmations to his words, which recalls Emma Bell Miles’s assessment of mountain preaching as “mesmerizing” (152). Rufe begins to lose control and winds up loudly and fervently singing “I am bound for the promised land,” the refrain from the traditional hymn “On Jordan’s Stormy Banks,” swinging his arms “camp-meeting fashion” in an effort to drown out Andy’s attempt to discredit him (153).
He uses this same hypnotic preaching technique to try to woo Jude as she grieves for Sid, whom she believes dead, believing this will work since Jude also follows his “camp-meeting brand of religion.” He tells her, “Don’t grieve ‘bout him. Jude. He wusn’t born fer glory. . . . You ought to build your hopes on a firmer foundation. There’s still treasure in heaven if you’ll seek it the right way” (159). He quotes the hymn “What a Friend We Have in Jesus,” telling her to trust in God and pray (160). As he chants phrases like “fully trust Him— sweetly trust Him,” she begins to “sway with the same emotional ecstasy as before” and shout “Halleluyah!” (160). Finally, she “lays her head on his shoulder in a state of half consciousness” and takes the opportunity to kiss her “passionately on the lips” (160). At first she is startled, but he tells her it was just a “holy kiss” and eases her back into her trance-like state with his sing-song voice, but Meg interrupts them and his seduction can go no further (161-162). The holy kiss is not often performed between members of the opposite sex and is usually done in public in a church service, so Rufe is just using the practice to excuse his more fleshly motives.

As Rufe considers killing Andy, too, to protect his secrets, he prays with gun in hand: “O Lord, thy will be done not mine! I won’t kill him lessen You want me to” (164). Sid enters, saying in a deep voice, “Mene, mene, tekel, upharsin,” which is the phrase written on the wall by a divine apparition at King Belshazzar’s feast in Daniel, Chapter 5, in the Bible and Rufe immediately asks, “Is that you, God?” obviously believing God is speaking to him a second time (164).

Even to the last, Rufe looks to God to rescue him. When the Hunts have left him behind in the cellar, he begs: “O, God save me! You can save me if you
will! . . . I’ve got faith in You! I never have doubted You. . . . But everybody ain’t like me, God! They’s lots o’ folks that has to have proof! An’ if You save the others an’ don’t save me, like the fool, they’re a-goin’ to say in their hearts they ain’t no God!” (186). He emerges from the cellar and looks out the window at the flood, “terrified by what he sees” (186). He says to himself, “They’re right! [His voice drops to a hoarse whisper.] They ain’t no God!” (186). With a “malignant expression” on his face, he continues, “If they is He hain’t got no use fer folks like me! He’s fer them that’s on top! That’s what He is!” stands on the tips of his toes and with great “defiance toward heaven” shouts, “Damn you, God!” (187). He crumbles and mutters “[. . .brokenly in a fit of terror] Now I’ve done it! I’ve committed the unpardonable sin!” and screams “hysterically” for help from anyone who can hear as the curtain falls (187). Rufe is facing certain death moments after committing what some see as the only unforgivable sin, blasphemy, so he knows he has lost his place in heaven of which he had been so sure.  

This ending was so disturbing to audiences that at some point during the play’s run in New York it was changed to allow Rufe to escape, but all published versions retain the original ending, and all reviews and most articles make reference to Rufe’s death.

Even though the villain gets his comeuppance in the end in *Hell-Bent Fer Heaven*, it still leaves us with a bleak picture of mountain religion, in which people like Rufe use religion as a tool for personal gain, good people are easily duped by clichéd religious words and gestures, much of their faith is based upon fear of hell, they believe in a God who takes sides and takes revenge, and even a gentle soul like
Meg can be persuaded in a moment of anger to leave a man to die and feel righteous in doing so.

Despite the controversy over Hughes's receipt of the Pulitzer Prize and his play's often negative portrayal of mountain religion, *Hell-Bent fer Heaven* is a complex, disturbing, and involving drama. Rufe Pryor is a fascinating, though repulsive, character, and Hughes's telling of his story is a compelling exploration of the tragic fate that may await the self-righteous and the hypocritical. The play makes good use of biblical imagery and entertains throughout, holding the audience in suspense even in its final, chilling moments.

*Ruint*

Rufe Pryor is a misguided, overzealous layman who will use religion to justify any misdeed that will help him win the woman he wants, but in Hatcher Hughes's 1925 *Ruint*\(^5\) we see that even preachers themselves will use religion to further their personal romantic agenda. In the play's first scene, Mrs. Horton and Mrs. Akins gossip about young Mandy Hawkins being pregnant out of wedlock. Mrs. Horton is shocked to learn the father is rumored to be a man who is "a tryin' to preach": "Umn-ump! An' him so good an' r'ligious! Why I've hyeard him pray in public myself" (20). Mrs. Akins, on the other hand, is not at all surprised: "Shucks! Them's the wust sort among gals. I reckon it's a good thing he knows how to pray, fer he shore will need help from the Lord if Jim Hawkins gits a-holt of him" (20).

The only preacher we actually see onstage in *Ruint* reinforces Mrs. Akins's thesis about preachers. When he hears the rumor that Mary Jane has been "ruint," he leaves in the middle of a camp meeting, even though "the mo'ners wus stacked four
deep in front o’ the mo’ners bench,” meaning that many people were convicted of sin and ready for salvation, to come to her home on the pretext of saving her from the devil (87). He tells the women Satan is “a-walkin’ this mountain at this very minute,” and even claims to have seen him (88). He says Satan has disguised himself in another image, and describes a man who sounds just like Reginald, the young man Mary Jane loves, dressed in his golfing clothes (90). When the women ask why he isn’t out chasing devils right now, he counters:

For all ye know I may be hot on the trail o’ one right now. In Bible times they ’us seven devils cast out o’ one woman. The Book don’t say, but it’s my belief they ’us all she-devils. I know fer a fact they’ve been a-roostin’ in women critters ever since. An’ if I ain’t mightily fooled, Mary Jane, they’s one a-perchin’ in you right now! (92)

When they leave him alone with Mary Jane so he can save her, she resists all his efforts to loudly preach the devil out of her (95-96). Then Abraham lowers his voice to an “intimate” tone, and reveals his true agenda: “I’ve got a special reason fer wantin’ to bring ye into the fold. . . . I’ve been a-layin’ off fer some time to tell ye: las’ spring, shortly after my wife died, the Lord revealed to me in a dream that ye wus to be my next” (97). Again, we see a man using the mountain belief in visions to his personal advantage. However, he has underestimated her; Mary Jane is clever enough to see it is Abraham’s will, not God’s, that she be his wife. She fires back: “It’s quair He never said nothin’ to me about it,” but Abraham reasons, “That’s only nachel. Ye ain’t in close tech with Him like I be” (97).

Next, Mary Jane questions why God would match two people of such disparate age. Abraham says he would have preferred an older woman, “but ’taint fer us to question His judgments” (97). In fact, he even has a biblical explanation:
“They’s good Scriptur fer matin’ them that’s separated by a wider gulf o’ years than me an’ you. Thar was Ole King David, fer edzample, had a little slip of a gal not more’n sixteen to keep him warm when his blood fust begun to thin. An’ he ’us old an’ well stricken in years, while I’m jist now in my prime” (97-98). Mary Jane is unimpressed and reminds him he can’t expect to have all that a king once had (98). Abraham then tries to shame her by reminding her that he is willing to accept her even though she is no longer virginal (98). No matter how many biblical reasons he gives, Mary Jane flatly refuses his overtures (98-99). Finally, he leaves, but only after delivering a pious parting shot:

Well, the Lord sent me to ye an’ I come. What’s more, I come in a Christian spent. An’ I’m a-goin’ to leave the same way. I forgive ye. But I doubt if the Lord’ll be as easy on ye as I’ve been. He’ll find a way to bow yer stubborn neck! (99)

At first Mrs. Horton is upset when her daughter calls the preacher a "reprobate," but when she learns of his proposal and how he “blames it on the Lord,” she, along with Mrs. Akins, is just as repulsed (100-102).

Mrs. Horton then tells a humorous tale about how her husband “allus has contended that [Abraham] ‘us called to preach by Jim McKinney’s jackass instid o’ the Lord” (102). According to Abraham, he was walking home drunk after visiting a still, when, as he passed behind McKinney’s land, “he hyeard a voice from heaven a-cryin’ ‘Abraham, go preach! Go preach! Go preach!’” (102). Mrs. Horton says Amos has heard McKinney’s jackass bray many times and is convinced that is what Abraham really heard (102). Mrs. Akins wonders why no one has told Abraham instead of letting him “make a fool of himself” preaching (103). Mrs. Horton
explains: "Amos did study about it once. But he said as fur as he could see his preachin’ had jist as much effect as them that ’us called reg’lar. An if the Lord wanted him stopped he could do it hisself, fer he had enough to do to ’tend to his own business" (103). This statement, while seeming to undercut the power of being called by the Lord, actually affirms God’s power by allowing that it would be within God’s power to stop Abraham if he so desired.

Even though it is used to humorous effect, once again the most corrupt, manipulative character in the play is the one who speaks for religion. Mary Jane is deceitful, too, but she has youth and a broken heart to explain her behavior. Abraham Holifield, at fifty old enough to know better, presumes to be the voice of moral authority, yet uses his position and others’ faith in God to try to achieve a selfish goal.

**The Funeralizing of Crickneck**

*The Funeralizing of Crickneck* by Percy MacKaye was written in the early 1920s, and published in 1933 as part of the three-play volume, *Kentucky Mountain Fantasies*. It takes place in the cabin of Claundesty Coots, called “Widder” Coots, “in the Kentucky mountains, at the present time,” which would be the 1920s. As the play opens, it is twilight and Widder Coots rocks in a chair by the door as Preacher Samp Green gives a funeral sermon just outside for her late husband, Crickneck Hen. We learn from the sermon that Hen was supposedly hanged for murder and buried in an unknown location by the government more than three years ago. Preaching a funeral months or even many years after someone dies and is buried was not uncommon in the mountains until the recent growth of the funeral home industry in
the area. Often, travel was difficult and winter weather made it even more so, so the sermon and eulogy would be delayed until a time when the entire family could be present. In some instances, the service had to wait for the visit of a circuit riding preacher. This practice of delayed memorial services is called "funeralizing," so clearly MacKaye was aware of the custom since it appears in the play's title.89

During the funeral service, a man identified as the "Stranger" has secretly entered the cabin and hidden in the shadows. He is dressed in dirty striped clothing and is barefoot. Throughout the funeral sermon he examines various items in the cabin, but Widder Coots never sees him.

When the mourners leave and Samp Green stays behind, the widow's demeanor suddenly changes; she is no longer sad, but flirtatious. The two drink moonshine and talk about how the widow has hidden Hen's nest egg from his other heirs, his children by a previous wife. Only after Samp shows her the marriage license he promised on his last visit does she reveal that she has hidden half the money in her petticoat, and the other half in the three apples of the Tree of Paradise quilt pattern of her "bed-kiwer" (78).

Samp says the license is all they need to be married, but Widder Coots insists on a service, so Samp performs it, playing the roles of both preacher and groom. Just as the bride says "I shore doos!" the "stranger blows out the candle, leaving them in darkness" (82). When they light the candle again, the couple sees that the whiskey bottle is gone and the "bed-kiwer" has moved from the bed to the fireplace area, where the skeining reel turns slowly all by itself. They are terrified when the quilt begins to move and speak, then they realize it is Hen, but they think it is his ghost.
He says that he has come for his clothes and that if “Beelzybub” comes chasing him
to say, “You seed me scootin’ by, an hour sence, headin’ for the north star” (92-93).

Hen hides again as the jailer, whom the couple takes for Beelzebub, arrives
looking for a man who “calls hisself all ways of a weather... he varies from
Culpepper to Coots. Three year ago he were hanged for Coots, and last week he
broke jail for Culpepper” (94-96).

When the jailer leaves the house for a moment, Hen cuts the money out of the
apples in the quilt and demands the balance from Samp Green. He takes the
Preacher’s coat, pays him five dollars for the funeral, drinks a toast to the bride, and
slips out as the jailer knocks at the door.

The jailer says he will try to track Hen to the north, and Samp says he’ll leave
now that they have no nest-egg. Hen returns to tell Samp he is leaving him “the
raiment of a bridegroom, what weds a double-hosbanded wife,” his striped prison
garments. Samp Green continues to try to weasel out of the marriage: “Hit’s
moughty ticklesome... Weddin’ service needs a witness, Claunderstey... Jail gear!
— I axes ye, pint blank; Kin we chanct hit?” (106-107). Hen pops his head back in
the door to speak the play’s final line: “Shore! — I’s witnessed ye. — Chanct hit,
fellers!” (107).

MacKaye’s play offers yet another example of a randy, greedy preacher. The
beginning of the play sets him up as a fervent preacher of the gospel, comforting
widows and saving souls. His sermon reflects the passionate sing-song style of
traditional mountain preachers. As is often the case in mountain funerals, he takes
the opportunity to preach on salvation. He preaches Hen into heaven, despite his
criminal record, and uses the idea of Widder Coots’s someday finding a new husband as an analogy to John the Baptist’s description of Christ as the bridegroom of the church. He closes the service by having the congregation sing a traditional hymn about meeting loved ones again in heaven, “There’s a Land That Is Fairer Than Day,” perhaps most recognized for the words of its chorus: “In the sweet by and by, we shall meet on that beautiful shore.” All signs point to him as a faithful advocate of traditional mountain religion.

He tells the departing mourners he will stay behind briefly to comfort Widder Coots, saying, “God’s leaving me behind for the widder’s mite,” but the moment he and the widow are alone, the split between his public and private personae becomes obvious (67). He and the widow are flirtatious and clearly already romantically involved. He immediately wants to switch from drinking water to corn liquor, which contradicts the values one would expect a mountain preacher to hold. When she insists he eat first, he tries to use Genesis to make her feel guilty:

Sister Coots, hit’s a sight terrible how you women-kind holds things back on your man-kindred. That’s how come Temptation and the Fall. Old Eve started hit at the stand-in. She kep’ a-holdin’ back that-thar apple on ole Adam; that’s why he fell for hit! Ef she’d jist a-said — “Here! Take hit, old feller!” he’d never a-tetched hit. (69-70)

He is in a hurry to learn about the money Hen left behind and marry the widow.

It is the widow, not the preacher, who has moral and religious concerns about their plans. Before she will reveal the location and amount of her “nest-egg,” she insists, “I ’needs fust for to argyfy hit with ye, releegious” (71). Again, he dismisses her concerns as a female quirk: “Lordamighty, ain’t the woman-kind quar
deevils! Hit’s a roundybaut lane of releegionin’ what leads to love, but they allers prefers hit to the straight-and-narrer short-cut!” (71). He is cavalier about the matter, saying, “Shoot your text, ole sister” (71). When she asks if she can trust him, he uses his occupation as proof: “Ain’t I a caller of the Gospel, and a comforter of widders?” (71). But when she tells him her question is about the eighth commandment, his attitude suddenly changes: “Thou shalt not steal! Claundesty!” (72).

Widder Coots is concerned that hiding Hen’s next egg is a sin because Hen has six children from a previous marriage who came looking for their inheritance. Again, Samp Green serves his own agenda with his assessment that concealing an amount as small as three hundred dollars is an act of thrift, not theft (73).

She explains that part of the money is hidden in a quilt:

Hit were the bed-kiwer I quilted for ole Hen, when me and him was married, me bein’ his third woman. Hen choosed it hisself, the Tree pattern. Hit were a parable, he says. So he axed me to tuck-in three apples, and them scarlet-red, ’cause they was three Evas, he says, what had tempted him three times to defy Providence with tastin’ the fruits of knowledge. (79)

Just as Hen had a biblical reason for wanting her to quilt the pattern, Widder Coots has a biblical reason for hiding the money in the apples: “Bein’ hit were kindly the likes of a Bible temptation, I just hided hit in the fruits of the Tree o’ Paradise” (78).

When the preacher declares he is eager to sleep under that quilt tonight, Widder Coots interrupts him: “Set down, man! . . . They’s more yit releegious matters for to be considered” (79). An exasperated Samp complains “I’m ruined out with releegionin’!” (79). He is far less concerned with religious propriety than she
is. Widder Coots demands a proper religious wedding to accompany the license Samp has brought. She believes her late husband is watching "from the banks o’ Jordan" and fears he might haunt them unless they are properly married “by a Holy Gospel preacher” (80). Samp insists that it is acceptable for him to perform his own wedding ceremony, and does so, using different tones of voice to designate the roles of preacher and groom (81-82).

Just as the ceremony is complete, the "stranger" blows out the candle and the couple hears him move. Widder Coots asks the preacher to pray, but he cannot. Again, her religious devotion proves greater, and she prays herself. The terrified preacher thinks the spinning skeining reel is “witchery,” and wants to go get a “charm-doctor” (87). He is willing to put his faith in folk magic rather than the God he so passionately preached about earlier. He accuses Widder Coots of “lettin’ in a witch-deevil” and tries to flee rather than help her as the bed-cover inches toward the door (87). Widder Coots demands: “Samp Green, ef be you’re a true Bible preacher, you’ll come over here quick and collect the balanct . . . Jist challenge hit with the Word o’ God” (88). He says he cannot, but she insists until he reluctantly, nervously begins reciting scripture from Genesis.

When Widder Coots see who it is, she cries, “Hit’s him — my ole Hen, loost from heaven!” and Samp, who was adamant in his sermon that Hen was in heaven, now says, “Loost from hell, hit is!” (91). Hen explains that “Beelzybub” is tracking him: “Oh, he’s aimin’ to captive me for hisn, the ole Divvil, jist to spite Godamighty what claimed me fust for his angels” (93). Widder Coots shakes the dazed preacher
to warn him the devil is coming, and Samp utters this comic reversal of the phrase from Matthew 16:23 he means to quote: “Git me behind thee, Sattan!” (93).

When he hears the jailer approaching, Hen orders the couple: “Kneel down now! Shet your eyes! Hark for the voice of thunder, and pray for salvation!” (94). He blows out the candle and hides. Widder Coots and Samp Green believe the jailer is the devil because of his name: “My name’s Beals; Bub Beals; Bealsy Bub, some calls me. Haint’s you-all heem o’ me? I’m County Jailer from Die-Easy” (96).

After the jailer leaves, Hen returns, cutting open the quilt and speaking “with an imitative intoning,” and language evocative of the King James Bible, in mockery of Samp’s preaching:

Yea, he cometh! But where doth he cometh?
Doth he cometh in the flesh of Mortality and the bones of Corruption? — n-n-n
Doth he cometh in the vestiments of Transgression, and the mortgages of Mammon? — n-n-n
No! Never no, smart friends!
He weareth the onsightful garments of the Lord-un;
He onsealeth the vision of his weepful widder. —
[Dropping into conversation]
Hain’t that how hit sarmons, Brother Green? (98)

When Samp is reluctant to return the balance of the money, Hen suggests religious reasons why he should: “Not yet? Well, speakin’ of laws and Bible Commandments, there’s the Eighthly and Tenthly: Thou shalt not — steal, is hit?

And how doos your Bible say about Neebor’s Wives, Brother Green? Thou shalt not never covet ‘em behind a bed-kivver; is that hit?” (99). Though he has successfully pointed out Samp’s hypocrisy, Hen admits that one technically cannot steal from or
covet the wife of a "hant," so he offers them a deal. Hen promises that if they give him the nest egg they will not see him again until after Judgment Day (100).

Once the nest egg is gone, the preacher is no longer as certain of the validity of their marriage as he was earlier in the evening. He is not sure it is a worthwhile risk. Widder Coots asks "in fond trepidation": "Why is hit, Samp? — Yonder’s the Tree o’ Paradise yit greenin’ for us, and yere’s the red seal for a new-fresh apple-fruit — Samp! — and you’s spoke the holy sargvice yourself. — We’s plumb wedlocked, ain’t we?" (106). Samp Green has been clever enough to make sure there was a loophole in the procedure. One wonders if he planned to desert her all along once he had gotten what he wanted when he answers in a "shrewdly dubious" tone: "Weddin’ sargvice needs a witness, Clauundesty" (106). Hen seems to get the best of him again as he pops his head in to remind them that he has been their witness.

Like Ruunt, The Funeralizing of Crickneck uses the hypocrisy of a preacher to generate humor. A man who is outwardly holy, but sins behind closed doors and manipulates a widow for money and affection is certainly not a positive representative of mountain religion. And, while one might expect the preacher’s faith to be the strongest, in time of crisis he acts cowardly and turns to superstition in panic; he is easy prey for Hen’s trickery. Samp Green lacks Rufe Pryor’s murderous instinct, but in some ways he is even less ethical because he seems more conscious of his wrongdoing; he is calculating where Rufe seems delusional.

MacKaye’s play is entertaining in its inclusion of the audience as conspirator in the trick played upon Widder Coots and Samp Green by Hen and the comic confusion that results. As in Timber, MacKaye crafts a heavy dialect of questionable

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authenticity for his characters and relies on a number of negative stereotypes, but here they are used with a lighter touch. The use of the practice of funeralizing as a plot device reflects the research MacKaye did within the region, and he renders the commonplace nature of delayed funerals and the quality and content of funeral sermons rather well. The play does not reflect positively on traditional mountain religion, but its tight construction and lighthearted satire have theatrical merit.

**Unchanging Love**

Romulus Linney's *Unchanging Love* presents us with another, even darker, picture of a hypocritical preacher. We never meet the preacher, nor any other minister, yet his impact on the characters in the play has been great.

When Shelby Pitman first sees the Musgroves' teenage daughter Judy in 1921, he offers the family a silver dollar in exchange for a kiss from her. Judy hesitates because his coat makes him look like a preacher. Her father explains, "When our child was little, Mr. Pitman, she was carnally deceived by a man was a preacher. . . . He told her 'Of such is the Kingdom of Heaven,' when he stuck it to her. She's been skittish ever since" (15). Once she has been assured Shelby is not a preacher, Judy kisses him at her mother's request (15).

When Shelby later asks for Judy's hand in marriage, her father reminds him and his father that, "through no fault of her own, she was carnally deceived by a preaching scoundrel day after she turned eleven year. She is not a virgin and I wouldn't want my beloved darlin' low-rated and maybe even returned on account of it" (26-27). Shelby marries her anyway.
Even after Shelby and Judy have had their first child, she is still haunted by the memory of the preacher. She tells her sister-in-law Barbara: “Shelby bothered me when we was married. He was so strange and cold. But he wasn’t mean. Not like that Preacher. . . . I couldn’t go to sleep beside my husband, not for the longest time, but I can now. He don’t scare me. Still, I like it best when he’s gone” (46).

While the Musgrove family is understandably distrustful of preachers, Shelby’s cynicism extends even farther. When his sister Barbara expresses concern about the ethics of their family’s business practices, she says it bothers her to be involved in cheating people: “See here, in the eternal world beyond, when we are judged, what then Shelby? What will we say to God the Judge, when we are on trial before Him, for all eternity? What then?” (40). Barbara’s question reflects the hope of heaven and fear of hell so common and so powerful in mountain tradition. But Shelby dismisses her concern, saying there will be no trial:

Hit’s because there ain’t no God. If there ain’t no God, who’s going to judge what? See? Well, maybe there is a God somewheres, but there shore ain’t no faith. Everybody says they believe, but they don’t. . . . You just think you do. Life is just life, it don’t come from nowhere and it don’t go nowhere. It just is, then it ain’t. . . . If God is so smart and we are all a-going to live again, then — why die in the first place? Huh? Preacher don’t believe. Judges don’t. Old Ray Hobbs . . . says people sitting in church just so’s other people can’t say they’re not. Hell, it don’t matter what nobody does. . . . When it’s over, it’s over. [He laughs.] We’re on the cross, not no Jesus! (40-41)

But the play’s final moments show that, while Judy and her family do not believe in organized religion anymore, they still have a measure of faith. When Judy’s baby, Tommy, dies, she asks Barbara where her son’s soul has gone, and even Barbara “can’t say” (60). Barbara asks if Judy wants a church service for the baby
and she reacts intensely, recalling the Bible verse quoted to her by the molesting preacher: “No! I won’t have no preacher come near him. . . . Preacher will say, ‘Blessed are the little children. Of such is the kingdom of heaven.’ God damn all that. Somebody else say something else. Now” (61). Barbara cannot, so Elmer does his best, in a prayer that encompasses a number of mountain values — familism, belief in a powerful God, love of land and nature, and patriotism:

Lord, we mean no disrespect to you, but our daughter can’t abide Christian preachers, and you know why. We ask you anyhow to look down on us here. Please bless her baby . . . he only lived long enough to love his Momma, but he did that well. Say what else? Well, we know the glory of your works. We have seen them, from the top of the Shenandoah to the bottom of the Smokies. We love our country where we live, and believe there will be good here and there will be bad. That is your Will. God bless us and the United States. (61)

Judy says the baby would want all of them to say goodbye, and asks her father to sing “Unchanging Love” (61). So while Linney’s play shows us how evil people can use religion to commit destructive acts, in the end that does not diminish the “wideness to God’s mercy” or invalidate his “unchanging love.”

The Musgrove Family Singers sing more secular folk tunes than anything else in the play, but they bookend the story with the traditional hymn “Unchanging Love.” It is sung for a birthday party in the first scene, and a funeral in the last. Linney also closed Holy Ghosts with this same hymn, sung by a young mother holding her baby in the snake-handling church. The theme of the song is God’s grace, a key element of mountain theology. But in this play, the song has a beautiful but tragic quality since it is sung as meek and gentle Judy holds her dead baby up to each Pitman family member, including Leena who murdered him, for one last
farewell. Leena’s evil agenda has triumphed and she seems to go unpunished, at least in any public or legal sense. But the dignity of Judy’s sweet forgiving gestures of love toward the family, particularly Benjamin, and to her dead child seem to redeem humanity. Judy may not seem to be the recipient of God’s favor, but instead she seems to be the instrument of his grace, so that is a small triumph, if a quiet one, in such a dark world.

*The Kentucky Cycle: “Ties That Bind”*

*Ties That Bind*, the fourth play in *The Kentucky Cycle* by Robert Schenkkan, takes place in 1819. Patrick Rowen is 43, his son Ezekiel (Zeke) is 19, and his son Zachariah (Zach) is 17. The Rowen family’s slave, Sallie Biggs, is 49 and her son Jessie is 26.

As the scene at the Rowen homestead opens, Zach and Jessie are wrestling as Zeke sits on the porch reading a Bible. Finally, Zeke is provoked to fighting and cursing when Zach insults Zeke’s sweetheart. Patrick catches his sons fighting and reprimands them both, but especially Zeke for fighting with his younger, smaller brother, who is clearly Patrick’s favorite. Patrick tells them to get cleaned up because people from the circuit court are coming about his bankruptcy case. He tells the boys if he scratches his head they are to come out of the house with rifles and do “whatever it takes” to keep the land (92-3).

The judge arrives with two deputies. Patrick has Jessie give the judge a drink from a jug of whiskey, which cheers him, as the last of the judge’s party arrives, introduced only as “Mr. Jeremiah” (94-5). The judge tells Patrick he does not own the land he has used to secure his loan, only “the paper on that land,” which angers
Patrick, who says he has been unable to pay off the debt because of the change in currency from paper to coin (99). The judge explains that Mr. Jeremiah has purchased Patrick’s debts from the bank, so even though it collapsed, the Rowens are still in debt to him. He says the land is no longer worth what Rowen once paid for it, so even that will not cover the debt. Even the livestock are not enough, so Patrick resorts to selling the two slaves.

Zach begs Zeke to convince their father not to sell Sallie. Jeremiah will not take Sallie because she is too old, and when Sallie realizes Jessie will be sold away from her, she finally tells Patrick, “YOU BE SELLIN’ YOUR OWN BROTHER!” (108). But even when he learns they shared a father, Patrick says, “I ain’t sellin’ no brother, I’m just sellin’ a slave,” which devastates Zach (109-110). The Rowens even end up losing the house and becoming sharecroppers for Jeremiah.

Once the deal is made, it is revealed that one of the deputies was Patrick’s Native American mother, Star, in disguise, and Mr. Jeremiah is young Jeremiah Talbert, whom Star rescued the night Patrick killed Joe Talbert so he could have Jeremiah’s sister Rebecca for a wife. They are enjoying their revenge.

When Zach criticizes his father, Patrick disowns and banishes him. Zeke stays, but it doesn’t seem to matter to Patrick, who is weeping over losing Zach, until Zeke starts talking about plotting long-term revenge.

For a few moments at the beginning of the fourth play of The Kentucky Cycle, it seems as if the tempering influence of religion has finally entered the bleak, violent, cruel world of the Rowen and Talbert families. The lights come up on Zach and Jessie wrestling while Zeke sits on the porch reading the Bible (85). While some
characters have quoted scripture when it conveniently suited their arguments in earlier plays, this is the first play in *The Kentucky Cycle* where an actual Bible appears or in which we hear of anyone attending church. When Zach says “Hell,” Zeke reprimands him for cursing (86). When Zach gets the wind knocked out of him, Zeke lectures him:

ZEKE: Don’t know what you expect, wrestlin’ on the Lord’s day.
ZEKE: Now, what’s the Lord got against wrestlin’? Weren’t you just bendin’ my ear the other day about a Jacob or somebody?
ZEKE: Didn’t he wrestle him an angel or something?
ZEKE: He didn’t wrestle him no field hand, and he sure didn’t wrestle him on the Sabbath! (87)

At one point Zach thinks he has Jessie beaten in the wrestling match; when Jessie asks if he is sure of that, Zach jokes, “Sure as my redeemer liveth!” (88)

Despite the teasing, Zeke continues to refuse to fight, even when Zach begs for his help:

ZEKE: I told you, Zach, you supposed to remember the Sabbath and keep it holy. It hurt me somethin’ fierce to watch you suffer like that but I figure if it brings you closer to God, well, that’s just the price I gotta pay.
ZEKE: Shoot! You listen to that, Jessie! Man’s just a natural-born coward, hidin’ behind the Scriptures. (89)

But we soon discover that Zeke has an ulterior motive in being so pious. Jessie remarks, “No sir, I think Mr. Zeke done got him the Spirit, all right. But it ain’t Jesus got him by the short hairs” (89). Zach is amazed to hear that Joleen Johnston has his brother “on a short rope”:

ZACH: Well, I’ll be! You mean all this prayin’ and studyin’ . . .
JESSIE: Them clean hands and shiny boots . . .
ZACH: That six-mile walk over and back to meetin’s ever Sunday. . . That all for some woman? That true, Ezekiel? Ol’
Joleen got you towin’ the line here and that’s why you become this overnight holier-than-thou pain in the butt! (89-90)

Zeke’s conviction against breaking the Sabbath weakens, then comes crashing down, as he physically attacks his brother for saying, “Way I heard it, ’fore she found Jesus, Joleen get down on her knees for just about anybody!” (90). This lighthearted illustration of the hypocrisy of Ezekiel’s religious posturing is a harbinger of much darker mixing of religious and personal motives to come in this play and the next. It also sets the tone for the religious hypocrisy of the judge who is about to arrive.

The judge who comes to the Rowen home to discuss Patrick’s bankruptcy case hopes to use religion to further his own legal agenda. When Patrick introduces his sons, the Judge Goddard responds: “Zachariah and Ezekiel! Great men, learned men, men of judgment and of the law! An auspicious beginning. I always find that a house in which there is respect for God’s laws also respects the laws of this great country of ours. They follow one another as night does follow the day. Would you not agree, sir?” (94). When Patrick says only Zeke is baptized, and that the boys were named by their late mother, the judge realizes Zeke is the only one on whom religious manipulation may work. He turns to Zeke: “So you’re a Christian, are you, young man? Read your Bible, do ya?” (94). When Zeke says yes, Zach denies that either of them can read (94).

Later, when the judge’s associate is introduced, “Mr. Jeremiah” sends a chilling foreshadowing message by playing on Zeke’s religious devotion:

JEREMIAH: You there, boy. Mr. Preacher Man.
ZEKE: Ezekiel.
JEREMIAH: Ezekiel. [He smiles.] Do you know who Jeremiah was in the Bible, boy?
ZEKE: A prophet?

JEREMIAH: A great prophet. He sent the whole Hebrew nation into exile. Tore 'em from their homes and sent them wanderin' in the desert for seventy years! (96)

In fact, Jeremiah and Ezekiel are both prophets associated with the period of exile, while Zechariah is immediately post-exilic and, like Zach in this play is critical of his father, was critical of the priestly leadership; so the names of all three are associated with a Biblical period of displacement and strife.98

Jeremiah also tries to use false piety to achieve his own vengeful ends. When the judge says they are seeking justice, Jeremiah steers the talk back toward his goal being purely business: “No offense, Judge, but a man who goes to a court of law looking for ‘justice,’ he gonna be pretty disappointed. I think Mr. Rowen there’d be the first one to agree with me on that point. No sir, you go to court to get the law enforced. We’ll leave ‘justice’ up to God, eh, preacher man? All I want here is my money” (104-105). The irony is that Jeremiah is there to avenge what Rowen did to his family; he is doing a great deal to help along whatever justice might be coming from God.

Zach, who does not believe in God, turns out to be the only member of the Rowen family with much of a conscience, and as a result is driven to leave home because he cannot accept their hypocrisy. When trying to persuade Patrick not to sell Sallie and Jessie, he turns to Zeke for help and gets no Christian sympathy from his pious brother, who summarily dismisses his anguish with, “Bible don’t say nothin’ agin it. Joseph hisself was sold into slavery” (106).99 Zeke’s use of the Bible as the
sole standard for what is right and wrong is typical of the literal interpretation of and
importance placed upon the Bible by mountain “people of the book.”

Sallie, the slave Michael Rowen raped and impregnated before his son
Patrick killed him, is the only person in the play who looks to God for protection and
mercy, rather than a vengeful sort of judgment. She does not pray for the Rowens’
destruction, but for her baby’s life: “John Biggs he tell me, ‘You see how things is.
Man kill his own daddy ain’t gonna spare no baby no sword. We just gots to keep
quiet and pray that baby take after his mama.’ And the Lord, He heard them prayers,
’cause my Jessie was born black as night and I knew he was gonna live” (109). Even
after Patrick has sold her and she is being taken away, she does not take it upon
herself to exact or ask for revenge: “I can’t curse you, Mr. Rowen — you done that
yourself when you sold the best part of you” (116).

In the play’s final moments, we see Zeke’s religious hypocrisy that was
before at least driven by love for a girl, turn into a darker version of itself, fueled by
hatred and revenge. The play’s final lines reveal Ezekiel’s twisted application of
scripture that will cause such destruction in the cycle’s next play:

ZEKE: Hush now. Got to be strong. Got to be stone. The Lord, he
ain’t gonna forget us. No way. No sir. He just be testin’ us.
PATRICK: My boy 
ZEKE: We got to wander in this desert here, like them Hebrews, but
then he gonna bring us home.
PATRICK: My boy 
ZEKE: And then . . . [Beat.] Then we gonna settle up. (118)

Anything Zeke has learned in church is now just another tool in his arsenal as he
fights his father’s bitter war.
The Kentucky Cycle: "God's Great Supper"

"God's Great Supper," the fifth play of Robert Schenkkan’s Kentucky Cycle, takes place 42 years later in 1861 at the Rowen homestead. Patrick is 85 and feeble. Ezekiel is 61 and married to Joleen; their son Jed is 28. Jeremiah’s son Richard Talbert is 39, and his only son Randall is 10.

Ezekiel grew up to be a hellfire and brimstone preacher, and his son Jed narrates as the play begins, recounting a disturbing dream that begins with his father preaching and ends with “two ragged sisters” chanting a list of names (124-125).

The dream ends, and the scene is the run-down Rowen front porch. Young Randall Talbert is very attached to Jed and wants to come live with him while his father is away fighting in the Confederate army. Jed tells Randall to return home with the gun he has taken from his father, reminding Randall that Mr. Talbert would not approve of him visiting, much less living there. Talbert arrives, in uniform, and angrily sends his son home. Talbert has come to recruit Jed for the Confederate army. Ezekiel forbids him to go. They argue, and Jed insists he is going.

When Talbert leaves, we learn this has all been an act for his benefit and that the plan is for Jed to murder Talbert in battle. When Ezekiel discovers Randall under the porch, he threatens to kill him, but Jed convinces the boy the plot he just overheard was all a joke, and so spares the boy’s life. Jed makes Randall his “blood brother” so he is sworn to secrecy (145). After the boy leaves, Ezekiel cautions, “Ain’t no point gettin’ too fond of Randall, Jed. Make your mind up to it — we gonna kill ’em all” (146).
Jed does go to war by Talbert's side and, after saving his life to avert suspicion, kills him by pushing him out of a boat when he is injured and cannot swim. Talbert cries for help, but Jed smiles coldly and watches him sink. Then Jed joins up with the guerrilla fighter William Clarke Quantrill in Missouri and kills innocent civilians under his command.

Jed returns home disillusioned to find the family burying Patrick. Ezekiel wants to attack the Talbert place that night. When Jed suggests they run the Talberts off rather than kill them, Ezekiel insists that they kill them in return for the loss of the land and their years of servitude, and his wife supports him, saying he must do this for the sake of future generations. Ezekiel assures him this will be the last battle. Jed agrees.

They kill all the men, slave and free, except for Sallie and Jessie’s family, whom Ezekiel sets free. They use one of the men as a mule to plow salt into the fields. Ezekiel kills young Randall, which devastates Jed. Jed spares the two Talbert daughters, thinking, “What can women do?” but the girls speak as in the dream, listing the names of those who killed their family (161-62). Jed returns to the subject of his recurring nightmare as the play closes. He says it is always spring in his dreams: “Spring. [Beat.] And then the harvest. [He pours dirt onto RANDALL’S grave.]” (162-63).

By the time we see Ezekiel again in God’s Great Supper, he has become the “preacher man” the others teased him about being years before in Ties That Bind. His view of God has become even darker and more vengeful with the passing years, and he curses and lies often, revealing that his hypocrisy may be greater as well.
Ezekiel’s brutal nature is revealed in the early moments of the play when he catches Randall sneaking in to see Jed, manhandles him, calls him a “damn devil’s whelp” (126), and terrifies the child by saying, “God damns all liars, boy! He gives ’em to the devil and Satan rolls ’em in corn meal and fries ’em and terrible is the sound of their screams!” (127). When Randall’s father, Richard, arrives, Ezekiel reacts angrily and Jed requests, “Let the man speak, Pa, ’fore you go damning him to hell” (136). Ezekiel is always focused on damnation when he speaks of God and the Bible and uses his theology as a weapon in his vengeful campaign against the Talberts.

When Ezekiel and Jed pretend to disagree about Jed going to war, they make good use of Ezekiel’s position as a preacher throughout the argument. Ezekiel peppers the entire discussion with Bible verses quoted from memory, reflecting the extensive oral knowledge and command of scripture expected of a mountain preacher. As soon as Talbert suggests Jed come along, Ezekiel says, “That’s the devil talkin’ in him, son, sure as I’m standin’ here!” (138). When Ezekiel orders Jed not to go, Jed retorts, “Save your preachin’ for Sundays, Pa” (138). When Jed says Ezekiel is getting old, he preaches in his combative way, as his wife plays the role of the verbally affirming congregation:

EZEKIEL: You hear him Jesus, spittin’ in your face and violatin’ your most sacred commandments! Exodus! Chapter 20! Verse 12! “Honor thy father and they mother!”
JOLEEN: Amen!
EZEKIEL: Fall to your knees, sinner, and beg for forgiveness! Old! If Jesus could roll that stone away and rise up outta his cold tomb, I can surely come down offa this porch, old as I am, and still whip your butt! (139)
Ezekiel says if Jed leaves he must leave forever, and this final exchange ensures that Talbert will believe it when Ezekiel slams the door on his son moments later:

**EZEKIEL:** You hear me! You go and I'll put the curse of God on you, boy! He'll rot you from the inside out and send your unrepentant soul straight to hell!

**JOLEEN:** Ezekiel!

**EZEKIEL:** “A place of unquenchable fire!” Matthew, chapter 3, verse 12! “A place of memory and remorse!” Luke, chapter 16, verse 19! “A place of misery and pain!” Revelations, chapter 14, verse 10!

**JED:** Pa. I'm tired of Jesus, and I'm sure tired of these mountains, but most of all... I'm tired of you. I'm goin’. (139)

When Talbert leaves, they laugh about how he bought their act “hook, line, and sinker,” and Ezekiel jokes, “Hell, he swallowed the whole damn pole!” (140). When Ezekiel says he thought he would “bust a gut,” Joleen affirms his statement with “Amen,” just as she did his religious statements earlier (140).

But Ezekiel is more than a clever manipulator; moments later he shows himself to be a ruthless opponent, capable not only of the grave sin of blasphemy, but, still worse, also of murdering even a child without hesitation. When he catches Randall eavesdropping on their plot to murder Talbert during the war, Ezekiel shouts, “GOD DAMNIT!” and demands to know how long the boy has been there, “damn it, or I'll tear your guts out and feed 'em to the damn hogs” (142). He coolly pronounces to his family, “We gonna have to kill 'im now” (142). Jed spares the child by convincing him the whole conversation was a joke, and buys his silence by making him his “blood brother.” Even Ezekiel’s “blood brother blessing” is in keeping with his sin-focused fundamentalism: “Jesus! Look down on these two sinners... and bless 'em to thy Holy Name. Let the blood they share... purge...
and... and join them together even as your blessed blood did redeem us of our sins and bring us together with God... in whose Holy Name we pray” (145). Since he is normally so fluent when making spontaneous statements of damnation and judgment, his faltering blessing may be read as revealing that he has very little practice with the more positive duties of his office, such as blessings. Cursing is his area of expertise. Even Jed acknowledges his flawed delivery: “Oh, yeah. Nice prayer, Pa. Real... movin’” (148). Murder was more what Ezekiel had in mind, and he cautions Jed not to get too attached to Randall, because he plans to kill him along with all the other Talberts (146).

Jed Rowen leaves a home where religion is twisted to fit his father’s agenda to fight a war where leaders use God in similar ways. Richard Talbert calls the Union a “godless enemy” and “Babylon” (147). William Clarke Quantrill quotes “an eye for an eye” as Biblical justification for his brutal guerrilla tactics (152). Quantrill’s selective application of religious principles is evident when he coldly and summarily executes innocent people, then turns to Jed, “gestures toward the loot in Jed’s hands and shakes his head disapprovingly,” and tells him, “Lord don’t love a thief, boy” (155). Quantrill is, in a sense, not just using religion to justify his often unethical tactics, but actually “playing God” with the lives of the people he attacks. He is a sort of anti-Christ acting out his own final judgment, an incarnation of the worst elements of an Old Testament, arbitrary, vengeful interpretation of God, and lines in the play support that view of him. When Jed first meets Quantrill’s disciples, he is persuaded to join them when Gus says, “Where you been, country boy? William Clarke Quantrill is God in these parts!” (152). When a Union soldier
tells a disguised Quantrill that he would love to do battle with the feared guerrilla fighter, Quantrill announces himself by declaring, “Well, Christmas come early son, looks like you gonna get your chance” (154).

Jed was able to act as judge, jury and executioner for Talbert and ignore Talbert’s pleas that he help him “FOR THE LOVE OF CHRIST” because he felt he had to in order to avenge his family. After being horrified at Quantrill’s execution of the prisoners, he is sickened to learn that Quantrill’s brother Charley, in whose name he kills, never existed. When Quantrill asks, “What difference it make, Jed?” and laughs, Jed and his friends break with the group. He returns with them to Kentucky, only to find his father still eager to mete out his own version of divine justice on the Talberts.

Ezekiel and Joleen both quote the same Old Testament Bible verse to justify their deeds as Quantrill did, “An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth” (158). Jed strongly resists the idea of more killing, but they bully him into it with family loyalty and divine duty:

JOLEEN: . . . You’re a good boy, Jed Rowen, don’t you ever forget that. The Lord is askin’ a terrible thing of you, I know, but you got to be strong, honey. You just keep His promise in your heart and you think about your own children.
EZEKIEL: Jed?
[Beat.]
JED: One more day . . .
EZEKIEL: And then you can rest. Just like the Lord did when his work was done. (158)

Joleen says the Lord is asking a terrible thing of Jed, but it is actually Jed’s earthly father, not his heavenly one, asking him to do it. Ezekiel is no different from
Quantrill. Jed even says he uses techniques learned from Quantrill to carry out his father’s order (159).

Ezekiel is shouting a sermon as they ride in and wreak havoc: “O Lord God, to whom vengeance belongeth, show thyself! For the day of their calamity is at hand, and the things that shall come upon them make haste. . . . You rich men, weep and wail over the miserable fate descending on you! You have lived on the earth in wanton luxury and the day for slaughter has come!” (159). As they burn the house and kill the men, still Ezekiel preaches: “Can you see the flame, sinner! Can you feel its heat?! God has not forgotten your crimes! No! He will pay you back in your own coin! Can you see the flame, sinner?! . . . Come and gather for God’s great supper to eat the flesh of all men, slave and free, great and small!” (159) As they make Talbert’s brother serve as their mule while they plow salt into the fields: “That the whole land thereof is brimstone and salt, that it is not sown nor beareth nor any grass groweth therein! . . . The land thereof shall become burning pitch. It shall lie waste and the raven shall dwell in it” (159-160).

In the midst of all this, Jed makes the connection and sees clearly for the first time how false his father’s faith really is: “I could hear Pa preachin’ hellfire and judgment on ’em, but all I could think of was Quantrill laughin’ about his brother Charley, and I knew what we did had nothin’ to do with God” (159).

Little Randall begs, “Please, God, Don’t kill me, Jed!” the exact words his father had spoken to Jed when he first sensed his life was in danger (160, 150). Jed tries to help Randall escape, but Ezekiel kills the boy anyway. When the killing is done, Ezekiel takes from the farm no loot but the gold pocket watch that once
belonged to his father Patrick, uttering the same words as Quantrill: "Lord don’t love a thief, boys," completing the connection between the two (161).

Jed does manage to spare Talbert’s daughters, but even they are part of the recurring nightmare that haunts him (161-162). Jed closes the play telling how the “shadows” of the experience haunt his days and the dream he described at the beginning of the play haunts his nights (162). In the dream, the horrors of that day at the Talbert place are firmly bound to the horrors of Biblical Armageddon: "My dream always begins with me in church.... My pa, Ezekiel, preaches from the dark chapter of the Bible, the one that always scared me as a kid: the Book of Revelations" (123). It is appropriate that Ezekiel is so fond of Revelation, as the biblical Ezekiel’s visions are tied symbolically to John’s vision of the end of the world. Ezekiel is preaching from the text he quoted that day: “Then I saw an angel standing in the sun and he cried aloud to all the birds flying in mid-heaven, ‘Come and gather for God’s great supper, to eat the flesh of horses and their riders, the flesh of all men, slaves and free, great and small!’” (124). Jed sneaks out of the church into an apple orchard full of rotting fruit. He is the lone diner at a “cold church picnic,” his own sad version of “God’s great supper,” where he is fed “to bustin’” by the ragged Talbert sisters as a strange man sits silently across from him. Jed is afraid of what will happen when he stops eating, so he makes himself sick. The man removes his hat, revealing that he is Quantrill, taunts, “Have some more, Jed,” and laughs. Then the women recite the names of the men who destroyed the Talbert farm and murdered the family. After they speak Jed’s name over and over, he wakes up (125).
By the time we see Jed again in the play that opens Part Two of the cycle, the horrible haunting experiences have been glossed over or omitted entirely from the story of his life that he has told to his children. But, significantly, he also seems not to have passed on any of his father’s frightening religious ideas to the children, either. After God’s Great Supper, religion all but disappears from any place of importance in the dark world of The Kentucky Cycle, almost as if Jed took the poisoned faith his father preached and buried it along with Randall. Perhaps after being forced to confront the horrors performed in God’s name that resulted from his father’s hypocrisy, Jed decided that God, like Quantrill’s brother Charley, does not even exist.

Many reviews and critical articles note the violence and feuding in Ties That Bind and God’s Great Supper, and how poorly it reflects on the character of Appalachian people. But they neglect to mention that Schenkkan not only paints the people as greedy and brutal but as religious hypocrites and blasphemers of the worst order. Schenkkan is not the first to portray mountain religion in a negative light, nor will he likely be the last, but in his work even faith is turned into an ugly thing on a level not seen before in theatrical portrayals of Appalachia. Schenkkan makes creative use of the text of Revelation and skillfully weaves biblical imagery into his tale of revenge and brutality, but his plays leave us with virtually no alternative image of traditional mountain religion to counterbalance the evil perversion of theology exhibited by the Rowen family and others in The Kentucky Cycle.
"He will give me grace and glory, and go with me all the way": Stories, Songs and Stitches

Not all portrayals of mountain religion are negative. In the last few decades of the twentieth century, several plays appear which treat the faith of mountain people with respect and sensitivity. These plays are mostly written by authors who have some tie to the region, having either been raised there or lived there for an extended period. They reflect the depth and complexity of mountain religion instead of dismissing it as shallow or misguided. The plays often focus on the grace, mercy and love of God rather than on judgment. The characters may have arguments with certain aspects of their churches and often have lapses into sin or crises of faith, but ultimately they make peace with God and themselves and are enriched by the experience.

**Why The Lord Come to Sand Mountain**

Romulus Linney’s *Why the Lord Come to Sand Mountain* was first produced in 1984 as part of the Philadelphia Festival for New Plays, and may be performed as a one-act or as a second act that follows Linney’s one-act *Sand Mountain Matchmaking* for a complete evening of theatre called *Sand Mountain*. The setting for both reads: “Place: Sand Mountain. Time Awhile ago” (6, 24).

The play is narrated by the Sang Picker, an old mountain woman who picks the herb ginseng to sell for money, a common occupation in Appalachia at one time. There is thunder and wind as the lights change and her tale begins.

We see “The Lord” and “Saint Peter” who wear “long dark coats, mountain hats and kerchiefs, and carry small packs on their backs” (26). They ask the Sang
Picker for directions to Sand Mountain. She tells them the way and they travel on, but with a storm brewing and night coming as they reach Prosper Valley, Saint Peter wants to stop. Prosper Valley has good bottom land, nice houses and farms, and churches; we even hear hymn singing. A “Prosper Valley Farmer” recognizes them and asks them to stay, but the Lord insists they continue to Sand Mountain, so the Prosper Valley Farmer follows at a distance to watch unseen.

They weather a storm and a two mile climb up the mountain, and finally see “a little tee-ninesy light in what was jest the worst kind of slattery old cabin” (29). In the cabin live Jack, an old man, and Jean, his young wife, with their fourteen children; Fourteen Children is “played by one child, a boy as young as possible” (29). Jack and Jean are suspicious at first, but then recognize the two and let them in. Saint Peter is horrified at the appearance and the drunken state of the couple. They offer what little they have to their guests, as Fourteen Children speaks the lines of the children fighting over their portions. The Lord compliments the soup, which disgusts Saint Peter.

The Lord calms the fighting among the children by telling stories until they get sleepy. Jack offers brandy to the Lord, who accepts it, again silencing a protesting Saint Peter. Jack, Jean and the Lord swap superstitions and wise sayings, then tall tales and jokes. Saint Peter finally tries and fails at telling a joke himself.

After many hours, Jack asks, “Lord, you strike a body dead, they tell a Jesus tale?” (38). Saint Peter objects, but the Lord wants to hear. Many of the stories make Saint Peter the butt of the joke, which makes him wonder why that is and why the Lord would make him endure them.
The Lord asks Jack and Jean for one more tale, the story of Old Man Joseph and his family. The Sang Picker says “this man and his young wife told the old story The Lord needed to hear, and to hear it, from them, is Why The Lord Come to Sand Mountain” (39). The family sings snippets of the “Cherry Tree Carol,” as they tell an apocryphal folk version of the story of Mary, Joseph and Jesus, with Jean playing Mary, Jack playing Joseph, and Fourteen Children playing Jesus.

Mary is a young virgin, and Joseph, her elderly husband, thinks Jesus is the product of an affair, not a holy child as his mother claims. He forces Jesus into men’s work early in life to keep him from being spoiled by Mary, and Jesus rebels against him. When Jesus gets in trouble and Joseph tries to make him apologize, Jesus tells him and Mary to go to hell, so Joseph strikes him. Jesus grabs Joseph’s staff and uses it to knock him down. Joseph is sleepless and feverish and says he sees the Angel of Death. He tells Jesus to look out the window and tell him what he sees. A remorseful Jesus sees nothing, but the Lord speaks the following lines for Fourteen Children, who holds Jack/Joseph’s hand:

Jest like ye said. But I’m here, too. Yore boy. I tell ye, magic is mine, powers whut stretch beyond this earth . . . Ain’t nothing stronger than my love for ye. Kin ye hear me? . . . I’m a telling at black-dress angel, put up ye great sword, and step aside. Angel of Death, ye going to wait. I got to talk to my Daddy. I got to tell him goodbye. You wait. . . . The rivers of fire are cool water. The mountains of hell are sweet bottom land. Nary thing burns ye. Nary thing kin hurt ye. Everythang is all right. Go in peace, Daddy. (46)

The Sang Picker narrates: “When Joseph died, Jesus wept” (46). Jean sings a few more bars of “The Cherry Tree Carol.”

The Lord lets the fire go out and is ready to go once the story is finished. In the morning, the Lord says to the couple, “What this morning you first begin, will
not stop until tonight” (47). Jean turns to the chore of laundry and an endless supply of beautiful new clothes comes from the tub. The Prosper Valley farmer has seen this and demands the same blessing for his people. At first the Lord refuses, but Saint Peter insists. The Prosper Valley farmer tells the people to open their purses and begin counting silver dollars so they’ll be rich, but then suggests they all go to the woods to relieve themselves first so they won’t have to stop all day. The Sang Picker remarks that the Lord moves in mysterious ways.

She says there are many legends about why the top of Sand Mountain is bald, but that some say the Lord keeps it clear because of his memory of the night spent in that shack where “he liked the way he was treated” (49). She closes the play by saying, “Course a body kin deny it. Say The Lord never did laugh or tell no tall tales. Well, I never heared him laugh, but everybody knows he liked a story, and I’ll dispute that anywhar. At’s what I think. [Pause.] Now. [She leans forward, smiling.] What do you think?” (49).

Linney’s play is a fable that affirms mountain people and their faith and satirizes the condescending attitudes of mainline churches who fail to see the mountain people as faithful or worthy. It blends folk wisdom and religion to create a picture of mountain theology that is filled with grace, redemption and love rather than judgment and punishment.

The Sang Picker narrates the story, designating it as part of the local oral tradition, using folk elements universal to mountain oral tradition, but tying it to the local landmark, Sand Mountain. She filters her religious ideas through folk wisdom and vice versa. She says mountain people understand why the raven did not return to
Noah after the flood: “Bible says so. But don’t say why. I’ll tell ye why. Ever soul on Sand Mountain knows yore raven will jest downright dispute with ye. We are like that too, hereabouts. Can’t read no Bible, but love to dispute the thang anyhow” (25). Her statement reflects the oral mastery of scripture in the mountains described by Loyal Jones, Bill Leonard and Deborah McCauley, the importance of determining its meaning, and the stubbornness of mountain people who are firm in their beliefs. She credits her faith and folk medical practice with her long life in spite of hard conditions: “Gen Sang and Bible Stories, that’s how. Roots of life. Yes, sir. Chew Gen Sang, ponder Bible Tales. Keep yore body alive in spite of debts, doctors and even husbands” (26). She sees healing power in stories, particularly Bible stories, a belief that is borne out by her tale of Jesus’s visit to Sand Mountain. She explains the importance of stories of all kinds to mountain culture:

I reckon you’ve heard Smoky Mountain head benders a-plenty. How Jack Killed the Giant and The Ghost of Daniel Boone, all that. And Bible Tales a-plenty, too. Noah in the Ark, Jonah in the Whale, Daniel in the Den, Moses Up the Mountain, all that. Ain’t no disputing them. But around here, we fancy ’em all mixed up together. something a body ain’t heared four hundred times, something a body kin dispute. Like Why The Lord Come To Sand Mountain. (26)

She begins her tale, painting a vivid picture of how the Lord and Saint Peter ask her directions with a storm brewing on the mountain. She makes clear that their trip had a definite purpose: “I tell ye, plank flat them men are Saint Peter and the Lord Jesus hisself. Come to the Smokies a-looking fer Sand Mountain” (27). In keeping with mountain belief, the Lord is taking the initiative, looking for specific people he wants or needs to connect with, not waiting for them to take the lead.
On the way to Sand Mountain, the two come upon Prosper Valley, and Saint Peter is excited to see the “good bottom land” and nice, established settlement with well-kept, modern houses and farms (27). They hear the choir singing “What a Friend We Have in Jesus” in the church, and meet the Prosper Valley Farmer, who recognizes them by their halos and brags of how “We all love ye, Lord, and to worship ye day and night, why, that’s what we love a-doing most!” (28). He offers to let them stay and enjoy good food and accommodations for the night while they wait out the coming storm. Saint Peter, who represents organized religion in this tale, wants to stay with the prosperous and the saved, but the Lord wants to continue on to Sand Mountain.

After a difficult climb in inclement weather, they come upon the small cabin of Jack, his wife Jean and their fourteen children, which Saint Peter condemns as “pitiful” (29). Saint Peter is upset that the woman is much younger than the man, they are unkempt and their children dressed in rags, and the couple is drunk, but it does not seem to bother the Lord. The couple takes them in and offers them what meager food and drink they have, an act typical of mountain hospitality to travelers, no matter how humble the means of the family, a trait Loyal Jones lists among “Appalachian values.” The Lord enjoys the meal, while Saint Peter thinks it inadequate. The Lord entertains the children with stories until they fall asleep, using the storytelling skills that he used to tell parables in his ministry according to the Bible; but these are tall tales, not religious allegory. His attention to children also reflects the welcoming attitude of the biblical Jesus toward children.108
Saint Peter is distressed that the couple has a large family, but has never been married and does not attended church. He blames their shortcomings for their poor state: “Well, no wonder you’re in such a mess” (31). The Lord, however, does not condemn them. When they ask the Lord what happened to them to bring them so low as to drink too much and fight, sometimes hitting each other and the children, Saint Peter interrupts, “I just told you. Old man, young woman, no wedding, no church, and too much corn liquor,” but the Lord tells him, “Hush,” and turns to Jack with compassion: “We can’t really tell you. Life can be mysterious, sometimes, and sad. [Pause] Let me put it this way. I have no sermons on the matter. [With a look at Saint Peter.] And neither does he” (32). Saint Peter, like Jack Weller and other missionaries to the region, is quick to criticize the mountain people and blame them for their own difficulties, but Jesus, representing the personal and mysterious connection mountain people feel with the holy, takes a larger view, reflective of the view of life in the world as hard and something that must be accepted as difficult.

Jack offers an after-dinner drink of homemade “Sand Mountain brandy,” though it is not very good and there is very little of it, again offering all they have to give (32). The Lord seems to enjoy it, while Saint Peter cringes. The Lord makes the dying fire flame again so they can sit up late telling tales, and later performs another minor miracle, comparable to his first biblical miracle of turning water into wine, by making the jug mysteriously refill no matter how much they drink.109

The Lord is pleased with the wry bits of folk wisdom the couple shares, including a story whose moral is “Ye learn, but ye fergit” (33). It is to be reminded of something that he has come to this cabin, so this tale has particular impact on him.
Saint Peter, however, does not understand it, and decides after listening to more stories he deems “crazy,” that he will “fight fire with fire, and give ‘em something strong, human, and down to earth sensible. With a meaning to it!” (35). He fails to see that all the tales have meaning for Jack, Jean and the Lord. The story Saint Peter tells falls flat, frustrating him even more. He is irritated that they return to a series of stories he feels have no bearing on reality and no moral.

Then Jack asks, “Lord, you strike a body dead, they tell a Jesus tale?” and the Lord is eager to hear them (38). He is not bothered to hear tales about himself, but Saint Peter is very upset at the apocryphal, comical tales, especially because he is often the butt of the joke.

After listening for a while, the Lord asks for the story of Joseph the carpenter and his family, the story of his own childhood, which the family knows and agrees to tell: “Before the Lord and Saint Peter, this man and his young wife told the old story The Lord needed to hear, and to hear it from them, is Why The Lord Come To Sand Mountain” (39). The Lord did not want to hear praises from the church-going Prosper Valley faithful, but instead wants to hear this somewhat apocryphal and very human account of his beginnings from the most humble mountain family he can find. They are important in the eyes of the Lord, even if Saint Peter cannot see it, for he has chosen them to deliver something he needs, something only simple people of an oral tradition can deliver. The “Cherry Tree Carol” is woven throughout the telling; in Jean Ritchie’s discussion of the song, she quotes her uncle who often sang it for her: “‘Now, have you ever heard that’n about Mary and Joseph and the argument over that cherry tree? Well, that’s a kind of a quare song, little story I guess never
got printed in the Bible, but it got told by a whole lot of folks, and might be true, don’t you know!" The song itself is an important part of oral tradition, and the entire evening the Lord spends with the poor couple reflects the importance of oral tradition in both mountain folklife and traditional mountain religion.

In the telling of the tale, the humble mountain couple take the roles of Mary and Joseph, which symbolically link them to the holy family. The boy who plays all fourteen children plays Jesus, creating an even deeper connection between the Christ child and the poor children of the mountains; after all, Jesus came from humble beginnings, too, and was born in a stable. In the story, Mary tells Joseph, “Hit ain’t the ending what’s important. Hit’s the beginning,” a line which Jean will repeat to Saint Peter later in an effort to make him see why the story is important (41, 47). The Lord has come to the mountain to be reminded of his human beginning, with all its flaws, and the tale does just that.

In the story, Jesus is a rebellious, difficult child, and when tensions in the family come to a head over him, they behave in a way Saint Peter would surely have judged negatively had he been there to see it firsthand: “Joseph and Mary had to come get their boy, and when they did, there was a plain squalid, pore-ways family fight, right there fer everybody to see” (45). In the course of the argument, Jesus damns his parents to hell. Since he is the Lord, his words have power, so Joseph is actually damned as a result, and soon lays dying with Jesus at his bedside. He sees the Angel of Death coming, and Jesus does what he can to remedy the situation. He transforms the horrors of hell for Joseph so that he will not see them and they will not affect him. He tells him, “Ain’t nothing stronger than my love fer ye” and weeps
when his father dies (46). The love Jesus feels for his father is symbolic of the love he feels for all humanity after that, too. If, as Troy Abell observes, mountain tradition connects with him primarily as the “Man of sorrows” who suffered on earth, surely this story reflects the beginning of his human suffering. Once the story is told, he is ready to go. Saint Peter still does not understand why he would want to hear a story “about things that never happened,” and the Lord does not confirm or deny the truth of the tale; his reason for bringing Saint Peter may be indicated by the Sang Picker’s comment: “And the Lord loved Saint Peter, the fisherman he knewed as a man, who reminded him of the carpenter he’d knewed as a boy” (46). He loves Saint Peter and the organized church no less than he loves the “unchurched” mountain couple, but wishes he could see the holiness right before his eyes, just as Mary wished Joseph could see the holiness in the child Jesus.

As they depart, the Lord tells them they may now kneel, and he grants them a miracle. Jean begins washing and an unlimited supply of new clothing comes from the washtub. The Prosper Valley Farmer has been watching and is jealous. He fails to see how much the Lord values the mountain couple, and he tries to bargain for a blessing for himself:

Come see us, we’d give ye real comfort. Bean-bacon soup, goat barbecue, corn, black-eyed peas, feather beds, holiness hymn-singing and powerful preaching in yore sacred name. Ye didn’t care fer it. All right! But at least do fer us the same ye done fer them shiftless no good cornsqueezers ye spent yor time with. All we ask, if you are really The Lord and Saint Peter, is jest be fair! (48)

Saint Peter demands the same: “I stayed up half the night listening to lunatics tell crazy stories, when we could have been down in Prosper Valley with the faithful and
the devoted. I tolerated your kind of folks, now you tolerate mine!” (49). The Lord asks, “You sure about that? The faithful and devoted?” and then gives the Prosper Valley Farmer what he asked for: fairness (48). The Prosper Valley people want to count money so they will count all day, but when they “relieve themselves” first, that counts as what they first begin in the morning; their greed has tripped them up, and they get just what they deserve. The Sang Picker reminds the audience that this is an example of how the Lord works in mysterious ways. In Linney’s fable, we see an example of what McCauley calls “God-centered control” that seeks and rewards human cooperation, which is common to traditional mountain belief, contrasted with the “worldly” religion in the valley and its foundation in “human-centered control,” and in this instance God chooses not to cooperate with their initiative; instead he blesses those who opened their door to him after he took the initiative to seek them out.

The Sang Picker says that among the legends about why the top of Sand Mountain is bald is one that says the Lord keeps it that way in memory of how much the night spent in the cabin meant to him, and how much he liked the way he was treated there. She reminds the audience that everyone knows Jesus was a storyteller and liked good stories, no matter what they think of the truth of her tale, and leaves them to decide for themselves. In reminding the audience that Christ’s ministry was entirely oral, she validates mountain oral religious tradition as perhaps the most biblical way of knowing God.

Linney’s play gives us a family that is clearly designed to match the worst stereotypes about the mountain poor, yet gives them great heart and inner goodness.
and ultimately reveals them to have better core values than the prosperous people in the valley town. The Lord chooses the lowly people and has a profound personal and mysterious connection to them that he can only have with them and not with the good but emotionally limited people of Prosper Valley. In an act of grace, the Lord seeks out the mountain people, loves them, is an easy guest in their humble home, and blesses them despite the judgments of Saint Peter and the organized church. The play is a parable that shows the mountain soul in a merciful and loving light. It is with the mountain folk that Linney’s Lord is most at home.

Linney deftly uses the Appalachian storytelling tradition to shape his tale of divine grace and compassion, and the play is remarkable for its ability to evoke both laughter and deep emotion and entertain while plumbing deeper issues of faith and prejudice. *Why the Lord Come to Sand Mountain* is a tightly constructed play that draws the audience into its tale and into a world where religion and tall tales may combine to make direct contact with the holy possible for even the lowliest and seemingly least likely mountaineers.

*Hillbilly Women*

Elizabeth Stearns’s *Hillbilly Women* gives mountain religion a multifaceted treatment through the different voices of the seven women. In just a few short pages, the play touches on many key elements of and opinions about mountain religion.

Della Royce establishes her family’s long history in the region with the statement, “We go back to the first circuit riding preacher; before that there was nothing but wilderness” (11); it is a testament to the play’s economy that a single
sentence can describe the method by which Gary Farley and Bill Leonard say much early ministry was done in the mountains and the essential link between religion and mountain culture by using religion’s arrival to designate the region’s transformation from wilderness to a settled place.

Later in the play, the women engage in a seven-page long discussion of their experiences with religion. Some of the stories they tell are cynical and humorous. Jewel, the extroverted former mill worker, is the most irreverent. She mimics the passionate style of mountain preachers so vividly described by Emma Bell Miles, Loyal Jones and Deborah McCauley: “I used to make Della and her brother go. She’d sit up in the front pew and the preacher’d spit in her face . . . [Jewel imitates the preacher] ‘uhbaba . . . uhbaba’ . . . She’d come home screaming. . . . He’d spew and she’d start: ‘I ain’t goin’ anymore, mommy, he spits all over me’” (41). Della confirms the truth of the story and says it is how people judged whether a child was good or bad: “The best little kids sat on the first pew and got spit on for an hour. I was ten years old before I got smart enough to move back five pews” (41). Jewel remarks, “Well if you was me now, you’d’ve moved all the way back,” and Della reminds her that eventually she did (41). Jewel later adds that the spitting preacher no longer pastors that church, but, “they had to practically beat him over the head with a pine knot to get him out. And the next preacher they got in there . . . they got so mad at him . . . they egged his house . . . Well, he got in good with a couple of gals in that church, took the gals and the mother and formed a church of their own!” (44). McCauley notes that many mountain churches are remarkably small, as the family church in Jewel’s story likely is.113
She also jokes about the hypocrisy of some supposedly holy people, and

Betty Jo, the Cincinnati-dwelling migrant, and Siddy, the spunky union songwriter from Harlan County, most often concur:

JEWEL: You know the churches where the women sit on the one side and the men on the other . . . if you see 'em looking across, they're sleeping around!
BETTY JO: Usually, it's the piano player or the deacons.
JEWEL: Or the preacher!
SIDDY: [raising her cup]
   Father, Son, Holy Ghost
   The one who drinks the fastest
   Can have the most
DELLA: I'll drink to that. BETTY JO: Alright. (41)

The women joke about self-righteous people:

JEWEL: I had an aunt so narrow she thought everyone was going to hell but her and her children.
SIDDY: Yeah.
   God bless me and my wife
   My son John and his wife
   Us four and no more. (42)

All the women laugh at that remark, and Jewel says of her judgmental aunt, “Ohh, she put me in hell a dozen times” (43). But later, she makes clear that her feelings about that run deeper that it might seem: “I’m making all these silly little jokes; I’m sounding like I’m joking. . . . But, honestly, I think it’s a crock of ‘s’ you know, cramming religion down everybody’s throat. It really is the truth; you’re either in some little religious group or you’re already in hell” (44).

Denise, the quiet seamstress, speaks up only a handful of times to assert her positive feelings about faith in the midst of the tale-telling. She does not say the others are wrong about the foibles of churches and their pastors, but puts in a good word for God: “I was raised Primitive Baptist. I don’t go to church regular to do my
talkin’ and prayin’ and all, but I believe in God. I believe just as much, maybe more
than most people. I was saved at seven and baptized when I hit eight” (42); and
later, “Well I pray every day; I pray and work at the same time. You don’t have to
get down on your knees in church to pray” (44).

Young Sharleen, who works with Denise, seems to have mixed feelings. She
tells a story about a preacher who “preached her cousin into hell” because while
drinking a beer at home one Saturday night, he declined an invitation from the
preacher to attend church the following morning. That Sunday morning her cousin
had a heart attack and died while driving. His car ran off the road, and the preacher
was the first to arrive on the scene. He thought her cousin didn’t deserve help:
“People ran down to check and the preacher told ’em their hands were unclean and
God’d punish them” (43). The preacher was not asked to speak at the funeral, but
after the two preachers performing the funeral spoke “he gets up ’n says, ‘Anybody
that drinks, won’t come to church, goes clowning around in a car . . . is going to
hell’” (43). But later on she very sincerely tells of having been healed through
anointing with oil and laying on of hands at a black Holiness church (45), a practice
described by Troy Abell and Ted Olson as a common religious folk practice in the
mountains.

When Sharleen tells her faith healing story, she is defending Ada, her
childhood friend and the most fervently religious of the women. Ada’s memories of
the role religion has played in her life illustrate how important church and faith are to
many mountain people. She begins the discussion of religion by recalling how when
she was a child her father would carry her shoes and stockings as she walked
barefoot the two miles to church with her family: "Mama carried an old wet rag to
wipe my feet off. . . . just as soon as we got near the church, she’d put my white
stockings and my shoes on and we went in" (40). Ada’s family saw church as
special and important and Ada followed suit. She recalls that, unlike some people
who will never “understand what it really means to be saved”:

I felt accountable. I was so troubled; I was fifteen. I just knew that if
I should die I’d be lost. So one Sunday evening I asked all the people
to pray for me; we prayed for hours until I just couldn’t hear anything.
I had left the bench where I was on my knees and was clear across to
the other side of the room, not even knowing. I felt like flying ’n all
that burden was gone. (42)

In addition to that vivid account of being “convicted” and on the “mourner’s bench,”
she recalls her baptism in an icy river, claiming she never felt the cold (42). Loyal
Jones points out the importance of full immersion baptism, and the most traditional
churches still perform the ceremony in creeks or rivers.

Ada practices and believes in a very traditional form of mountain religion.
She asserts that “the regulars” really are moved by the spirit when they give their
lengthy sermons, and says, “I like the old ways. I won’t take bread and wine if I
don’t wash feet. In my home church, we pray the prayers of faith and sometimes
there’s healing: it’s according to how much faith you got in the person making the
prayer” (44-45). She says she believes God heals people to make others have more
faith (45).

The most intense moment in the discussion of religion, which is followed by
all the women except Jewel singing “Amazing Grace,” comes when Ada tells
about the death of her fourteen year old son in a car accident. She was very afraid
for his soul for a long time after that because he had never been baptized. But then she had a vision:

One night I was layin’ in bed a-prayin’ . . . for the Lord to show me the way and I lost sight . . . of everything! . . . there was a golden staircase in front of me and . . . on the top step was my son wearing the overall pants and a little checkered shirt . . . the same as when he was killed. I saw him standing on the top step with a big bright light behind him and he reached down with both of his hands saying, “C’mon, Mommy, c’mon.” Well, I was on the third step before I come back down! ’N all that worry left me. (45)

_Hillbilly Women_ illustrates that while many of the women share common experiences, mountain religion takes many forms and affects different people in different ways. Some, like Jewel, rebel against its rigid traditionalism and often judgmental stance. Some, like Denise, no longer formally practice religion, but their faith still plays a very central role in their day-to-day existence. Others, like Sharleen, have anger toward certain flawed self-righteous people like the pastor who “preached her cousin into hell,” while still having affection and respect for people like the Holiness congregation who healed her, and a sense of mystery about that sort of religious encounter. Still others, like Ada, hold fast to the traditions they have been taught, will defend their deeply-held fundamentalist beliefs, and have powerful experiences of signs and visions. Even though some of the women’s experiences with religion have been cruel and alienating, it is important to note that the most fundamentalist of all the women, Ada, closes the discussion with a story that allows for a forgiving God who spares her from pain and her unsaved son from eternal damnation.
**Smoke on the Mountain**

*Smoke on the Mountain* is a musical comedy conceived by Alan Bailey and written by Connie Ray with musical arrangements by Mike Craver and Mark Hardwick of traditional religious songs. It was first performed at the McCarter Theatre in 1988 and 1989, and premiered in New York at Lamb’s Theatre in 1990. The play is set “in the sanctuary of the Mount Pleasant Baptist Church in Mount Pleasant, North Carolina, located just west of Hickory near the Blue Ridge Mountains. It is a Saturday night in June, 1938” (9). Other than farming, the town’s main industry is a pickle plant, which has “lately begun laying people off at an alarming rate,” because of the Great Depression (9). The Sanders Family Singers are returning from a five-year hiatus from the gospel-singing circuit to perform at the tiny church that night. The play is performed as if the audience were the congregation. The stage directions suggest that they be given the “funeral home fans” commonly used during summer services in the days before air conditioning. The playwright emphasizes that Pastor Oglethorpe and the Sanders family are “not Southern caricatures or religious buffoons: they are real people” (11).

As the play opens, young Pastor Oglethorpe enters, turning on the solitary light bulb, apologizing for the tardiness of the gospel singers. He thanks the church’s benefactors, Miss Maude and Miss Myrtle for the electric light and their willingness to come to the first-ever Saturday night sing in spite of their “strong reservations about guitars and fiddles in the church” (14). He welcomes visitors from “the Antioch, Free Will, and Fire Baptized Holiness” (14). The oldest Sanders

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daughter, June, age twenty-three, runs in, apologizing on behalf of the family. She explains that they are late because the bus turned over in a ditch.

Soon the whole family arrives, all of whom play instruments and sing except for June, who signs for the deaf even when there are no deaf people in the audience because, “Mama says I need the practice” (16-17). Burl, the father, starts to describe how “Vera’s legs were sticking straight up in the air” when the bus tipped over, and a “mortified” Vera, at the piano, begins their opening number, “The Church in the Wildwood,” in an effort to silence him (17-18). As they sing, Burl introduces the family, including Uncle Stanley and the seventeen-year-old twins: “Denise — she’s the girl . . . And Dennis is the boy” (19-20). They sing “Wonderful Time Up There,” one of many songs in the play that emphasize heaven in a way typical of the mountain churches studied by Jones, Abell, McCauley and others; afterwards, Burl explains how the family hasn’t performed in five years because of his mother’s illness, but that since her recent death (Pastor Oglethorpe gasps, “Not your Mama!”) they have felt called to perform again (21-22).

After they sing “Build on the Rock,” Pastor Oglethorpe lists all the prayer requests of the congregation, including one member who died in an accident at the pickle plant, and says he has “arranged to have that particular vat taken out of commission and inscribed . . . In Memory of Earl” (23-24). The family sings “Meet Mother in the Skies” in memory of their grandmother (24-25). They follow it with “No Tears In Heaven” (26).

As Pastor Oglethorpe makes a pitch for the Building Fund, young Denise finishes one of his Bible quotations and he is smitten. In his enthusiasm he risks
allowing Dennis and Denise to sing a rollicking version of “Christian Cowboy” (28). As they finish, he remarks, “[For Miss Maude and Miss Myrtle’s benefit] Us Baptists are pushing on into the modern world” (30).

After Burl gives elaborate testimony about how the Lord sent a sign to keep him from giving in to the temptation to sell beer like other, more profitable, filling stations, in which he compares a beer salesman to Satan and himself to Job, the family sings a song called “Filling Station” (31-36).

Next, Denise sings “I’ll Never Die (I’ll Just Change My Address)” followed by her story of sneaking away from home to audition in Charlotte for the role of Scarlett O’Hara in Gone With the Wind (37-40). She explains that she and Dennis trade years attending Bible School, and this is her year off, which may account for her behavior. She repents the sins she has committed against her family and prays she will eventually figure out what the sin against herself was.

The family invites Pastor Oglethorpe to join them for “Jesus Is Mine,” which is followed by Dennis’s attempt at a “sermonette” (42-3). Pastor Oglethorpe coaches him on how to preach from the pulpit, and Dennis does a poor job of trying to read what his mother has written for him. When he cannot find some of the pages, his mother tries to prompt him, but he suddenly does better when he strikes out on his own with no notes.

The next number is “I’ll Live A Million Years,” complete with interpretive movement by Denise and June (48-9). As the girls march in place, Pastor Oglethorpe gasps, “Oh, no! Not dancing! . . . [To congregation] They’re not dancing; they’re just moving with the spirit” (49). But Miss Maude and Miss Myrtle are leaving as Pastor Oglethorpe shouts at Uncle Stanley, “We don’t dance here!” to which Stanley responds, “Shit!” and storms out (50). Pastor Oglethorpe calls for a break, and the family rushes off to find Stanley as the pastor summons June and Denise into his study.

As Act Two begins, Pastor Oglethorpe assures the congregation the girls are sorry, but the family quietly protests by quoting Bible verses which mention dancing in a positive light. Stanley returns and sings “Everyone Home But Me,” followed by testimony about his fall into sin and his life working among rough men building bridges (56). He gives a touching account of how he found his faith again when the foreman’s daughter, a toddler, brought the roughest of the men to tears by hugging him. He leads the family in singing “I Wouldn’t Take Nothing for My Journey Now,” followed by “Angel Band,” “Bringing in the Sheaves,” and “Whispering Hope” (57-62).

Vera uses a June Bug in her children’s devotional, saying when a June Bug fell in her lemonade, “God, in his wisdom, let me see that . . . all of us are June Bugs in this world. Flying aimlessly, hitting the screen doors of life, and drowning in the refreshments!” (63). She shows how a June Bug she releases flies around with no direction “like a sinner,” but one with a thread, which she compares to Jesus’s love, tied to its leg will fly in perfect circles around her head (64). But she is frightened
when the June Bug lands on her and she stomps it to death, which alters her conclusion a bit, leaving her praying for a heaven with no insects.

After the family sings, “Inching Along,” “I’m Using My Bible for a Roadmap,” “I’ll Walk Every Step of the Way,” “I’m Taking a Flight,” and “Life’s Railway to Heaven,” June speaks (65-69). She tells of the power she felt when a tour guide let her push the button for the control gate at the Fontana Dam, and its giant sound, and how the chattering of the Methodist woman who helped them after their accident reminded her of that dam. She was so glad to have helped them that she thanked June and said she’d pray for them, which she hadn’t done in a while. June observes: “So what if I can’t sing and none of y’all are deaf. My job is listening. God’s power is loud like thunder, but it’s soft, too, like Miss Joanne” (70). The family finishes the show with “Smoke on the Mountain,” “I’ll Fly Away,” and “When the Roll is Called Up Yonder” (70-73).

Smoke on the Mountain portrays many characteristics of traditional mountain religion in a lighthearted and affectionate way, poking fun at some of its foibles, but ultimately respecting and valuing what it means to people in small communities like Mount Pleasant.

The church is small and welcomes visitors from many other small independent churches in the area, illustrating the principle of fellowshipping between small congregations in the mountains observed by Deborah McCauley in her study of the region’s traditions. Often, churches share buildings and resources, and some do not meet every week, so congregations visit one another’s services a great deal. Pastor Oglethorpe, like many of the preachers Loyal Jones interviewed, is
bivocational, also working at the pickle plant, which is typical of small churches that either do not pay their pastors or pay them very little. The congregation also prays for the sick and the needy in their community, and the pastor gives credit to their prayers for healing his mother's cyst (14). This reflects the belief in the healing power of prayer that Abell, Lippy, and Olson describe as common to mountain churches.

Since the play is made up largely of traditional hymns and gospel music, it reflects the importance of music in mountain churches. Many of the hymns deal with common themes of sin, salvation, grace, and heaven. The Sanders even sing what they call a "blood medley" that illustrates the important theme of the "redeeming blood of Jesus" in mountain hymns as noted by Loyal Jones. 117

The play also reflects the importance of scripture in mountain tradition. The characters often communicate by quoting Bible verses to one another, and Pastor Oglethorpe and Vera often become competitive, trying to out-quote the other one in order to make a point, illustrating the oral knowledge and mastery of the Bible described by McCauley.

Inspired preaching is also exhibited in Smoke on the Mountain. Pastor Oglethorpe speaks of having been called to preach (14), and when Dennis falters in delivering his prepared sermon, he stops and says, "The Lord has called me to preach, and I believe He'll fill my mouth" (45). In a classic example of the spirit-led preaching observed by Jones and McCauley, only after he decides to "let the Spirit lead" is he able to preach and he is able to speak without the help of his mother's notes. Even the family believes God has called them to return to their music.
ministry. Burl says when he thought of music again after his mother’s death: “I took it to the Lord. And just at the mention, He filled my heart to brimming with the thought of spreading the gospel through song and celebration. And I said Yes, Lord” (22). All the family members give personal testimony as the spirit moves them, which is also a feature of Spirit-led worship in mountain churches.

The play says a great deal about sin, including card-playing, dancing and extremes of hair and makeup. Burl’s account of his temptation by the beer salesman gives vivid testimony to his belief that drinking is a sin, and of God’s power to send signs to the faithful. Just as he is about to give in and agree to sell beer in his store: 

**BOOM!** That trunk lid blows open and a bottle cap flies by my head so close it just about pins my ear to the clapboard. Well, I am defrosted and down in the dirt with the beer man. And it hit me. The Devil! . . . This here beer man reminds me of old Satan himself. . . . I jerked that beer man up by his fancy lapels, I put my nose right up to his and I said, “Bud, I suggest you crawl back in that stinking Mercury and haul it down the road.” . . . I won’t sell beer in my store. . . . That bottle cap’s still stuck in the siding. Next time you’re up on Highway 11, pull in — I’ll show it to you. (34-35)

While the characters speak often of sin, they also have a lot to say about God’s grace and salvation. Vera’s illustration of how an unanchored June Bug flies erratically, while a bug tied to a string representative of Jesus’s love tugs on its string like a tempted sinner, but if it doesn’t pull too hard, flies in nice circles is a bit odd, and in the end doesn’t quite work out since the bug startles her and she kills it, it is well-intentioned. She felt called by God to give the devotion after she saw a sign from him in a June Bug landing in her lemonade. Despite her flawed delivery, the message she means to send is that God’s love saves sinners because without it people “are June Bugs in this world. Flying aimlessly, hitting the screen doors of life, and
drowning in the refreshments!” (63). Her message is that with God’s love “we will fly in perfect circles around God’s head in this hateful world and in the glorious world He has prepared for us beyond,” emphasizing the God-centered control, the separation from the world, and the hope of heaven so important to mountain faith (65).

The most powerful illustration of grace comes from the prodigal figure in the family, Uncle Stanley. He left the family and lived a life of drinking and sin while working on bridges over the Yadkin river. But God sent him a sign even there. Stanley was friends with a huge, rough, mean man named Leighton. One day they were sitting waiting for dinner, and the foreman’s wife who was serving them brought her daughter along:

She’s a-toddling along behind her Mama when she fixes her eyes on ole Leighton. Walks right over, crawls up in his lap, stretches out her little baby arms, and hugs Leighton’s neck. Her little cheek up there next to his. Now, you don’t even want to brush up against Leighton. You don’t want to get near him. So, I turn easy-like to pull her off him, and I see a big ole tear roll down his ugly face. Leighton turns to me and says “What you looking at?” And he squeezes that baby with those big ole ham hands of his and sends her back to her Mama. We eat our dinner, Leighton’s chewing on an ole cold biscuit and says, “That’s the first hug I’ve had since I was twelve.” When the Lord looked out over the five thousand, he was moved to feed them. And that multitude included the likes of Leighton and me. I wanted to come home. (56-57)

Stanley has seen God’s grace at work in the foreman’s little daughter, showing that no matter how much one may sin, God still cares and there is still opportunity for redemption, and that in fact he will take the initiative and seek you out just as the toddler came to Leighton, a very important principle in mountain salvation theology, which McCauley cites as a distinctive trait of traditional mountain religion.
The Sanders family speaks often of God's power, and June illustrates it in her story of being allowed to push the button to raise the gate at the Fontana Dam, but she also sees God's power in "Miss Joanne," the kind woman who helped them after their bus accident. She notes that "God's power is loud like thunder, but it's soft, too, like Miss Joanne" (70). June, like many mountain Christians, sees evidence of God's power in every event in her life; her faith pervades her entire world view.

*Smoke on the Mountain* may allow its audience to laugh at how shocked the congregation is by dancing and at the sometimes inept speaking efforts of Pastor Oglethorpe and others, but heart of the play is warm; Ray and Bailey have written a tribute to the faith of the characters in the play, not mocked it as a stereotypical hillbilly comedy might have. The play is often produced and well-received by theatres in the region, which is testament to its sensitive treatment of mountain religion. The play was revived in New York, again at Lamb's Theatre, in 1998, and the New York Times reviewer noted the dignity it gives to the people it portrays: "For all their sly, Bible-quoting efforts to manipulate one another, these characters share a deep affection, and the actors so clearly relish inhabiting them that the performance becomes a delightfully engaging revelation of the rich complexity, and downright orneriness, of simple people whose faith is powerful but far from unquestioning." Smoke on the Mountain is more than just a diverting musical and comedic entertainment. In the heartfelt and simple speeches of its characters, a depth of faith and of spirit is revealed, lending the play more dimension and impact than audiences might initially expect.

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Tom Ziegler’s *Grace and Glorie* premiered in New York in 1996 with Estelle Parsons in the role of Grace Stiles and Lucie Arnaz in the role of Gloria Whitmore. The play is set in Grace’s “cottage located in the Blue Ridge Mountains of Virginia one recent fall” (xi). Its only characters are Grace, a “ninety year old mountain woman,” and Gloria Whitmore, “late thirties, early forties. A New Yorker” (xi).

As the play opens, the “angry din of heavy earth-moving equipment” interrupts the peaceful sounds of the farm (3). Then we hear the Walkman Grace is wearing in bed blaring the “Good News Quartet” singing “Throw Out the Lifeline” (3). Gloria knocks, and when she hears Grace singing along, cautiously opens the front door (4). She is “attractive, dressed in a conservative, expensive suit” and carrying a leather attaché case (8).

Gloria has trouble getting Grace’s attention because she is absorbed in singing along to the music she is playing to drown out the noise from outside. Gloria explains that she has come from the hospital as a Hospice volunteer to help Grace. She has brought Grace’s medication, thinking she forgot it, but Grace explains that she did not want it. Gloria is concerned that Grace’s grandson leaves her alone with no working telephone, and the more Grace protests that she does not want her help, the more Gloria becomes determined to give it.

After several minutes of conversation, Gloria finally realizes Grace needs to go to the bathroom, and the women finally wind up using an old soup tureen that
once belonged to Grace’s mother-in-law for a bedpan. The humor of the situation helps break the ice.

Gloria is concerned about the digging, so Grace explains that she has sold the property to developers who will build time-share vacation condominiums and call the development “Apple Glade” because of the orchard on the land. Grace has moved from her home into the small cottage her husband built for his elderly mother after she was widowed, and when Grace dies, that will be torn down, too.

Gloria explains that she has an MBA and once had a thriving career, but since she and her attorney husband moved to the mountains, she has been volunteering to help the dying. She is surprised to discover Grace cannot read the pamphlets she has brought her, and has trouble convincing her she needs any assistance from Hospice at all. Grace wonders why Gloria wants to do this sort of work, but cannot get a satisfying answer from Gloria.

The next morning, Gloria comes by to fix breakfast for Grace, who is frustrated by Gloria’s ineptitude with the wood stove, pump and other rustic appliances. She cannot build a fire, and is surprised that just-collected eggs have bird droppings on them. She is lost in Grace’s world, but at least has used her business negotiating skills to get the telephone reconnected overnight.

Next Gloria begins to meddle in Grace’s sale of the land, explaining that she may not be getting a fair price and that if she had a contract the noise could be controlled. Grace feels powerless over any of that, but Gloria is determined to fix it.

Grace shows Gloria a sweater depicting the apple orchard she is knitting as a birthday gift for a young great-niece who writes to her; the girl is fascinated by her
oldest living relative, and Grace is sorry that she is unable to answer her letters. Gloria offers to mail the gift when the time comes, as Grace fears she cannot trust her grandson with the responsibility.

As the women get to know one another, Gloria shares her unhappy family history, including the death of her twelve year old son in a car accident, and Grace tells how she has survived all of her children. She tells Gloria she looks forward to seeing them again in heaven. Gloria is frightened by a rooster, a mouse, and then a dynamite blast, and it is Grace who winds up comforting her in a reversal of assigned roles.

Several days later the developer is still blasting away parts of the mountain as Gloria urges Grace to take medication for her intense pain. Gloria tells Grace she is taking legal action to restore the peace and quiet for her. Grace is nearly finished with the sweater, and it bothers her that Gloria is sitting idle while she knits, so she gives her fabric scraps to cut for a quilt top.

The women talk about family, death and fear. Gloria calls her husband to tell him she has decided to stay the night. Grace is concerned by how tense the telephone conversation sounds. Grace persuades Gloria to talk about her deceased son, and Gloria asks about her deceased children in return, wondering how she handled losing so many when losing one has been so hard for her. Finally, after Gloria has gotten emotional, Grace reveals her suspicion that Gloria is suicidal and pleads with Gloria to let her die first as Gloria bolts out the door.

The next morning, Grace is returning from picking apples off the ground for a pie as Gloria arrives with “New York” food for Grace to try. Gloria is excited about
the lawsuit she is planning to file against the developer on Grace's behalf to get her a fair deal. Grace is not as excited and cannot think what she would do with the money. Gloria wants her to make a will and leave it to someone who matters to her, perhaps to young Luanne for her college education. She also thinks Grace should make a videotape to send to Luanne with the sweater. Grace is upset because the previous night's conversation has made her think doubtful thoughts about God, and she is not very receptive to the idea of a videotape.

Outside, the machinery starts up again, and Gloria is angry because they are violating a court order. A horrified Grace runs outside in despair when she realizes they are leveling her beloved orchard, which they had promised all along they would not touch. Later that evening the women talk about how it was a reprisal for Gloria's lawsuit, which makes Gloria want to fight more, but makes Grace want to stop.

Grace asks Gloria to read to her not from the Bible, but from a pamphlet on death, and suddenly decides she wants to make the videotape after all. She even lets Gloria put some makeup on her, and while Gloria is styling her hair, confesses that she fell in love with a visiting preacher after she was already married. She never acted on her feelings, but the shame was enough to keep her out of church thereafter. Excruciating pain seizes her and Gloria forces her to take just a few drops of morphine. Grace is angry and troubled about the meaning of her life, but as the pain passes she calms down and is able to speak for the camera.

She falters at first, but then delivers an eloquent message to Luanne about the sweater with the orchard pattern, what it represents, and how it can be a metaphor for the meaning of life. Both women are deeply moved by the moment. As Grace tells
Gloria of her hopes and dreams for the little girl and how she now wants the money from the lawsuit so she can leave it to her, Gloria reveals that the camera is still running, creating a video to help authenticate the will she wants to help her write. The women have achieved a sort of catharsis and deep bonding. Grace gleefully tells Gloria she has decided to leave her the soup tureen/bedpan so she can remember what an “ornery old piss-pot” she was, and at long last goes to sleep while Gloria sits eating an apple.

*Grace and Glorie* is a sensitive, thought-provoking portrayal of the clash between traditional mountain religion and modern-day secular thinking that allows its two characters to find common ground and mutual respect through their struggle to cope with death and the meaning of life.

Grace Stiles fits the image of the traditional mountain woman. She is ninety years old and very much a product of her place and time, surviving almost as an anachronism in a world that is being overtaken more and more by mainstream contemporary American culture, as symbolized by the transformation of her remote farm into time-share condominiums and the invasion of her home by a well-meaning displaced New Yorker. The play opens with the incongruous image of Grace tucked under several quilts in her “primitive” cottage, singing along loudly to gospel music playing on her headphones as bulldozers rumble outside. This mix of the traditional with so-called progress is emblematic of the debate at the heart of the play.

Grace has many of the traits of someone raised with and still guided by traditional mountain religion. She is steadfast in her faith, despite the fact that has not attended church for fifty years. She always listens to the Gospel radio station,
however, which has been an important component of twentieth century mountain religion, as documented in Howard Dorgan's *Airwaves of Zion.*

Grace follows many of the rules of fundamentalist mountain religion. She has a literal, infallible view of the scriptures. When Gloria seems to discount her biblical arguments, she is troubled by the possibility that Gloria has read the Bible, yet still doesn't believe. When Gloria doesn't respond, Grace says "You won't answer because you know in your heart that the 'Good Book' is true. Ain't that right? Just 'cause I can't read it don't mean I don't know it's true" (70). She cites the Bible to defend her choices to Gloria. When Gloria suggests she make out a will, Grace counters, "Course you know what the Bible says about money. The root of all evil. Buys nothing but misery. I don't believe I want that on my conscience" (57). When Gloria suggests she do her hair and makeup for Luanne's birthday video, Grace protests, in a response typical of the traditional mountain Christians interviewed by Troy Abell and Loyal Jones, "Don't use make-up. Never have. . . . A painted woman. That's what you want me to show Luanne?" (63). When Gloria does finally persuade her to use just a little makeup, Grace is still uncomfortable with the idea: "This is vanity. You know that don't you? The vice of vanity!" She cites her conservative interpretation of the Bible to defend her stand: "It's because of Eve's vanity women suffer like we do. Because she give in to the devil, ate the forbidden fruit. That's why women wear make-up. To hide their shame" (69).

Grace also believes in the tenet of many mountain churches that blasphemy is the only unforgivable sin. In the first scene she gently asks Gloria not to take the Lord's name in vain, asking that she substitute "good heavens" or "good gravy" (24).
Only later does the deeper belief that underlies the simple request come to the surface. In the final scene, when Grace admits to her long-ago attraction to the visiting preacher, she tells Gloria that during the painful aftermath of that embarrassment she was angry and that it was the only time in her life that she doubted God; any denial of God's divinity is blasphemy in many mountain church traditions. Gloria, who is styling Grace's hair, fails to understand the gravity of that confession and dismissively comments, "That was a long time ago. Hold still." Grace is stunned: "Hold still! I'm rememberin' things goin' to send me to hell for all eternity and you tell me to hold still!" (75). And Grace certainly does believe in Hell and the Devil. When Gloria is sitting idle and insists she is not just sitting there, but thinking, it bothers Grace:

GRACE: Thinkin' is not doin'. Thinkin' is just a fancy word for idleness. And —
GRACE AND GLORIA: "Idleness is the Devil's workshop."
GRACE: It is, indeed. And I will not be party to contributin' one speck of anything to the devil.
GLORIA: I don't believe in the devil, Grace.
GRACE: You think the Devil cares? (42)

Grace's belief in God is so central to her existence that it is difficult for her to accept nonbelievers. She is bothered that her roommate at the hospital, Bernice Wallace, did not believe in God. Grace had to begin using the Walkman because Bernice objected to what she called "holy roller music" (13). She resisted a nurse's request that she wear the Walkman:

I kept sayin' no 'til Bernice finally hollers, "Grace, put the damn thing on your ears and shut the hell up!" You can probably tell Bernice was a heathen. Said only "fools" believed in God. Fools. Course, like I said, Bernice died yesterday. Closed her eyes for a nap and never opened 'em up again. I was just thinkin'. Be'cha anything Bernice
Wallace believes in God now! ... Why I'll bet the good Lord slaps a “Walk Man” on her heathen ears and makes her listen to “holy roller music” for all eternity! (13-14)

When Gloria doesn’t agree with her conviction that she will be reunited with dead loved ones in the afterlife, she is shocked: “S’pose next you’re goin’ to say you don’t believe in God. You and Bernice Wallace. Why is the good Lord sendin’ so many heathens ’cross my path?” (34-35). When Gloria recounts her ambitious life as a career woman in New York City and wonders in the aftermath of her marital troubles and the death of her son “What happened to my life, Grace? I mean no one believed in herself more,” Grace reacts to her self-oriented secular mindset: “You young people, all talkin’ 'bout ‘believin’ in yourself.’ I always thought faith was believin’ in somethin’ bigger” (72-73).

Grace believes in “God’s initiative” or “God-centered control” as described in McCauley’s writing. She sees God’s will in almost everything, from day-to-day events to issues of life and death. When Gloria tries to convince her she shouldn’t be alone in her “condition,” Grace argues with her:

GRACE: But I’m not alone. The good Lord’s here with me.
GLORIA: Oh, right. And just where was the good Lord all day when you needed help to go to the bathroom!
GRACE: He sent me someone to help, he sent me you! I just didn’t recognize you at first. (20)

When the water for her egg boils, Grace refers to it as “One of the Lord’s little miracles” (30). She even accepts the deaths of her children as God’s will (49).

Grace’s acceptance of God’s will reflects mountain religion’s acceptance of the controlling will of an all-powerful God that has so often been dismissed by observers like Jack Weller as a symptom of fatalism. However, when she explains it
in her own terms, it seems more logical and less a “backward” trait associated with laziness or hopelessness. It sounds more like a truth city dwellers have lost connection with, as in this exchange about the deaths of her children:

GLORIA: How did you deal with... losing them?
GRACE: Deal with it? I’m not sure I know what you mean. I grieved. Still do. But it was the good Lord’s will.
GLORIA: And you didn’t question it? The good Lord’s will?
GRACE: What I don’t think a person like you understands, people like us, people tied to the earth, we’re used to death. It’s never pretty, at times it’s mighty inconvenient, but it’s happenin’ ’round us every minute just the same. Look outside, it’s the middle o’ fall. What do you think’s goin’ on out there? You civilized people. You’re moved so far away from death you forgot it’s as much a part of life as being born. Like the doctor said, these things just happen. (49)

Gloria, as a “civilized” displaced urbanite, brings a different set of references and beliefs to the table. She arrives dressed in a suit, carrying an attache case, armed with pamphlets and good intentions, not unlike outsider missionaries described by Loyal Jones, who have come to the mountains year after year to save the natives from themselves. At one point Gloria tells Grace, “I was raised a God-fearing, church-going, money-loving Episcopalian” (70). Her urbane, sophisticated spiritual and cultural frame of reference is revealed early on in a joke about eating Kosher that is lost on Grace (22). And later when she brings exotic “New York” foods to share with Grace and offers her brie, saying, “Just smell it, Grace. Isn’t that heaven?” Grace predictably retorts, “I sure hope not” (58).

Gloria seems to mock Grace’s faith in God when she faces her first crisis of dealing with “primitive” appliances. When the wood stove starts to smoke, Grace is trying to interrupt Gloria’s hysteria to tell her to open the damper rather than put out
the fire. All she can get out is, "We don’t need water," before Gloria interrupts:

“What are you trying to say, Grace? THE ‘GOOD LORD’S’ GOING TO SHOW UP WITH A HOSE?!" (26).

Gloria argues fervently with Grace’s belief in the inerrancy of the Bible and her interpretation of the story of Adam and Eve. While Grace does not accept her intellectual, feminist take on God and the Bible, they do find some small common ground on the question of the “weaker sex”:

GLORIA: You’re a liberated thinker, Grace. Did you ever ask yourself who wrote this “Good Book?”
GRACE: There were many men that —
GLORIA: Men! That’s the operative word. Men wrote the “Good Book.” Every word of it.
GRACE: But all of them were holy men. Like the story of Adam and Eve. Moses himself wrote that part.
GLORIA: You think Moses was going to blame mankind’s first sin on another member of the great fraternity? . . .
GRACE: Eve was the weaker of the two. Our old minister at church told us that one Sunday. The Serpent tempted Eve to eat the forbidden fruit because she was the weaker. ’Course I do remember thinkin’ at the time —
GLORIA: What?
GRACE: Well, men are stronger than women, got bigger muscles and all, but when it comes to temptation —
GLORIA: Yes?
GRACE: Men are pretty easy.
GLORIA: They are indeed! Now if the Bible were written for women —
GRACE: There’s women in the Bible, lots of ’em.
GLORIA: Wives, mistress, whores and slaves! You know there’s many of us, Grace, who’ve believed for quite some time now, that if there is a God, she’s a woman.
GRACE: That’s a hot one! God’s a woman. I worry about your soul, honey.
GLORIA: And this business of Eve and the “forbidden fruit.” So she cost us our cushy berth in paradise, look at all she gave us. Yearning, passion, satisfaction, poetry.
GRACE: She also give us death. (70-71)
While the debate about gender and the Bible seems mostly lighthearted, the crisis of faith created by their interaction is quite serious for both Grace and Gloria. Both are struggling with death — Grace with her own approaching end and Gloria with her guilt and grief over her son’s tragic demise.

Gloria postures as a matter-of-fact nonbeliever, but when she opens up to Grace about Danny’s death, a raw anger is revealed:

Okay, maybe I did deserve to get slapped down. I mean, I had become a little lofty, a little full of myself. Peter was feeling very threatened by my success and I was loving it. And there was the affair. But if these were my sins, MY SINS, why was it Danny who paid for them? That’s what’s insane. That’s what makes me want to — You talk about God? What kind of God is this? Is he sick? Is he a sadist? If he’s not butchering us outright he’s . . . (52)

When Grace expresses concern that Gloria’s Hospice volunteer work is a way to “try Death on for size ’fore you go off and kill yourself,” Gloria’s anger flares again:

THIS SHOULDN’T HAVE HAPPENED, GODDAMNIT! He was a brilliant, innocent boy with his whole life in front of him, not some miserable rodent stumbling into a trap! You’re the one with faith, you tell me! What heavenly purpose was served by crushing his beautiful, young body and leaving it on my lap to die? All I want is an answer, Grace! One lousy reason! Except there is no answer, is there? I’m sorry, but whatever this — game is, I can’t play it anymore! (52)

Grace has figured out Gloria’s self-serving psychological motives for volunteering to help the dying, but is still compassionate enough to ask the departing Gloria, “Glorie, honey, would you do me a favor? Would you let me go first?” (52). Grace’s patience is remarkable because in venting her own grief and confusion about Danny’s death, Gloria has attacked the very faith that gives Grace’s existence meaning. And Gloria has committed this offense shortly after Grace has confided her own fears about death:
I don’t want to be asleep when he comes. . . . Death. Oh, I’m afraid of Him, I am. But it’s the kind o’ fear — I don’t know quite how to — It’s like this time my Daddy hauled us kids all the way to Richmond to the State Fair. They had this Ferris wheel there. Looked to be least a mile high. I wanted to ride that thing mor’n anything in the world, but I was too scared. My whole life’s been like that. Always too scared. Now Death’s coming to call. And I’m frightened. But this time I’m ready — Oh, mercy, I am ready! To be lifted up into that Promised Place [breaking down] where I won’t hurt or be afraid ever again. (45-46)

Gloria seems to want some of the comfort in faith that Grace has, while at the same time almost cruelly forcing Grace to question it at a vulnerable time when she needs it most. After questioning why God made Danny pay for her sins, Gloria goes on to say things to Grace she will be apologizing for moments after she has uttered them:

Look at your life. Haven’t you ever asked yourself. . . . You buried not one child, but five! Everything you’ve ever worked for has been reduced to — Look out there. To rubble! You have a grandson. Who are you to him? A woman he charges to run errands and cut wood. Haven’t you ever asked yourself what your life’s been for? Here you are a sick old woman, ravaged with pain, without a soul in the world to even care whether you live or — Grace, I — I think I’d better go home after all. (50)

Gloria realizes she should not have said what she did, but it’s too late to take it back and she has started Grace on a painful path of questioning: “I never have asked myself that question. What’s my life been for. . . . Maybe I should. . . . I sure ain’t left my mark on much o’ nothing” (51). When Gloria returns the next day, Grace is agitated:

GRACE: I don’t like what’s happenin’ to me. I’m so confused. Ever since last night, my mind is —
GLORIA: I told you I was sorry about last night.
GRACE: Ain’t sayin’ I’m doubtin’. Never doubted the good Lord one second o’ my life. But you got me wonderin’. So many things. Like I was listenin’ to my music this mornin’, but I was hearin’ it different somehow. “Gladly will I toil and suffer, only let me walk

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with Thee.” I don’t like sayin’ this, but, try as I might, I was never glad about the toilin’ or the sufferin’. (57)

Later she says she has nothing to say in her message to Luanne, no wisdom to impart: “And just what have I learned in my life? You said it yourself. My life’s been for nothin’! . . . Absolutely nothin’! I’m an illiterate, backwards old woman!” (64). When she asks Gloria to read to her from the pamphlet “The Signs and Symptoms of Approaching Death” rather than the Bible, it seems a sign of her despair, as does the reaction provoked by the mention of confusion as a symptom: “Confused. Yes, yes, I know about that. You start wonderin’ things. . . . Things you never wondered about in your whole life. Like why God even bothered to put you on this earth!” (69). Jones, Leonard, McCauley and others note that in traditional mountain religion, the Bible is the authority on all matters, so Grace’s sudden reliance on the pamphlet instead of scripture is a sign of her inner turmoil and crisis of faith.

Gloria thinks she came to help Grace, but Grace has been wounded by her assumption that she knows better, and at one point in the final scene begs, “NO! NO MORE! Honey I got to ask you a big favor. Please stop helpin’ me” (67). Her statement speaks not only to the immediate situation, but also to the larger phenomenon of outsiders coming into the mountains to “uplift” people whose cultural outlook they devalue, sometimes doing as much harm as good. As Grace’s pain increases and she feels death growing nearer, she resists taking morphine and becomes less able to hold back her feelings of anger and despair. Grace tells Gloria she has seen the signs of approaching death many times before:
You start havin' visions, crazy visions! Visions of God! Oh, but if I see God, he won't be there, will he? Bernice said only fools believe in God. That what I am? A FOOL! When my little Carroll died. When I was holdin' on to Duane and his blood was pumpin' out of that bullet hole and I prayed for God to make the bleedin' stop, prayed to let my baby live. WAS I JUST TALKIN' TO THE AIR? That why my babies died? 'CAUSE THERE WAS NO GOD TO SAVE 'EM? All the times I was cold and hungry and hurtin' and wantin' to run away from this miserable farm. But I thought this is where God wanted me to be. Now you tell me I could o' gone? . . . Is that what you come here for? TO TELL ME MY WHOLE LIFE WAS FOR NOTHIN'?! . . . And when I close my eyes for the last time will that be it? GRACE STILES WILL BE NO MORE? . . . Honey, I know I'm ignorant, but . . . I've been happy in my ignorance! WHY COULDN'T YOU O' JUST LET ME DIE THAT WAY? (76)

The “hope of heaven” so eloquently described in Charles Lippy’s essay is all-important to mountain Christians like Grace; to take it away from her is perhaps the cruelest thing Gloria could have done.

But there is still redemption to be found in the relationship between the two women. Grace tells Gloria early in the play that she is sorry she never had a daughter because she always felt she “had so much to give, so many secrets to share” (47). She explains to Gloria that she calls her “Glorie” because her mother used to sing the old hymn “Where He Leads Me,” (which echoes once again the theme of God’s controlling will), and, “The last part, it goes [Singing] ‘He will give me grace and glory, and go with me all the way.’ Mama used to laugh. ‘We got our little Grace,’ she’d say. ‘Now all we need is a little Glorie.’ ’Course she never got her little Glorie. Neither did I” (43). But in the play’s final moments, it seems that she has gotten her “daughter” after all, in the person of Gloria and also Luanne, the great-niece she has never met. She is able to pass on wisdom to both of them, and
discovers that God has not failed her after all, but truly is "with her all the way,"
even in her final struggle with the meaning of life and its end.

Gloria admits that she needs Grace just as much as Grace needs her: "Grace,
I'll probably never believe in the same things as you do. But in the last few days,
you've shown me . . . that it might be possible to believe in something again" (77).
Gloria says young Luanne must be searching for something, too, since she's been
writing to Grace, and convinces Grace to make the videotape so Luanne can "learn
firsthand the secrets her great, great aunt has to share" (77).

Grace speaks as much to Gloria, and to herself, as to Luanne when she holds
up the sweater whose pattern is all that remains of her beloved orchard:

This little farm. . . . It's been my whole world. It's like — Maybe. . . .
[She begins to get excited] maybe it's like this . . . like this sweater. I
mean the way everythin' in this world is, you know, connected. Like
the stitches in this sweater. See, each one, they ain't much by
themselves, but you break even one and the whole sweater falls apart.
Now I might not know what my life's been for, Luanne, but I do
know God put me here on this earth for a reason. Even if it was only,
like a stitch in the middle of this sweater, to hold on with one hand to
the stitch that comes before me and with the other hand to the stitch
that comes after. If that's all I was put here to do, it's still a mighty
important thing. And it makes me a mighty important person. [She's
looking at Gloria] I think that's all God wants any of us to do, honey.
Hold on. To each other and to this sweet earth He give us with all our
might. (79-80)

When Grace finishes, Gloria says simply, "Amen" (80). The heavy moment is
lightened when Grace wonders if crying with makeup on has made her look like
"that Tammy Faye Baker on TV!" (80). Gloria laughs and says yes, she does (80).
Grace is now able to laugh about something that just days earlier she would have
condemned as sinful.
When Grace is finally ready to rest for a while, Gloria promises she will wake her if she sees death coming, just as Grace promised her in Act One (82, 47). Grace says she thinks Gloria is afraid that if she stops grieving she'll lose Danny forever, and tells her, "But, honey, it wasn't death tied you and that little boy together, it was life. That's what 'our sister Eve' give us when she bit that apple. All the glory o' life" (82). Grace falls asleep, and the play's final image is of Gloria with an apple: "She is about to start peeling the apple but stops. She looks briefly at GRACE, looks back at the apple. Then takes a huge noisy bite as the lights fade out" (83).

Significantly, the play opens with a quartet on Grace's gospel radio station singing, "Throw out the lifeline, someone is drifting away . . . Throw out the lifeline, someone is sinking today" (7). Both characters have in a sense "thrown a lifeline" to each other. Grace has given Gloria the gift of being able to believe again, and Gloria has given Grace the gift of finding herself and her faith in a whole new way by facing fears much greater than a ferris wheel. Gloria has helped Grace find her voice and use it to share her wisdom, and Gloria has learned in the process that even a simple, elderly mountain woman can think deeply and have complex spiritual truths to share that Gloria probably never expected. Grace's favorite hymn is "Amazing Grace" (32), and in a way both women have found that grace in this process, answering Grace's question about why God is sending so many heathens across her path. Ziegler gives both women heart, intelligence, humor and dignity, and manages to give mountain religion a very even-handed and respectful treatment in this play. Unfortunately, the play has had its widest impact through its 1998 Hallmark Hall of Fame adaptation for television, which significantly alters the events in the script,
virtually erases the play's specific regional setting, and softens the harder edges of its characters, their experiences, and their dialogue, thereby robbing it of much of its depth and complexity.

The vital importance of religion to mountain culture and to America's image of the region is borne out in the number of plays which deal with it or even take it as their primary subject matter. Many of the plays reveal the misunderstanding by and negative image of mountain religion held by the rest of America, but many also show a more positive image to the country at large. Loyal Jones argues that mainline Christians could learn a great deal about acceptance and respect from mountain religion, and that seems to be the sentiment the more positive plays are trying to convey.

Notes


3. Jones 3-4; The Anti-Mission Movement of the nineteenth century was a reaction against the influence of outside churches; see: McCauley, *Appalachian* 21-22.


8 McCauley, "Grace” 362.


10 Abell 200.


13 McCauley, “Holiness” 103-104.

14 McCauley, “Holiness” 104.

15 Jones 9.

16 McCauley, “Grace” 357.

17 Abell 17.

18 McCauley, “Grace” 356.

19 Abell 20; Jones 51-56.

20 Jones 63-66.

21 Abell 24.

22 Abell 34.

23 Jones 67-69.

24 Abell 34-36.

25 For examples of the fatalism argument, see: Jack E. Weller, Yesterday’s People: Life in Contemporary Appalachia (Lexington: University of Kentucky.

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27 Abell 18.

28 Jones 84-85.

29 Abell 28.

30 Jones 81.

31 Shackelford and Weinberg 289-290.

32 Jones 14.

33 Jones 135-137.

34 Abell 23.

35 Abell 20.

36 Jones 141.

37 McCauley, “Grace” 357.

38 McCauley, “Grace” 357.

39 McCauley, “Grace” 357.

40 McCauley, “Grace” 357.

41 Jones 147-150.

42 Abell 25.

43 Jones 156.

44 Jones 156.
Many mainline churches tend to see John’s vision as reported in Revelation as symbolic, often reflective of issues and figures contemporary with its writing, rather than prophetic; for a symbolic reading and commentary, see: David E. Aune, "Revelation," Harper’s Bible Commentary, ed. James L Mays (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1988) 1300-1319.


66 Jones 110-114, 115.

67 Jones 121.

68 McCauley 214; Jones 121-122.

69 Miles 125.

70 McCauley 215.

71 Jones 124.

72 For more on the spontaneous nature of worship, see: Leonard, “Faith” xxviii; for more on testimony, see: Jones 172-181; for more on footwashing, see Jones 150-151; Ted Olson, Blue Ridge Folklife (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1998) 104-106; for more on healing, see: Abell 37-38; Lippy 43; Olson 110-111; for more on the holy kiss, see: McCauley, Appalachian 222; Jones 149; for more on speaking in tongues, see: Lippy 42-43; Olson 108; Abell 34-35.

73 Hatcher Hughes, Hell-Bent fer Heaven (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1924) ix.


For more on why blasphemy is viewed as the only unpardonable sin in mountain tradition, see: Jones 94, 157.


For a description of the use of the “mourners’ bench,” see: Ownby 150, 162-163.

The account of David’s young nurse appears in 1 Kings 1:1-4, but it does make clear that David’s relationship with the maiden never became sexual.


90 Crissman 90.

91 Jones 162-163; Crissman 95-96.

92 See: John 3:28-29.


94 The actual verse reads: "Get thee behind me, Satan," and was Christ's rebuke to his disciple Peter for reacting negatively to Christ's fortelling of his own death and resurrection.


96 This is a paraphrase of the words Jesus spoke when he asked that children be allowed to come and be blessed by him. The statement appears in three of the four gospels, see: Matthew 19:14; Mark 10:14; and Luke 18:16.


99 For the account of how Joseph was sold into slavery by his brothers, see: Genesis 37: 25-36.


102 This statement appears in Exodus 21:24, and is a Jewish variant on laws in the Code of Hammurabi; for more explication, see: "Hammurapi," The Oxford Companion to the Bible, ed. Bruce M. Metzger and Michael D. Coogan (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993) 268-269.


106 Shackelford and Weinberg 91-93.


108 When children approached Christ and others, thinking them a nuisance, tried to keep them away, he welcomed them, blessed them, and used them as an example of how adults should approach God; see: Matthew 19:14; Mark 10:14; and Luke 18:16.

109 For an account of the miracle at the wedding at Cana, see: John 2:1-11.

110 Ritchie 36.


112 For more on circuit riders, see: Farley and Leonard 156-157; McCauley, *Appalachian* 236.

113 Some independent churches are remarkably small; see: McCauley, *Appalachian* 68.


117 For a discussion of the prominence of “blood hymns” in mountain tradition, see: Jones 196-197.


121 Jones 210.
Appalachia has occupied a mythic place in the American mind, forever frozen in the frontier past, often idealized as a simpler, more authentic American place, but, at the same time, demonized or pitied as a dangerous or uncivilized place in need of help from missionaries and social workers from outside the region who can save the people from themselves and their outdated and primitive culture. The outsider portrait that simultaneously romanticizes Appalachia as a land of Elizabethan and Celtic survivals and argues that it needs to be brought into the mainstream of American life is exemplified by the title and dedication of a 1970 book about the region by Bruce and Nancy Roberts: Where Time Stood Still, dedicated to “the people of Appalachia and to those who help them.” But, while time may seem to move more slowly in any rural area, it certainly has not “stood still” in Appalachia; change has always been taking place in the region, and the results, both positive and negative, have shaped the people and their culture. And in recent decades, the changes in infrastructure, population and education have been tremendous.

American mass culture permeates Appalachia like never before, as the people have access to just as many cable television channels as any urban American, and even in the least populous areas they often need only drive to a nearby town in order to shop at Wal-Mart or rent the same movies that fill the shelves at any big-city Blockbuster Video. The one room school is a thing of the past, and the region has many fine colleges and universities, many of which in the past thirty years have
developed outstanding programs in Appalachian Studies administered by people who
value the region (of which many are natives themselves) and give serious scholarly
attention to its culture, its authors and creative artists, and to the images of the region
imposed upon it by mainstream American culture for so many years.²

At the same time, more young people are leaving the region to build their
careers. There have been several waves of emigration from Appalachia in the
twentieth century. Many families migrated to Ohio (as well as Detroit, Michigan,
and other northern labor markets) after World War II in search of jobs and still live
today in Appalachian enclaves in that state’s major cities, traveling home to the
mountains as often as they can to visit, though not every weekend as some did in the
eyear days. Since then many talented young people have left the region either to get
an education or to use the education they received at one of the colleges in the region
because job opportunities are still scarce in Appalachia.³

Meanwhile, more people from outside the region are buying resort homes in
the mountains, causing a shift in land ownership and in population. Family farms are
disappearing, as likely to be replaced by summer cottages or tourist attractions today
as they once were by strip mines.⁴ Tourism brings jobs, but often they are low-
paying jobs that create wage slaves who do not fully share in the prosperity of
development. Dolly Parton, for example, has sparked some criticism for bringing a
remarkable level of tourist activity to her native Pigeon Forge through her
amusement park, Dollywood, and accompanying attractions. She may have created a
booming economy to “rescue” a depressed area, but at the price of traffic jams, an
abundance of subsistence-level seasonal jobs, and a packaging of local color for tourists that may, in fact, cheapen the very culture she seeks to celebrate.⁵

Some Appalachians have stayed on and tried to work with the outside forces in an effort to get a small piece of the pie for themselves, seeing some of the negative aspects of change as necessary evils that must be endured in order to keep the mountains economically stable. Others have left the region, some shedding their accents and trying to assimilate, others maintaining a proud Appalachian identity in exile that will be passed on to some degree to future generations despite the geographic distance, and still others have capitalized on the hillbilly stereotype as entertainers, with varying degrees of acquiescence to the more damaging aspects of the image. But others have remained in or returned to the region, either to participate in the scholarly work of Appalachian Studies programs, preserve through oral history the voices and traditions of the people, or create works of fiction, poetry, prose and theatre from the raw material of their own culture. These changes in Appalachian culture are reflected in many ways in the contemporary drama of the region and in the critical work surrounding it, as writers reflect on the land they call home, and the people who live there, leave, or return, either in the literal or figurative sense, to tell its story and build its future.

“Sure I Remember the Homeplace”: Treasuring Tradition and Packaging the Past

The struggles of contemporary Appalachians with the issues of identity and place are reflected in the 1982 play, *Foxfire*, which was based upon the *Foxfire* oral
history series. The play’s plot hinges on the crucial question of “home,” what it means to stay there, and what it means to leave.

Home is very important to Appalachian people and to the region’s writers. Loyal Jones cites “love of place” as an essential “unifying” Appalachian value, which “makes it hard for us to leave the mountains, and when we do, we long to return.” Jane Stuart, daughter of famed Kentucky educator and author Jesse Stuart and an author in her own right, tells of “finding a world at home” and how, despite her travels and educational experiences outside the region, “it’s the eloquence of home that overwhelms me, and that I write about.” She lives and writes in her family home, a house expanded from the original one hundred and fifty year old log cabin, where she is surrounded by family history, objects, and memories she says “sustain me, and that sustain my writing.” She has said she would not choose to create in any other space: “I prefer the comfort and stories of this home to an outside world.”

The “old homeplace” is of great significance to Appalachians, whether they are writers or not. In volume 11 of the Foxfire series, Robbie Bailey observes that many interviewees continually refer to the “old homeplace”:

When people talk about the homeplace, they’re not just referring to the house or the farm buildings. They’re referring to a piece of land— their land—that they’ve lived on and farmed, and hope to pass on to a new generation of the family to give it the same care that they and their ancestors have. It is a place where you spend numerous hours wondering if there is another place in the world that is as beautiful and majestic as it is. It is something you can call your own and be proud of. It is where you are from and where you always belong.

He says that to his grandmother the piece of land where the family home once stood, which to the casual observer looks like a neglected empty piece of property,
"will always be home to her, whether she lives there or not." And more and more often, Appalachian people do not actually live at the old homeplace:

Today a growing number of people are leaving . . . for better jobs, and the family homeplaces are being sold to outsiders, thus breaking the bond that was established in these families. In a sense, when the next generation in a family leaves the land, it's as if someone has torn away a piece of family history.

One interviewee remarks that she and her husband would rather have land than money, so they refuse to sell: "Somebody comes [to my house] nearly every day to buy land, but we got four children and seven grandchildren. They all got to have a place to live." Another says that people do not want to leave the mountains, though they often do so in order to "make a better living," but "sometime or other they come back. Sooner or later, there won't be a place to come back to. That's why I won't even think of selling. . . . Too much has been sold."

Those who have moved away say they have "a feeling for" the place where they were born and raised and, on a deep level, a longing to return. Bailey explains that even those who leave carry the homeplace within:

Sure, you can touch an old barn or grab a handful of dirt, but the homeplace is more than that. It is a feeling from deep inside that makes you swell with pride one minute and fill your eyes with tears the next. It is an emotion that only the people who toiled in sweat to create homeplaces, and their generations to come, can experience. I also found that even if you are not a farmer or don't live on the family homeplace, you are still a piece of the puzzle that fits together to form the old homeplace. Your ancestors did the work and you feel as if you, in a sense, did too. There is a personal bond between you and the people who spent the time to take care of the land.

The homeplace, though it may physically disappear as a result of changes in Appalachian demographics, lives on in the work of those who revisit the region to

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tell its story from the inside out, who, as Kentucky author George Ella Lyon puts it, "go home inside" and give voice to the place and the people who shaped them.16

_Foxfire_

_Foxfire_ by Susan Cooper and Hume Cronyn was produced at the Shakespeare Festival in Stratford, Ontario in 1980, the Guthrie Theatre in Minneapolis in 1981, and had its New York premiere on November 11, 1982. It starred Jessica Tandy as Annie Nations, Hume Cronyn as Hector Nations, and Keith Carradine as their son, Dillard.17 The play was later adapted for television as a Hallmark Hall of Fame movie, this time featuring John Denver as Dillard.18

_Foxfire_ was based on interviews conducted by Eliot Wigginton's high school students for the _Foxfire_ magazine and book series, especially the interviews with Aunt Arie, which were so extensive that they were eventually published as a separate volume.19 The character who interviews and befriends Annie in the play, Holly Burrell, even takes her last name from one of the Foxfire students who knew Aunt Arie.20 The playwrights had to meet with and explain their project to the _Foxfire_ students, who subsequently voted to give them permission to use the interviews, because they were suspicious of the motives of interested outsiders in the aftermath of the movie _Deliverance_. Cronyn and Cooper consulted the students every step of the way, giving them some veto power over scenes they felt didn’t ring true. And the students were later provided with tickets to the play’s openings and some with bit roles in the film version.21

_Foxfire_ tells the story of Annie Nations, an old woman living alone in a rustic home with no indoor plumbing in the mountains of northeast Georgia. The piece of
land, called “Stony Lonesome,” has been in her husband’s family since his parents settled there as a young couple. Annie’s husband Hector has been dead for five years, but she behaves as if he is still alive and he appears as a character in the play. Annie is not delusional and understands intellectually that Hector is buried in the old orchard with the rest of his family, but she just is not ready to let him go.

Their youngest son Dillard has become a professional musician, singing and playing guitar with a backup band called the “Stony Lonesome Boys” after the old homeplace. It is Labor Day weekend, and he is coming home to the area to perform for the first time in many years. When Dillard arrives, Prince Carpenter, a local agent for a land development company building vacation homes, assumes he is the competition. When Prince realizes who Dillard is, he tries to get him to convince his mother to sell the land; neither she nor her husband has ever been open to his offers, despite the fact that many of their neighbors have sold their land and moved to town.

Dillard does not want his mother to sell the land, but he does want her to come live with him and his family in Florida for at least part of the year because he worries about her living on the mountain alone. At first she resists the idea, and Holly Burrell, a local schoolteacher and former neighbor who once interviewed the family for a high school oral history project, supports her choice. Holly has returned to the community to teach because she cares about her home and feels she is needed there. She provides a contrast to Dillard, who trades on his mountain roots in his stage persona, but in an inauthentic, sometimes disrespectful way. Holly takes him to task for it after attending the concert with Annie. Ultimately, Annie decides to sell, after ensuring that the cemetery will be protected from development, and leave
with Dillard. As Prince nails up a "no trespassing" sign and sits triumphantly on the porch, Hector watches Annie go, knowing she will come back to visit him, and eventually to lie beside him in the orchard for eternity.

*Foxfire*’s characters represent the many ways in which Appalachian people are facing the future in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. Hector most clearly represents the old ways, having been a trader and perhaps having once shot a revenuer, insisting on planting by the signs, and viewing physical labor like farming as the only "real" work, saying "that’s a job as counts" as opposed to Dillard’s popular music career (68, 11, 81). He clings to the family land as all-important and part of the family’s very identity, opening the play saying, "I’m always here," telling Annie that Dillard should have stayed because "this land woulda took care a’ him," and delivering a long soliloquy about how proud he is to be buried there once he realizes Annie is going to sell. He is not angry with her because, as he told Holly in her interview with him years before, the one thing he values more than the land is Annie (80). Hector is dead, but still speaking his piece and guiding Annie and Dillard’s lives, indicating that the tradition he represents is not easily silenced, even when its advocates pass on.

Annie also represents traditional ways of life, as she lives without plumbing and uses the same simple tools and techniques she always has in her mountain home. She has no interest in modernity or in city living, but, unlike Hector, can understand why it is more attractive to and appropriate for their three surviving children, telling him Dillard couldn’t stay and work the farm because "He weren’t cut out" (11). She is devoted to her husband even after his death and to their children even after they
very permanently leave home; only Dillard visits, and then very rarely. The flashbacks show Annie as a lively young girl, a hardworking wife and mother, and a deeply grieving widow, giving the audience an overview of what her life has been and how much of it has happened on Stony Lonesome, where she has spent every night since her marriage, even giving birth to all her children at home (37-43). Her husband and two of her children are buried in the old orchard, and Annie must choose whether to live out her days at the old homeplace or learn to make a new life in the home her son has made for himself outside the mountains.

Holly is a bright, educated young woman who returns to the mountains out of her love for home: “There’s plenty of teachers in Atlanta — this is the place I care about” (20). From the time she was a teenager she has been interested in preserving the culture of the area, and cares enough about its older residents to visit former neighbors like Annie and lend a hand when she can. She is disappointed by Dillard’s “Li’l Abner” dialect-heavy stage persona, and tells him she likes the way he used to sing, recalling how he sang a hymn on the day she interviewed the family many years ago (50-53). Holly wants to remember and treasure the past of the mountains, while at the same time creating a future for its young people through her work in education that may not only improve their lot in life, but also make it more appealing for them to stay. Her parents have sold their homeplace and moved to town, but Holly still has a strong sense of place and respect for tradition.

Prince Carpenter is buying up the history and heritage of his neighbors as he collects old homeplaces for his development company to level off and transform into vacation real estate for outsiders. He is making his living in his native area, but has
moved his family and his aging mother to the town. He is profiting from the transfer
of land ownership and power from insiders to outsiders. While vacation homes may
help pump money into the local economy for brief periods, they increase the tax
burden on local people and change the priorities of the community.

Dillard Nations has the most conflicted relationship with his Appalachian
roots. He makes use of them in his music career, but his stage persona speaks in a
phony “hillbilly” accent not his own, and the lyrics to his songs transform people like
his father into charming comic stereotypes instead of celebrating the complex people
they really are. He tells Holly it is “all part of the image” (51). Dillard struggled
with his father and rejected his ideas as a teenager, but clearly loved and respected
him and still carries with him some of his father’s wisdom, though it has dimmed
and warped a little with time, as revealed by his depiction of his father as a slick
trader rather than a hard worker in one of his songs (45-51). He wants his mother to
move, but respects her wishes, never suggesting she sell the property. His life in the
city, as his mother suspects, has its own challenges and hard times, just as his parents
had on Stony Lonesome. He may have material things they did not, but his marriage
has fallen apart and he must now face raising two children virtually alone, something
his parents could not have imagined happening to them except through the premature
death of either spouse. They faced hard times and the deaths of young children, but
even when Annie was once troubled to see Hector flirting with another woman, they
stayed together; Annie admits there was not much romance after their courtship, but
even after death parted them, they were a team. Dillard has left the homeplace, and
though his "feet took to walking," as his lyrics say, and he has a conflicted relationship with his past, he still draws on it for strength more than even he realizes (47).

The landscape is changing in the Appalachia of Foxfire. Annie is the last of a generation that made a living by working the land, not selling it. Prince explains to Dillard in the first act: "Face it, Dillard — everything’s changed since you an’ me grew up in these mountains. The kids with any get up an’ go have got up an’ went — jus’ like you did. The old ones are jus’ hangin’ on like foxfire on rotten wood" (33). Annie admits Prince is right about times changing when she tells Hector, "Things change whether we want ‘em to or not," and by play’s end Hector himself repeatedly asserts that “times change,” as if it had been his observation to begin with (76, 91, 94); Annie even braves her first airplane ride as Dillard takes her to live with him in Florida (91). As they depart, Prince remarks, “Gonna be some fine homes up here,” to which Dillard responds, “Always was” (93).

Times are changing, old people are dying, land is leaving the family, and young people are leaving the mountains, but Foxfire reminds us that some, like Holly will come back to share with the region’s schoolchildren their respect for and valuing of the history of Appalachia. And even if Annie and Dillard will never live on Stony Lonesome again, the place will still draw them home physically from time to time and survive in their memories, world view, values, and sense of identity. Hector is rightly confident as he speaks the play’s final line: “She’ll be back” (95).

Foxfire is written by outsiders, but Cronyn and Cooper are outsiders interested in giving a theatrical voice to the mountain people interviewed by the
Foxfire program, and gave authority to the opinions of the Appalachian students in the shaping of their thoughtfully written script. While the play is sometimes criticized for being sentimental and many reviewers give primary credit for its success to the performances of Jessica Tandy and Hume Cronyn rather than to the script itself, it does touch upon some important regional issues while entertaining audiences and paying fond homage to mountain women like Aunt Arie in the character of Annie Nations.

"A Mirror of Our Own Making": The Future of Appalachian Drama

Jim Wayne Miller asked in a 1974 essay, "Do yesterday's people have a future?" And his answer, unlike that of Jack Weller whose label he uses ironically, is: "Yes, the future of Appalachia can be bright if Appalachians can gain a sure appreciation of what is good about Appalachian life — our institutions and values — and if Appalachians realize what a tragic loss it would be to exchange their birthright for a mess of mainstream America." Instead of accepting America's fun house mirror distortions of their culture, Miller suggests that Appalachians must provide "a mirror of our own making," and advocates Appalachian studies programs as an important way to achieve that end.

With the advent of cable television and the satellite dish, chain stores and new roads that bring in more tourists than ever to resort towns and send out more young people than ever to big cities to seek their fortunes, it might seem likely that the region will lose its identity as it loses its isolation, leaving no reflection in Miller's mirror. But the Appalachian sense of place and love of home cited by Loyal Jones may play an important role in keeping the culture vital in future generations.
Phillip Obermiller and Michael Maloney find in their study of Appalachians who have migrated to other parts of the country that, even among the mountain diaspora, the culture and its traditions survive. The tendency of Appalachians to live near others from their region and return often to their homes, combined with the feeling of having faced discrimination from the social mainstream, have slowed the process of assimilation: “There is no danger of the disappearance of Appalachians from the social map of urban America in the 1990s.” The introduction to the chapter of *Appalachia Inside Out* entitled “Exile, Return, and Sense of Place” asserts that, “Appalachia is perhaps one of the few places in the country where the concept of homeland still has great vitality,” and that “what both expatriate and die-hard share is a respect and love for the land and its people, and a sense, however lost or beguiled, of home.”

George Ella Lyon explains that home is not just a place, “For the history and spirit of a place are in its voices; to accept the denigration of the speech you were born into is to sever one of the ongoing threads of life.” She recalls her own experience with the dangers of assimilation and shame and the loss of creative source and power that can result:

I grew up in Harlan County, Kentucky, in the coalfields, and was in high school during the War on Poverty. I remember the TV stereotypes — not just *The Beverly Hillbillies* but on the news — of mountain people both materially and culturally deprived. So, I thought, if I am going to write, the first thing I have to do is go somewhere and acquire a culture. During the process I would learn to sound like I was from somewhere else. I didn’t know that was like cutting your throat to remedy hunger.
Lyon says she silenced her Appalachian voice and memories in her writing for years. But while pursuing graduate study at Indiana University, she learned to write from her own experience and her “first voice,” and gained a new understanding of how much there was of value about her Appalachian heritage:

I found out I had a culture. I’d been to college and graduate school, London and Paris, the Smithsonian and the New York Public Library, and now I needed to go home. For while I found all sorts of necessary and wonderful things in those places, I couldn’t find my voice.

I don’t mean I went home literally — I’d been going back for holidays and summer visits all along — I mean I went home inside; I began to pay attention to all those voices, to the language and people I grew up with. In doing so, I abandoned the larger culture’s belief that such voices had no place in art, had, in fact, nothing to say. 28

With the growth over the past thirty years of Appalachian studies and of publication of native authors, perhaps the stereotypical images that sent Lyon into physical and psychic exile in her youth will lose their power as the real people of Appalachia develop more numerous public creative and critical voices that are heard beyond the front porch or the hearth of oral tradition. America may still buy tickets to see the old negative stereotypes trotted out in films like 1993’s The Beverly Hillbillies, and the institutions of the cultural elite may still reward distorted versions of the region’s history like Schenkkan’s The Kentucky Cycle, but the voices of Appalachian dissent have a larger platform from which to speak than they did in the days when people came to collect their songs, stories and resources and leave the teller, the singer, the farmer or the laborer behind in the mountains. There was no community of regional scholars, no collection of regional academic journals to rail against the early mockery of Appalachians on stage, no authentic Appalachian voice scripting the speech of romanticized mountain girls or dangerous feuding men, and
few who understood the region's religious beliefs or respected its traditions to tell the stories of people of faith. But over the years more plays have been produced by playwrights who respect the region and know that the drama in the lives of real Appalachians is far more interesting theatrical material than the exploits of the stereotypes that once populated the American stage. And when a play like *The Kentucky Cycle* presents an often inaccurate and victim-blaming version of the region's history, the voices raised in protest are legion and are taken seriously. To echo the refrain from *Foxfire*: Times have changed.

Change seems to have come more slowly to Appalachian drama aimed at New York or national audiences than to fiction, poetry or social history. Perhaps progress is hindered in theatre aimed at outsider audiences because, like film and television, it is a very visual art form and, therefore, prone to use of old, often stereotypical images as reference points for the audience; even when not intended as negative, they may be read as such by the audience, since, unlike fiction, they are being viewed directly through the eyes of people with preconceived notions of Appalachians rather than described by the narrative voice of a fiction writer who can shape with words how the visual image is presented. Appalachian culture has a strong storytelling tradition that perhaps translates more easily to the narrative voice on the printed page than to realistic, dialogue-driven plays. The Roadside Theatre's extensive use of storytelling techniques in its grassroots performances, such as the docu-drama *Red Fox/Second Hangin'* which is performed by three storytellers, is an example of how the gap between the two genres might be bridged. Romulus Linney has also used storytelling conventions in more conventional plays like *Why
the Lord Come to Sand Mountain and Tennessee. Elizabeth Stearns also draws upon the Appalachian oral tradition in her adaptation of oral history interviews for the stage in Hillbilly Women. Perhaps as future generations of Appalachians are exposed to theatre through the work of grassroots groups within the region more writers will be drawn to the genre as a way to express their culture, ideas and experiences, and they may find new ways to incorporate the rich oral culture and storytelling traditions of the mountains into their plays.

The scarcity of native Appalachian voices on the national stage is probably also due in part to the fact that theatre is expensive and large companies must produce what sells. Small companies within Appalachia are doing innovative work that gives voice to the experiences, values and views of those native to the region, but seldom does the rest of America see it. What they see, aside from the occasional production of a Linney play that may or may not be sensitively staged, are the endless school productions of *Dark of the Moon* and the awarding of the Pulitzer Prize to *The Kentucky Cycle* (though because of its length that play cycle has not been as widely produced as some other winners). And, finally, the lack of advancement in the treatment of Appalachian subjects on the national stage may be due to a lack of scholarly attention. More plays about Appalachia might be read, taught, analyzed, debated and even written if they received more attention from the academy. That the body of work is large and worthy of analysis is evidenced by this survey study, which one may hope will provide a basis for much-needed future scholarship.
Notes


8 Stuart 283.


10 Bailey 12.

11 Bailey 25.


14 Bailey 27.

15 Bailey 27.


20 Wigginton 53.


23 Miller 448, 458-459.

24 Obermiller and Maloney 136-137.


26 Lyon 168.

27 Lyon 168.

28 Lyon 170.

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Laura Grace Pattillo was born in Louisville, Kentucky, on March 27, 1970. While growing up in Louisville, she attended Highland Presbyterian Preschool, Louisville Collegiate School, St. Matthews Elementary School, Highland Middle School, and Lyman T. Johnson Middle School, and she graduated from J.M. Atherton High School in 1987. She earned the degree of Bachelor of Arts with majors in English and speech communication and theatre arts from the University of Richmond in 1991 and the degree of Master of Arts in English from Louisiana State University in 1993.

She taught freshman composition and sophomore dramatic literature for seven years as a Graduate Teaching Assistant at Louisiana State University. In the fall of 2001 she will begin teaching English at Bellarmine University in Louisville, Kentucky, and Indiana University Southeast in New Albany, Indiana.

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