"Getting above your raising" : the role of social class and status in the fiction of Lee Smith

Sharon Elizabeth Colley
Louisiana State University and Agricultural and Mechanical College

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/gradschool_dissertations
Part of the English Language and Literature Commons

Recommended Citation
Colley, Sharon Elizabeth, "Getting above your raising" : the role of social class and status in the fiction of Lee Smith" (2002). LSU Doctoral Dissertations. 3921.
https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/gradschool_dissertations/3921

This Dissertation is brought to you for free and open access by the Graduate School at LSU Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in LSU Doctoral Dissertations by an authorized graduate school editor of LSU Digital Commons. For more information, please contact gradetd@lsu.edu.
“GETTING ABOVE YOUR RAISING”:
THE ROLE OF SOCIAL CLASS AND STATUS
IN THE FICTION OF LEE SMITH

A Dissertation
Submitted to the 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
Sharon Elizabeth Colley
B.A., Mercer University, 1991
M.A., University of Tennessee, 1993
May, 2002
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank the Graduate English Department of Louisiana State University for allowing me the opportunity to pursue the doctorate and complete this degree. I especially wish to thank my dissertation committee of Dr. Peggy Prenshaw, Dr. Rick Moreland, Dr. Rebecca Saunders, and Dr. Dave Smith, as well as the staff of the Middleton Library, for their assistance and support.

My dissertation director, Dr. John Lowe, has been a source of unfailing encouragement and insightful guidance during the writing of this document. I greatly appreciate his advice and patient support throughout the writing process.

I also would like to thank my family and friends for their encouragement and patience during the last few years. While those deserving thanks are too many to name here, some who deserve a special “thank you” are: Bethany Clough, who now knows much more about Lee Smith than any other accountant in America; my sister, Laura Herrin, who has picked me up from the airport numerous times and made me feel part of her child’s life, despite our distance; my cousin, Monica Skidmore, who understands why this process was difficult; my fellow academic, Helen Sugarman, for her calm and steady friendship; Scott Smiley, who listened patiently to my many crises; and my grandfather, Lomas Hinkle, who always encouraged his grandchildren to get all the education they could. You all mean so much to me; thank you.

Perhaps most of all, however, I’d like to thank my parents, Bill and Peggy Colley, for their emotional and, at times, financial support during the graduate school years. You knew I could succeed when I didn’t; thank you for being “the wind beneath my wings.”
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS .................................................. ii

ABSTRACT ................................................................. iv

CHAPTER
ONE   Introduction: Class, Classifying, and Classy ......................... 1
TWO   “Who Are Your People?”: Lee Smith’s Relationship
to the Appalachian South ........................................ 11
THREE  Country Come to Town: Social Structures in Lee Smith’s Small
Towns ................................................................. 94
FOUR  “Raised to Leave”: Education in Lee Smith Country .............. 179
FIVE   “How Country Are You?”: Taste in Lee Smith’s Fiction ........... 231

EPILOGUE .................................................................. 307

LEE SMITH BIBLIOGRAPHY ............................................. 310
SECONDARY SOURCE BIBLIOGRAPHY .................................. 321
APPENDIX: INTERVIEW WITH LEE SMITH ............................. 332
VITA .......................................................................... 352
ABSTRACT

This dissertation examines the role of social class and status in the fiction of contemporary novelist and short story writer, Lee Smith. As discussed in the Introduction, the study defines social class broadly, not limiting it to production, but also not discarding its economic underpinning. Max Weber’s definition of class as “life chances” provides the starting point; any resources that can improve a person’s position in the market place positively impact their “life chances.” The resources appearing most often in Smith’s fiction include economic capital and property, as well as education, family connections, and occupational status. The discussion also builds on Pierre Bourdieu’s position that taste plays a crucial role in social class status, shaping not only individuals’ life chances but also their perspectives and aesthetics.

Chapter two explores Lee Smith’s relationship to her childhood home and signature setting of Appalachia, first by examining her personal history in the region and then by exploring the connection of social class to sources for her texts. Indirect sources include local color fiction and some of the stereotypical images it promulgated; direct sources consist of a sampling of source texts from one Smith novels, The Devil’s Dream. Chapter three systematically surveys the elements of social differentiation within her texts by utilizing social histories of the region; resources covered include kinship, land ownership, and religion. The chapter also examines the varieties of small towns in Smith’s fiction, including the stock Southern town, the coal-company town, the county seat town and the boom town.

Chapters four and five examine more closely two crucial element yet less tangible elements of social structuring in Smith’s work—education and taste. Chapter four accesses scholarship on social class and education, including liberal, reproduction, and resistance
theory, to discuss the difficulties of physical and social access to schooling in Smith’s work. Chapter five incorporates Bourdieu’s theory of taste and Richard Peterson’s concept of the cultural omnivore, which can be considered an Americanization of Bourdieu’s concept of cultural capital, to examine the relationship of social class to one of Smith’s primary themes, self-creation.
CHAPTER ONE
INTRODUCTION: CLASS, CLASSIFYING, AND CLASSY

In Lee Smith’s critically acclaimed, epistolary novel, *Fair and Tender Ladies* (1988), protagonist Ivy Rowe is an Appalachian native, born at the beginning of the twentieth century in the mountains near Sugar Fork, Virginia. Though Ivy identifies with the mountain community of her childhood, she interacts with individuals from a variety of social classes and status groups throughout her life. Her experiences with these diverse economic structures and social positions suggest the recurrent class and status tensions of Appalachia and the larger South. Ivy’s mother, Maude, was originally a “town girl” from Rich Valley before she eloped with John Arthur Rowe, Ivy’s mountain man father. Alienated from Maude’s rich father by her rebellion, the farming family struggles to survive when John Arthur is first incapacitated by and then slowly dies of a heart condition. After his death, the family moves to an early twentieth century boom town and works in the boarding house of a family friend, Geneva Hunt; various guests at the house include a local judge, teachers, a traveling evangelist, and lumber mill officials. After Ivy’s mother dies, she moves to a highly stratified coal company town to live with her upwardly mobile sister and brother-in-law. They encourage Ivy to date a mine owner’s son, which she does, though the man perceives her as a mistress rather than as wife material. Ivy also befriends a coal town neighbor whose husband was seriously injured by and is later killed in a mining accident; eventually, this friend becomes a traveling union organizer. For her part, Ivy marries a man from her home community and returns to her family’s mountain farm. However, she encourages her children to leave the mountain farm for schooling and helps a teacher from New York revitalize a nearby settlement school. Though Ivy never leaves her mountainous corner of Virginia, her
story includes representatives from a wide variety of class, status, and cultural backgrounds whose experiences limit and shape their opportunities and their worldviews.

As this incomplete sketch of Smith’s novel indicates, her Appalachian characters may originate in a relatively classless folk culture, but their social worlds are seldom homologous. Social class and status shape the lives of her characters, at times determining and at times subtly altering their options and perspectives. Previous studies have argued persuasively that the relationship between the individual and the community is a recurring theme in Smith’s fiction (Campbell 94-96; Wagner-Martin 28; etc.). This dissertation extends and complicates the discussion by further examining social class and status in Smith’s communities to determine its effects on the life chances and the relationships of Smith’s characters.

Defining “class” in the early twenty-first century United States is a complex project, dependent on audience and context. For sociologists, class remains an economic relationship. For Marxists, class is traditionally the economic relationship of a group to the means of production; neo-Marxists complicate the approach with elements such as culture, but retain the same economic premise. In popular usage, “class” may indicate a combination of occupational prestige, income, and education, indices of power in the market that do not necessarily correlate with a relationship to the means of production, though they may connect with it.

Many Americans separate class even further from the pure Marxist definition by associating the term with style, taste, and morality. For example, the pejoratively labeled “white trash” class fraction in the contemporary American South is not primarily defined by their position as wage laborers, though occupational status and power may be the foundation for their social location and lifestyle. Instead, these people are considered “trashy” because
they drink too much, chew Redman, do not keep their yards tidy, beat their children, and/or wear unflattering tube tops. “Trashy” people often have little income, less education, and almost no social prestige, but their taste and perceived immorality are identified by middle and upper class Southerners as a justification and reason for their lower class status. Therefore, “social class” can be defined as a measure of social and economic power deriving from a variety of sources, including prestige and appropriate consumption, rather than solely from the relationship to the means of production.

Yet, this approach should not negate the economic connections of social class. While wealth is not the only measure of social class status in the American South, it plays an inescapable role in determining social power. For example, though the Southern lady has “class” because of her genteel ways, those manners originated in a relatively privileged context. Anne Firor Scott observes in *The Southern Lady: From Pedestal to Politics 1830-1930* (1970) that typically “definitions of what was ladylike were reserved for women of the elite group, not for wives of mill workers or Negro maids” (xi). Though the image of the Southern lady has filtered down to women in many social classes, as Anne Goodwyn Jones observes in *Tomorrow is Another Day: The Woman Writer in the South 1859-1936* (1981), the ideal Southern lady historically represents the “aristocratic” class (5). An association with the mythical Tara and landed gentry hovers in the background of the traditional icon. The Southern lady’s *noblesse oblige* codes not just for kindness and grace but also for aristocracy and deserving, if not possessing, wealth. Regardless of her economic status, the socially powerful image of the Southern lady is consistently connected with both class (economic) and status (prestige) privilege.
In this dissertation, I define social class broadly, not limiting it to production-related issues, but also not discarding the frequent underpinning of economics. Max Weber’s discussion of “life chances” in the market provides the starting point for the discussion; any resource that can improve an individual’s position in the market place, thereby giving them additional options and power in their lives, can impact their “life chances.” These resources include economic capital and property, as well as education, family connections, and aesthetic taste. While these latter elements are more generally identified as status rather than class markers, economic resources often shape them; Smith’s mountain characters, for example, typically have less education than wealthier town characters because they do not have the resources to travel for further study. Furthermore, Pierre Bourdieu has argued that status often provides a cover for class, as the judgment about the “white trash” or “undeserving poor” indicate. This broader definition of social class resources allows for a more nuanced and complete discussion of the experience of social class in Lee Smith’s work.

Additionally, my dissertation builds on Pierre Bourdieu’s assertion that aesthetic taste plays a crucial role in social class status. Arguing that the combination of resources (economic, social, and cultural) that an individual has, in conjunction with their pattern of social mobility, creates their worldview, Bourdieu provides a framework for discussing how class-based taste shapes an individual’s perceptions and interactions with others. Beginning with these basic perspectives, I examine the lived experience of social class in Smith’s fiction, and discuss how the fluctuating markers of class and status empower and limit the lives of her Southern and Appalachian characters.
Background Approaches

While the insights of Karl Marx have provided the basis for class studies, his emphasis on production is problematic for discussing Smith’s protagonists, typically women who are often excluded from production sites, such as the coal mines. Defining female class status through male family members, though at times sociologically appropriate, is a distasteful approach to fiction like Smith’s, which celebrates female voices and experience. Rather than impose an ill-fitting Marxist paradigm on Smith’s texts, the current project builds on the insights of theorists such as Max Weber and Pierre Bourdieu to discuss stratification in Smith’s work. My discussion draws on the contributions of Marxist theorists only in the chapter on education, in which I rely on Paul Willis’ Learning to Labor: How Working Class Kids Get Working Class Jobs for insights into the connection between social class and attitudes towards education. Together with social histories of Appalachia, these varied theorists and approaches provide a framework for examining the role of social class status in Lee Smith’s fiction.

German sociologist Max Weber’s (1864-1920) posthumously published treatise, Economy and Society, includes two separate but similar definitions of class. In both versions, Weber describes “status” in concert with class, indicating the role of economics and prestige in social structuring. In his earlier account, Weber states that a “class situation” exists if:

1. a number of people have in common a specific causal component of their life chances, insofar as
2. this component is represented exclusively by economic interests in the possession of goods and opportunities for income, and
3. is represented under the conditions of the commodity or labor markets (927).

In another description, Weber defines “class situation” as the probability of “1. procuring goods 2. securing a position in life and 3. finding inner satisfaction,” based on “the relative
control over goods and skills and from . . . income-producing uses within a given economic order” (302). While Weber’s focus on the economic is consistent, the sources of income may vary. Property classes earn income from lands, mines, and securities, for example, while the commercial classes are entrepreneurs, such as merchants, as well as industrialists, and at times are those with monopolistic skills (303-304). Weber lists the social classes as: the working class; the petty bourgeoisie; the property-less intelligentsia and specialists; and the classes with property and education privilege (305). Unlike Marx, Weber regards class affiliation as a potential, though not certain, basis for social action.

Weber discusses status groups in tandem with social class. Status groups serve as a non-economic basis for social esteem and are created through lifestyle, especially vocation; invocation of heredity; or the appropriation of political power. Traditions such as marriage, compensation practices, and consumption may reflect status privileges (306). Though often created by property classes, status groups are best defined by the concept of social honor (932). Status and class positions may be connected but they are not necessarily the same; “status may influence, if not completely determine, a class position without being identical with it” (306). For example, a large income does not guarantee status, as the widespread distaste for wealthy carpetbaggers after the Civil War demonstrates. However, income can lead to social prestige by facilitating the consumption of high-status goods or securing an expensive education. While some critics contend that Weber’s discussion of status references the medieval Strand or estate class rather than the contemporary concept of prestige, his discussion emphasizes that social resources are not limited to economics.

This study builds on Weber’s earlier definition of social classes, in which he argues that the “conditions of the . . . market” shape an individual’s class situation and alter his or her
“life chances.” Depending on the market an individual occupies, a variety of resources can be utilized to gain prosperity and life satisfaction. While in Lee Smith’s Appalachia, owning land and coal mining equipment are obvious sources of wealth, educational credentials, social connections, and even physical beauty can shape an individual’s “life chances.” Because property, commercial and status resources can co-exist, and because the metaphor of the “market” provides an effective way to discuss the shifting values of these resources, this dissertation will refer to the characters’ “life chances in the market” to discuss the interplay of social class and status markers in Smith’s work.

Furthermore, this argument builds on Pierre Bourdieu’s division of capital into economic, social, and cultural categories, as well as his theory of aesthetic taste. Bourdieu, the scholar best known for connecting aesthetic taste and social class, most famously discusses this issue in Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste (1984). Bourdieu argues that an individual’s consumption choices of items such as food, clothing, and recreation, and the aesthetics that guide all choices of manner, style, and appropriateness, are determined by that person’s social position and relationship to the culture of the dominant class. The cultural competencies required by the artistic aesthetic of the dominant class, and an individual’s access to socially privileged aesthetics, shape their view of artistic and non-artistic products and events.

Bourdieu divides capital into three types: economic; social, which consists of family and personal connections; and cultural capital, which includes education, consumption, and taste. Cultural capital has become a sociological buzzword, applied to concepts far removed from Bourdieu’s. Herbert Gans argues for a conservative interpretation, limiting the term to the high cultural knowledge that serves as an informal job requirement for elite occupations in
France; while valuable for prestige, this kind of cultural capital has never been required of Americans for occupational advancement (19-21). However, if cultural capital is not narrowly defined as knowledge of “high culture,” but instead as an understanding of aesthetics that may have market value, then cultural capital can range from knowledge of a folk culture to an understanding of professionalism to a mastery of opera; any of these could conceivably improve an individual’s “life chances,” depending on the market they occupy.

For Bourdieu, an individual’s aesthetic disposition or \textit{habitus} is determined by the combination of the types of capital possessed and by the way that capital was acquired. The \textit{habitus} provides “the capacity to produce classifiable practices and works, and the capacity to differentiate and appreciate these practices and products (taste)” (170); the combination of these elements constitutes an individual’s lifestyle and perspective. The \textit{habitus} explains both the classifying practices and products, as well as the judgments that individuals make about the world. Internalized and semi-conscious at most, the \textit{habitus} exists “below the level of consciousness and language, beyond the reach of introspective scrutiny or control of the will” (466). Because of this, the \textit{habitus} does not provide for consciousness or free will; Smith’s frequent theme of “self-creation,” discussed in Chapter five, is antithetical to Bourdieu’s approach. This researcher therefore uses Bourdieu as a scaffolding rather than a blueprint, acknowledging the critical role of taste in social structuring but accepting a greater degree of agency on the part of Smith’s characters than Bourdieu might acknowledge.

While \textit{Distinction} focuses on consumption and cultural competencies, it is important to note that it is not the item consumed but the manner of consumption that is key (Holt 219-220). In Smith’s work, for example, when rural mountaineers and ballad collectors listen to folk music, their experiences are radically different because of their economic, social, and
cultural background. Outsiders may have the money and authority to legitimize folk culture, but they often misperceive it because of their class- and education-based perspectives. Similarly, mountaineers who try to gain social power by copying the consumption patterns of outsiders have mixed results because they have not internalized the perspective that accompanies the taste they adopt. Purchasing an Armani suit does not make a gentleman; knowing when and how to wear that suit is what codes for social class status.

Bourdieu’s sophisticated approach helpfully acknowledges fractions within each social class, based on the combination of economic, social, and cultural criteria capital of the individuals. For instance, a woman who married “money” but has little education may differ significantly in her aesthetic from a woman of the same class with more formal schooling. Similarly, a man with excellent social connections and a European education who has fallen on hard times may have a very different perspective than a man with the same career and similar income who has worked hard to rise from the working class. Bourdieu’s multiple-capital approach, and his recognition of the influence of class origin on not just status position but on personal aesthetic, provides a useful approach for discussing the constitution of social classes and perspectives in Lee Smith’s work.

This study begins with the premise that a variety of resources, ranging from property to skills to family connections to intuitive taste, have value in the market place and shape an individual’s life chances. Chapter two explores Smith’s own relationship to her signature setting of Appalachia, examining her personal history in the region and the connection of social class to the direct and indirect sources for her texts. Chapter three systematically surveys the elements of social differentiation within her texts by utilizing social histories of the region. Chapters four and five each take an element of social structuring important in
Smith’s work—education and taste, respectively—and examine them more closely to determine their role in shaping relationships and determining the life chances of her characters. Chapter four accesses scholarship on social class and education, while chapter five builds on Bourdieu’s theory of taste and Richard Peterson’s concept of the cultural omnivore, which can be considered an Americanization of Bourdieu’s approach to cultural capital. Underwriting all the chapters is Weber’s observation of class as determining “life chances” and Bourdieu’s multi-capital concept of social structuring.

The dissertation finds that while social class and status markers never override personal agency for Smith’s characters, they frequently limit or alter the options individuals have for finding satisfaction in life. Smith celebrates the ability of her characters to cope with all the limits placed on them, and frequently affirms the aesthetics of her low status mountain characters as personally nourishing and valuable. Nonetheless, demonstrating this aesthetic socially marks her characters, minimizing some of their social power as it maximizes their personal benefit. The unspoken challenge for Smith is to affirm the aesthetic of her rural characters while not simultaneously consigning them to a permanently inferior social position, as much local color fiction did. The journey which Smith’s characters undertake as they negotiate with their economic, social, and cultural resources reveals as much about the processes of social status and class formation as it does of the complex cultural project of their author.
CHAPTER TWO
“WHO ARE YOUR PEOPLE?”: LEE SMITH’S RELATIONSHIP TO THE APPALACHIAN SOUTH

Lee Smith’s eighth novel, *The Devil’s Dream* (1992), chronicles the lives of the fictional Baileys and Malones, two Appalachian families related by blood and marriage, whose members struggle to reconcile their success in secular country music with their spiritual heritage of Appalachian Calvinism. This multigenerational, multiple narrator saga examines themes of faith, art, sexuality, and kinship from the perspectives of various family members. The final third of the book is narrated by Katie Cocker, a contemporary country music star who eventually finds a lopsided but workable balance between the competing loyalties of family, self, spirituality, and success. This resolution does not come easily for her, however, as she explains at a press conference:

> It took me a long time to understand that not a one of us lives alone, outside of our family or our time, and that who we are depends on who we were, and who our people were. . . . I come from a singing family, we go way back. I know where we’re from. I know who we are. The hard part has been figuring out who I am, because I’m not like any of them, and yet they are bone of my bone. . . . (14)

Like Katie Cocker, Lee Smith has a complicated but determining relationship to her childhood home and its cultural heritage. However, while Cocker is a singer finding her own voice in a famous musical family, Smith is an Appalachian native who often writes about mountains she has not lived in for decades, a former “town” girl fascinated with rural “holler” culture, a sensitive and perceptive cultural observer with a penchant for some of the most dramatic stereotypes of Appalachia. Smith’s literary relationship with the sub-region of her childhood is more complicated than the no-nonsense tone of her narratives often suggests.

Just as Katie Cocker only gradually comes to an appreciation of her past, Lee Smith wrote short stories and novels for over a decade before she focused on Appalachia as a viable
setting. When asked why she did not set her fiction in the Southern Mountain Region from the beginning, Smith said:

That is because when I started out I thought the idea was to be sophisticated. To be a good writer, I thought, the idea would be to learn elegant language, write fancy sentences about an upper-class person . . . (Herion-Sarafidis 11)

Eventually, the towns and rural culture of the Southern Mountain Region of Smith’s childhood captured her fictional imagination. However, Smith’s responses to this terrain are shaped by her experiences in the region and by the literary and popular images of Appalachia that resonate inside and outside of the mountains. Though she periodically sets works in the larger South, because Smith’s literary reputation and professional identity currently rest on her association with the Southern Mountain Region, this dissertation begins by contextualizing her work in relationship to her signature setting of Appalachia.

The image of Appalachia has been repeatedly appropriated over the years by missionaries, politicians, capitalists, union workers, and fiction writers for innumerable purposes, some benevolent, some self-serving. Henry Shapiro observes in *Appalachia on Our Minds* that between 1870 and 1900, many writers and cultural workers created “explanations” for the perceived differences between Appalachia and the nation, resulting in a continuing view of the region as “other” (x). Allen Batteau states in *The Invention of Appalachia* that in some significant ways, “the making of Appalachia was a literary and a political invention rather than a geographical discovery” (1). ¹

Batteau argues, however, that the “myth vs. reality” approach to portrayals of Appalachia misses the real power of the archetypes of nature, poverty, and folklife that lay

¹ For purposes of clarity, this dissertation will refer to the geographical area as the “Southern Mountain Region” and the image as setting or concept as “Appalachia.”
behind mountain stereotypes. Texts such as Harry Caudill’s *Night Comes to the Cumberlands*, notable for its skillful use of nature as archetype, will be remembered long after those who rightly question the book’s “semantic accuracy” are gone. Batteau argues that a critique of the accuracy of Appalachian stereotypes is less useful for a discussion of mountain literature than understanding the archetypes behind these symbols and their resonance for the larger culture (4-7). “[E]very reality is constituted by archetypes,” Batteau states; “the interesting question is not a contrast between myth and reality, but rather the hierarchies and intersections and namings of multiple realities” (6).

While Smith at times undermines Appalachian stereotypes in her work, she is hesitant to offer a “reality,” often asserting that a story is “always the teller’s tale, and you never finally know the way it was” (Arnold 347). Instead, Smith complicates stereotypes by first invoking and then individualizing or contextualizing them. As Dorothy Hill states, Smith tends “to handle, play into, and shrug off Southern stereotypes” (6) with humor and narrative detail rather than simply negating them (7-8). Despite this imaginative rather than documentary approach to the region, Smith’s own experience as a Southern Mountain Region native helps “qualify” her as an Appalachian writer for her contemporary audiences. The occasional complaints that Smith writes about a region that she no longer lives in and about characters from a different social class than her own social origins indicates the importance of an authenticating regional connection for Appalachian writers. However, Smith’s fiction is enriched not only by her experience, but also by preceding depictions of Appalachia in literature, by the image of Appalachia in the popular imagination, and by her research. To effectively examine the social worlds Smith creates in her fiction, it is first necessary to
identify Smith’s position in relationship to her material and to place her fiction within the larger milieu of historic images of Appalachia in the literary and popular imagination.

This approach does not suggest that Smith’s fiction should be defined only in context of the literature of Appalachia. A discussion of the relationship of her work to the Southern literary tradition, with attention to her debts to Eudora Welty and William Faulkner, or in the context of late twentieth century multi-culturalism also would be illuminating. Furthermore, this chapter does not intend to treat Smith pejoratively as a “regionalist.” Many writers shy away from the labels “regionalist,” “Southern,” and “Appalachian,” and with good reason; Jim Wayne Miller observes that the tag “has been so predictably employed as a term of relegation that serious writers have been less than eager to be associated with it” (2). However, the focus of this dissertation is social class. Therefore, attention to the specifics of the social world the writer creates is essential to a thorough discussion. Because Smith is known for her depictions of Appalachia, and because the prevalent popular and literary images of the region often suggest a lower class status, this chapter concentrates on how Smith negotiates among her own perceptions, the popular imagination, and the literature of Appalachia to create complex social worlds in the mountains.

Lee Smith in Appalachia

While the definition of “Appalachia” has varied through the years, W.H. Ward persuasively argues that though its boundaries are indeterminate, “we know very well the location of its center: the mountains” (624). Though this definition should not obscure the presence of towns and urban centers in the region, it is a fair statement of the perceived source of the Appalachia’s uniqueness. The Appalachia of the literary and popular imagination is actually only the southern half of the mountain range that extends from Georgia to Maine.
The Southern Appalachians are generally defined as the section stretching from north Alabama and north Georgia through Tennessee, North Carolina, Kentucky, Virginia, West Virginia, Maryland, and into Pennsylvania. The mountainous regions of these Southern states are as different from each other as from the rest of the nation. To equate the cotton mill territory of north Georgia with coal-mining Kentucky is as much a mistake as confusing Spain with Mexico; while continuities exist, the geographical setting and experiences of the local population make the communities noticeably different.

“Appalachia” in Smith’s work is primarily the mountains and towns of the Virginia coal-mining country where she spent her childhood. While Smith does set works in other Appalachian sub-regions, such as North Carolina and north Alabama, she most consistently chooses settings that reflect the mountains of her youth. Cultural practices and perspectives often provide narrative consistency in those texts that follow characters across state or sub-regional lines. For example, *Saving Grace*, while set in various North Carolina and Tennessee rural towns and churches, is culturally unified by the protagonist’s association with charismatic churches that Smith consistently links with rural mountain culture. In *The Devil’s Dream*, Katie Cocker leaves the mountains to travel through genteel Richmond, honky-tonk Louisiana, hip California, and contemporary Nashville in search of stardom, she consistently identifies herself as a country singer, performing the music that is her cultural inheritance from her family in the mountains. Though some scholarship intimates that Smith minimizes sub-regional differences (Ostwalt 99), her persistent focus on coal-mining country reflects the mountains that she knows best.

In addition to sub-regional differences, scholars recognize varied degrees of economic and social differentiation within Southern Mountain Region communities, a view that
contrasts with the popular perception of Appalachia as homologous. Horace Kephardt acknowledges in the introduction to his 1913 ethnography, *Our Southern Highlanders*, that his text focuses not on town or hill residents in the Southern Mountain Region, but on “mountaineers,” thereby both noting and dismissing internal social distinctions. Cratis Williams’ doctoral survey of the mountain literary tradition up until 1961, serialized by the *Appalachian Journal* in 1975, identified three distinct socioeconomic groups that had coalesced within the region by the 1920s:

1. **Town and city dwellers** – Appalachian residents in towns of over 1000 people were similar to those in other U.S. towns. Often distantly related to their rural neighbors, they were anxious to separate themselves from the less desirable aspects of mountain culture and resented the label of “mountaineer.” According to Williams, “[t]hough close to their country cousins in the ethical aspects of their culture, they have modernized their manners, speech, dress, homes and habits of life” (58).

2. **Valley farmers** – The largest group, most of these prosperous rural residents lived in river valleys, near main highways, or large creek mouths. Though they shared “ethical and ethnical homogeneity” with the rest of the mountain population, they typically enjoyed a “more generous” material and social life than the third class.

3. **Branchwater mountaineers** – The group most often portrayed in local color and early- to mid-twentieth century fiction, branchwater mountaineers are often depicted as the *only* mountaineer. These small landowners, tenants, and squatters often lived in coves, on ridges, and in inaccessible regions, or they were scattered between the other classes. As the name suggests, they lived along small creeks rather than rivers or larger creeks of the valley farmers, and are at times called “creekers”; in Smith’s fiction, this class resides in mountain
“hollers,” or hollows, which are narrow valleys with a small creek nearby. Like town residents and valley farmers, this group resented the frequently unflattering depictions of themselves in print; as Williams states, “no one admits to being a mountaineer” (61).

Williams appropriated these categories from John C. Campbell’s 1921 study, *The Southern Highlander and His Homeland*, which Smith used with *Our Southern Highlanders* as research texts for her novels *Oral History* and *Fair and Tender Ladies*. Horace and Campbell’s ethnographies have been grouped with other early “documentary” texts that misleadingly suggest that “diverse pre-industrial localities in the southern mountains” represent “a single, region-wide folk society.” To be fair, however, Campbell was unique among these early writers for recognizing the variety of social groups within the region, even if he did not sufficiently differentiate between the social dynamics of sub-regions (Pudup, Billings, and Waller 3; 19). Because Smith used Campbell and Kephart as sources and because of the persistent town/holler division in her work and its criticism, these basic categories provide a starting place for discussing social and economic differentiation in Smith’s Appalachian texts.2

As a novelist and short story writer, Smith has published a total of nine novels, two novellas, and three collections of short stories since her senior thesis, *The Last Day the Dogbushes Bloomed*, was published in 1968. Her fourth book, *Black Mountain Breakdown* (1980), marked the beginning of Smith’s literary fascination with her childhood home of Appalachia. Since then, she has explored the mountains through texts such as *Oral History* (1982), *Fair and Tender Ladies* (1988), *The Devil’s Dream* (1992), and *Saving Grace* (1995).

2 Critical sources acknowledging Smith’s use of this division are surveyed in the following chapter.
Many of her short stories, including those in her recent collection, *News of the Spirit* (1998), focus on the larger South or a more contemporary Appalachia. Her current project, *The Last Girls*, follows four college friends reuniting for a cruise down the Mississippi, though she has stated that her subsequent novel will likely focus on a “picture man” traveling through early twentieth-century Appalachia.

Smith’s relationship to her signature subject is one of strong emotional and imaginative identification, subtly complicated by her continuing social distance from her subjects. A Southern Mountain Region native, Smith was born in 1944 in Grundy, Virginia, a small coal-mining town near the West Virginia border. The daughter of a schoolteacher and the owner of the local dime store, Smith identifies herself as a “town” girl rather than a “holler” girl, suggesting she has more in common with Campbell’s town dweller class than the branchwater mountaineers of early Appalachian fiction. Smith described the difference in a recent interview:

> When you live in the holler, when you live up one of those creeks, there’s a whole society among neighbors and clans—different people from one family in one place. It’s very close, warm, extended community. Traditionally, the people who live in the hollers or up in the creeks have a lot less money, and they work in the mines, or they work in the hospital, or they might come to town and clean somebody’s house or work in the tire store. The town people are more the people that own the businesses, the doctors—the people that own things. (Appendix 340)

Smith’s status as a town girl reflects a degree of social and economic privilege, distancing Smith’s experience from the majority of her protagonists, who often have overt “holler” connections and roots. According to Dorothy Hill, Smith “was fascinated by her classmates, even drawn to them, and yet she was distanced too; she felt burdened by a sense of guilt and privilege” because she always had shoes and her immediate family did not work in the dangerous coal mines (6).
When she was a high school junior, Smith’s parents sent her to Saint Catherine’s in Richmond, Virginia, an elite private school that introduced her to a more overt and traditionally Southern class system. Later, she attended Hollins College in Roanoke, Virginia, where Louis Rubin was her teacher and classmates included critics Anne Goodwyn Jones and Lucinda MacKethan, and writer Annie Dillard. Upon graduation from Hollins, Smith married the poet James Seay, with whom she has two sons. Smith accompanied Seay to various academic jobs, working briefly as a reporter before teaching a series of high school and college-level English courses; the couple divorced in 1982. In 1985, Smith married journalist Hal Crowther, whom she met while both were teaching adult education courses. Smith combined her writing career with a position at North Carolina State University, where she taught until her retirement in 2000.

Smith is often labeled a “Southern writer,” and while she does not object to the title, she has at times differentiated between “Southern writer” and her preferred title of “Appalachian writer,” a view she explained in a 1989 interview with Pat Arnow:

There’s a huge difference between a Southern writer and the kind of writer I am. For one thing, so much of what I think as the canon of Southern literature does have to do with race and racial guilt. . . . I just didn’t have a sense of that. And also, I never had a sense of an aristocracy. You know, there was nobody with big columns on their house, with lots of money or black mammys.

I just don’t think of myself as a Southern writer. I really don’t, because the class system was so different, the money situation was so different, even. Well, just the whole social structure was quite different, I think, from the deep South. . . . There’s not much similarity between a novel that comes out of Appalachia and a novel that comes out of the deep South. (26)

Smith here contrasts her experience in coal-mining Virginia with the plantation system of the deep South, an area more radically different from her home sub-region than the Piedmont she
currently lives in. Smith elaborates further in an article from her web page, “White Columns and Marble Generals”:

Nobody I knew was attached to the soil in a mystical blood-bound Faulknerian way—everybody had long since sold the timber and mineral rights to their land, which was mostly too steep to farm anyway. Mining had taken its toil on the landscape, as well. We weren’t allowed to play in the river because they washed coal in it upstream; the water in the Levisa River behind my house ran black as night. Nobody had much money, and there was no aristocracy either—unless we were the aristocracy, us town kids whose parents owned the stores and didn’t go down into the mines, who took pimiento cheese sandwiches to school in our lunch bags instead of the corn bread and buttermilk in a Mason jar brought by the kids from the hollers.

As these examples indicate, Smith perceives a split between Appalachia and what she calls the deep South. Smith’s statements that Appalachia has no racial guilt—indeed, “no black people”—no rigid class structure, no “columns,” and no “Faulknerian” connection to the land suggest that the difference she perceives between Appalachia and the deep South is that the mountains had no plantation-based aristocracy. Therefore, in her view, economically-based social structures contribute to regional distinctiveness.

This view of Appalachia as a land unaffected by plantation life is not representative of the entire region, however. Plantations and slavery, on both a large and small scale, existed within the Southern Mountain Region where conditions made it feasible. “Even though Southern Appalachia had a much lower incidence of slavery than the rest of the South . . . nearly two-fifths of the region’s combined fixed assets were tied up in slaves” in 1860 (Dunaway 311). Additionally, Talmage Stanley has suggested that past residents of Smith’s home county of Buchanan, Virginia, may have actively discouraged African-Americans from staying within its borders; her perception of Grundy as having “no blacks” may have a darker cause than settlement patterns (322). In response to several published statements by Smith’s
suggesting an absence of both social class and racial guilt in Grundy, Stanley argues that “a blindness to the work of racism entails a similar blindness to the work of class in a place” and doubts that neither race nor class played a significant role in her hometown (331).

Smith’s more detailed discussions of Grundy do reveal a socially nuanced society with divisions created by class and status factors. Her comments on her own position in Grundy in a 1989 interview with Irv Broughton are especially revealing:

Smith: It was a mountain culture. Mining was the only industry in that county. My dad didn’t work in the mines, but lots of my family did, lots of people that we knew did. . .

Broughton: Did you ever feel isolated from your friends whose families worked underground?

Smith: Yeah, I did. I felt very isolated. I felt kind of like a little princess in a sense. One thing people don’t understand about Appalachia that makes Appalachian writing very different from Southern literature: there is no upper class. There was nobody wealthy. I felt sort of embarrassed to live in town, and I had friends whose lunch would eat buttermilk and cornbread in a Mason jar. But I lived in town, and my mother was from the Eastern shore and had pretensions. . . . I didn’t go back up in the “hollers” after school. It was very funny; when I grew up and went away to school, I realized I had had the most middle class of childhoods. But given the circumstances, those of us who lived in town . . . we really thought that we had something.

Broughton: How did this manifest itself, Princess?

Smith: Our lives were different just because our family lived in town. People were always getting killed in the mines—I remember so well when I was growing up—or being disabled. And our families weren’t disabled, who had stores in town.

Broughton: Did you feel guilt?

Smith: Yes, very definitely. . . . I still feel a lot of guilt because I didn’t grow up in the “hollers.” I didn’t have a father who went down in the mines every day. (280-281)

While Smith appreciated the security and comfort her family experienced, these comments suggest a sense of ambivalence and guilt about this privilege.
Though Smith has been spent much of her adult life in the research triangle of North Carolina, she visits Grundy regularly and remains involved in the region through educational and research projects. In 2000, she wrote a personal introduction to *Sitting on the Courthouse Bench*, a compilation of oral histories from Grundy. Smith, whose novels include the fictional *Oral History* and whose work often reflects the voices of oral narrators, had always wanted to collect oral histories of her hometown (Appendix 332). When she learned that a flood control project would destroy downtown Grundy and relocate the town to higher ground, she and Debbie Raines, a local English teacher, organized local high school students to collect and preserve communal memories of the old downtown before it was literally washed away.

Smith’s introduction, written for a Grundy audience, reflects on her local family history and her memories of the town. The brief essay is striking for two reasons. First, Smith’s discussion of her family history emphasizes the prominent position that her relatives occupied in the community. Second, Smith’s memories of Grundy suggest the importance that her personal experience and observations play in creating her fiction.

The introduction modestly acknowledges the role that Smith’s family played in Grundy. Her great-grandfather was chairman of the county Democratic Party in 1896, then Deputy Sheriff, and eventually Clerk of the County Court for over 20 years. The local Methodist church began with meetings in the family’s front yard. Smith’s great-grandfather was also instrumental in bringing the fledgling coal-mining industry to the county, even ordering a survey that revealed the rich coal deposits in the area.

His children, the siblings of Smith’s paternal grandmother, had a variety of influential jobs: one great-uncle was Superintendent of the Buchanan County Schools for 42 years; another started a still-existent insurance company; one great-aunt was a teacher; and another
was a librarian. Smith’s paternal grandfather was the local jailor; his brother Vern was a member of the Virginia State Legislature and owned the area’s first Ford dealership, while an alcoholic brother, Blind Bill Smith, played the piano for dances in the region. Lee Smith’s father, Ernest Smith, opened the local dime store when he returned from World War II, a business that he operated until the early 1990s; he died on the last day of its going-out-of-business-sale. In addition, Ernest served as county treasurer for forty years (Arnow Now & Then 24).

The introduction does not discuss the family Smith’s mother, Virginia Marshall Smith, because she was a “foreigner” from outside the mountains. “Gig,” as Smith’s mother was called, met Ernest Smith when her sister married his uncle (Hill 6). She came to Grundy to teach school, having chosen Ernest over a Richmond gentleman (“A Familiarity with Lightening” xxxii). Raised on Chincoteague, an island off Virginia’s eastern shore, Gig’s extended family was based in Baltimore and had some education and “pretensions.” Though the family had “fallen on hard times,” as Smith says, her mother had graduated from James Madison College and retained genteel ideals. Smith’s mother perceived her mountain relatives, despite their prominence within their community, as somewhat lacking in the cultured social graces. The contrast between the mountain and genteel traditions became a conflict in Smith’s life and in her fiction (Hill 6; 250). Therefore, while Smith’s family had local affluence and prestige, she was aware through her mother that other class and status standards existed (Appendix 341).

In addition to indicating the role of Smith’s family in Grundy, the introduction to Sitting on the Courthouse Bench inadvertently reveals Smith’s frequent use of personal details as fictional texture. Smith begins by stating that an old woman once described Grundy to her
as “a playpretty cotched in the hand of God,” the same words that Granny Younger uses in *Oral History* to describe Hoot Owl Holler (24). Smith remembers winning the Miss Grundy High pageant, dressed in a strapless white dress with tiers of “tacky little net ruffles” and “a red velvet ribbon tied around my neck,” the same costume Crystal Spangler wore in *Black Mountain Breakdown* when she became Miss Black Rock. Smith’s story of hiding in cellophane Easter straw in the dime store while her father and his employees assembled holiday baskets turns up in both *Family Linen* and *The Christmas Letters*. Smith’s paternal grandmother is described as a woman who married young, had no formal education, but tried to “improve herself” by ordering books and catalogues; she most likely served as the model for the grandmother in Smith’s acclaimed story, “Artists.” The introduction even mentions the real grandmother’s lush garden and the inspirational plaque described in the story: “With the kiss of the sun for pardon, / The song of the birds for mirth, / I am closer to God in my garden / Than anywhere else on the earth.”

These are just a handful of the dozens of personal anecdotes and details Smith has mentioned in essays and interviews that have counterparts in her fiction. That a writer uses personal experience to create their artistic vision is certainly no revelation; Faulkner and Welty, to name two obvious examples, drew from communal and family history to create their fictional worlds. However, because Smith’s experience in the Southern Mountain Region in some ways authorizes her as an Appalachian writer, and because of her local position as a town rather than mountain girl, her integration of personal detail is significant.

As a Southern Mountain Region native, Smith is popularly authorized as one who can write about the area with authenticity; she has the requisite “cultural capital” to be convincing as a “real” Appalachian. Early local color writers were published partially on the strength of
their knowledge of the “exotic” cultures they depicted (Brodhead 151); while the mountain literary tradition has developed more sophistication in the intervening years, personal knowledge of the region at times remains an informal criterion for writers. Perhaps because self-serving outsiders have unfairly appropriated of the image of Appalachia in the past, a personal connection to the mountains remains a desirable credential for Appalachian writers, suggesting that their fiction may be more accurate and respectful.

Smith not only possesses and acknowledges such a connection; she also incorporates her life, both in and out of the hills, into her fiction. However, Smith’s experience in Appalachia as a “town girl” from a family of some prominence and means subtly shaped her experience of the area. The fact that Smith was a “town girl” does not invalidate her Appalachian identity nor does it suggest that she is incapable of fairly depicting individuals whose lives were not identical to her own. However, it does complicate the discussion of social class in the work of a writer depicting a supposedly “classless” society that she acknowledges as subtly stratified.

Many of Smith’s most celebrated protagonists, such as Ivy Rowe in *Fair and Tender Ladies*, belong not to Smith’s “town” class, but to the “holler” social groups. Smith commented on her somewhat distanced relationship to her rural mountain protagonists in the Broughton interview:

> So you say, you haven’t any right to write about people who never ventured more than nine miles from the place they were born in. But I do think if you’re from somewhere and you’ve hung around there all your life and you have family there, you feel legitimately qualified. And I’ve done a lot of research. (281)

The mild defensiveness in this response indicates Smith’s wrestling with one of the criticisms of her work: that she appropriates the lives of less privileged neighbors (Stanley 316). In
fairness, Smith has never equated her experience as a “town” girl with “holler” life, nor does she obscure the fact that, as an adult, she lives at some remove from her childhood sub-region. In the Broughton interview, she acknowledges the social divisions in the mountains, often not perceived by outsiders, and concedes that her relationships with any “holler” characters is characterized by experiential difference.

However, Smith believes that her distance can be an advantage. In subsequent interviews, Smith has articulated her relationship to her “first, best material” as one of a simultaneous insider and outsider, brought up in the culture but with enough distance to regard it aesthetically. Smith indicates in her review of Eudora Welty’s One Writer’s Beginning that Welty has adopted a similar position: “[T]he third essay in One Writer’s Beginnings is about this truth: how, in order to write what you see and what you hear, you have to be outside it, too. For the writer is ever the outsider and the traveler” (123). In an interview with Edwin Arnold, Smith states that “I had realized that I wanted to write about small-town life in general . . . but there weren’t specifically mountain families until I wrote Black Mountain Breakdown . . . it does take a long time to get enough distance, to get a real aesthetic purchase on things” (345). Smith repeatedly affirms the value of distance as well as understanding in the life of a writer, a position that semantically transforms her difference from her subjects into a benefit rather than a liability, and even defines that distance as a prerequisite for effective writing.

In “Blessings and Burdens: Memory in the Novels of Lee Smith,” Gloria Underwood argues convincingly that the ability to imaginatively connect with the past is a measure of the artistic health of Smith’s characters (11). Though literally returning to home or to the past is impossible, her characters visit through their memories; as a result, “the ability to go home
becomes in her fiction a measure of character strength intricately related to the acceptance of memory” (19). This desire for connection, in conjunction with the acknowledgement of the necessity for distance, can be seen as suggesting Smith’s relationship to her home community. Complicated by distance and transformed through affectionate imagination, Smith affirms the need for connection even as she suggests that memory and imagination are the best routes available—perhaps because they have become, in some important ways, her main personal connection to her subject.

These reasonable but complex positions are indicative of Smith’s own complicated relationship to the Southern Mountain Region. As a native, she understands intuitively the language, values, and aesthetics that make her home sub-region distinctive. As a town girl, she occupied a social position separate from many of her characters, which provided her aesthetic distance, but probably also contributed to her fascination with the holler communities and lifestyle (Lee Smith 6). Furthermore, the conflation of Appalachian social class in the popular imagination (Appendix 345) may cause some readers to assume that Smith’s lifestyle was identical to that of her characters, a fact she has never claimed.

Smith’s attitude towards Appalachia at times suggests “survivor’s guilt,” a sense of embarrassment at her own good fortune and advantages: she recognizes, sadly, that her family had financial security and opportunities her neighbors did not (Lee Smith 6) and treats those advantages as valuable but not indicative of individual worth. Yet, Smith also states that the town class in Grundy is roughly equivalent to the national middle class (Broughton 281), a perspective gained from her experience in preparatory school, college, and living in other regions of the South. This recognition allows the narrative to treat town characters with occasional bemusement, recognizing their local stature but acknowledging that in other social
contexts, they are not as powerful. For example, in the short story “Artists,” the
grandmother’s attempts to elevate her status receive mixed reactions from local residents but
semi-open ridicule from her outsider debutante daughter-in-law, who recognizes the
grandmother’s imperfect understanding of upper class taste. Smith’s social class limits her
personal knowledge of her characters’ lives, piques her curiosity in them, and provides her
with an expanded palate of choices to incorporate into her fiction.

**Appalachian Literature: An Abbreviated Overview**

Smith’s depiction of the social diversity of Appalachia contradicts the contemporary
assumption that the Southern Mountain Region is socially, economically, and culturally
homologous. However, the popular perception of Appalachia was not initially at odds with the
region’s internal diversity. Henry Shapiro argues in *Appalachia on Our Minds* that while the
topography and population of the Southern Mountain Region were acknowledged as distinct
early in the nineteenth century, these variations were regarded as differences of degree, not of
kind (xii). It was not until after the Civil War that Appalachia was perceived as a “peculiar”
land with a unique and quaint culture.

Though the mountaineer first appeared in various travel narratives and Southwestern
humor pieces, between 1870 and 1890 local color fiction writers such as Mary Noailles
Murfree and Protestant missionaries “discovered” Appalachia as a unique land. Both groups
stood to gain by perpetuating a view of Appalachia as distinct: the writers obtained a subject
for local color stories while Protestant missionaries found a field with few ties to outside
denominations or the slave economy of the Old South, making it easier to promote as worthy
of Northern benevolence (xiii-xiv). Though both groups’ depictions “were rarely made with
reference to the real conditions of mountain life” (Shapiro xiv), by 1890 they had helped establish Appalachian otherness as a national “fact.”

Towards the end of the nineteenth century, this Appalachian otherness came to be perceived as a “problem.” Americans responded to this “problem” by engaging in benevolent action and explaining Appalachia’s perceived different through techniques such as metaphors, like “our contemporary ancestors,” or references to the facts of mountain life, such as the region’s relative isolation (Shapiro xiv-xvii). An increasing number of texts depicted Appalachia as sordid and depraved, a tendency in keeping with the naturalistic and reform-minded temper of the day (Collins 70-71). In the fiction written between 1884 and 1913, mountain characters often resemble the poor whites of Southern fiction (Williams 789). Writers and apologists such as John Fox, Jr., and Berea College President William Frost successfully promoted Appalachia as ripe for industrial and missionary efforts (Batteau 84).

Local color texts were shaped as much by the demands of the literary marketplace as by the imagination of their writers. Shapiro argues that local color stories were an updating of the travel sketch, in which a “man of sensibility” described his experiences as a tourist. In local color fiction, the focus shifts from the charming narrative to what is observed because middle class readers, accustomed to first-person reports from the Civil War battlefield, wanted to know how the average person (re: Americans like themselves) might experience such an environment. Publications such as Lippincott’s, Scribners’s/Century, and Harper’s New Monthly Magazine featured articles and short stories with “olden” or “exotic” settings that contrasted with “modern” middle class life, literarily asserting the superiority and homogeneity of late nineteenth century, middle class, American culture (6-11; 14-15).
Shapiro and Batteau both identify the primary audience for local color fiction of the mountains as the middle class reader (10; 38-39).

Richard Brodhead offers a different approach. In “Regionalism and the Upper Class,” he suggests that local color fiction was intended for an elite rather than an average audience, observing that the content of Harper’s, Scribner’s/Century, and the Atlantic, the three “quality journals,” focused on “touristic” or vacation prose, reflecting an upper class consumption of culture rather than middle class concerns such as childcare (159). Most Southern mountain stories and essays published in the 1890s appeared in Harper’s, Atlantic, Scribner’s, Lippincott’s, Peterson’s, Appleton’s, and The American Missionary. All but the last two targeted similar audiences (Pancake 35). Brodhead further argues that local color fiction allowed the elite to deal with anxieties over increasing immigration; the texts created a “deeply fictitious America that was not homogeneous yet not radically heterogeneous either and whose diversities were ranged under one group’s normative sway” (167). In Regional Fictions: Culture and Identity in Nineteenth-century American Literature, Stephanie Foote agrees that local color fiction provided a technique for dealing with tensions over immigration and urbanization by creating groups of accented strangers with rural, American pasts, suggesting the presence of the foreigner within each American (13).

These varied interpretations concur on the most significant point: the audience for local color fiction, whether middle or upper class, is not the people written about (Brodhead 156). Moreover, the narrator and the audience, even as they demonstrate interest in and a perhaps admiration for the local color culture depicted, always represent the normative group. The “difference” between the audience and the subjects inherent in local color fiction
invariably privileges the readers’ position. A hierarchy, whether of class, ethnicity, or both, is implicit and never to the advantage of those written about.

Since the “unfamiliar” was the product sold by these publication-focused writers, authors tended to ignore the Southern Mountain Region’s town and valley residents, who had stronger connections to modern “American” culture, and concentrated on their more isolated and typically poorer neighbors: the branchwater mountaineer. This group became “the mountaineer” of fiction, and increasingly was regarded as “the mountaineer” after World War I (Williams 60).

During the very early twentieth century, much of the fiction about or set in the Southern Mountain Region continued to be sentimental or stereotypical, often written by outsiders, typically ethnographers, teachers, travelers, or benevolence workers (Williams 887-888). The union mine wars from 1913 to 1938 led to popular depictions of the mountaineer as the victim of industrialization (Batteau 127), and several 1930s proletariat novels were set in the mountains, the most notable focused on the Gastonia textile mill strikes in North Carolina (Williams 742).

Beginning in the 1920s, however, writers with more personal ties to the region began creating fiction with greater subtlety and understanding. Elizabeth Maddox Roberts’ first novels appeared in the 1920s; in 1940, James Still and Jesse Stuart published their first works; Harriette Arnow also followed with her first novel in the 1940s, just to name a few notable authors of depth and artistry. More sophisticated in characterization and plot than their predecessors, often Southern Mountain Region natives or long-time residents, these authors began to create a fiction of rather than about the Southern Mountain Region.
Though Appalachia was still envisioned as inherently “different” by both native and outsider, writers approached this assumption with a variety of themes and techniques. Many observed that the “different” mountains were in the process of changing because of industrialization and increased contact with the outside (Gray 251). Frequent themes in mountain fiction written by both insiders and outsiders between 1920 and 1950 included regional border crossing (251), mountain pioneering (268), feuding (276), primitivism (285), and the cultural and social displacement caused by industrialization (303-304).

In the 1960s, the nation again focused on Appalachia as a region needing assistance. The most widely read texts were journalistic, such as Henry Caudill’s *Night Comes to the Cumberlands* and Jack Weller’s *Yesterday’s People*. Most were as disliked by Southern Mountain Region residents, although they were revered by benevolence workers (Batteau 169). During the 1970s, Appalachian Studies courses and programs began surfacing in Southern Mountain Region high schools and universities, typically with the goal of preserving local culture or empowering residents (Fisher 8). Both the *Appalachian Journal* and *Appalachian Heritage*, two of the respected scholarly journals on the region, began publication in the early 1970s (Flynt 160).

In recent decades, Appalachian fiction has grown both in popularity and controversy. Some scholars argue that Appalachian literature does not constitute a separate category, or at least not yet. In “The Rush to Find an Appalachian Literature” (1978), W. H. Ward argues that the best writers of the region, such as Harriette Arnow and James Still, already receive critical attention. Furthermore, he seems wary that promoting Appalachian literature will reinforce the stereotypes often present in the second-rate novels. He concludes that
Appalachian literature is much like Post-Revolutionary War American writing; the fiction holds promise but does not always represent the finest artistic practices.

Approaching the topic from a different angle, Allison Ensor (1995) contextualizes the importance of Appalachian literature by reminding critics that formal study of American literature was once considered unwarranted. Furthermore, even after American literature became part of university curriculums, Southern literature was excluded for years. Ensor suggests that Appalachian literature should receive serious study as part of the American tradition of realism. Additionally, he argues that, “As New York, San Francisco, and Los Angeles do not make up the whole of the United States, so Richmond, Charleston, Atlanta, Nashville, and Oxford, Mississippi, are not the whole of the South. Our teaching should not imply that they are” (640).

To suggest that Appalachian literature represents a distinct literary vein is not to argue that it cannot be included within other traditions. Appalachian literature is not any less Southern than Louisiana literature, but both sets of texts have discernibly different aesthetics and practices because of the social worlds they depict. Given the popularity and critical success of contemporary Appalachian writers such as Fred Chappell, Wendell Berry, Bobbie Ann Mason, Dorothy Allison, Denise Giardina, Lee Smith, and others, discussing Appalachian writing as a distinct tradition, without implying that its writers cannot partake of other traditions simultaneously, helps reveal the connections and disjunctions between writers focusing on the specific social worlds in the Southern Mountain Region.

**The Beginning—Murfree, Fox, and Local Color**

The fictional mountaineer officially arrived in 1884 with the publication of Mary Noailles Murfree’s short story collection, *In the Tennessee Mountains*. Though she was not
the first to feature the mountaineer in fiction, Murfree’s collection signaled that the
mountaineer had become a distinct literary type (Boger vii). The daughter of an aristocratic
family from non-mountainous Murfreesboro, Tennessee, Murfree had observed the mountain
residents of Beersheba Springs, Tennessee, when her family summered nearby during her
childhood. After modest success writing stories about sophisticated life for *Lippincott’s
Magazine*, Murfree began writing tales of the Tennessee mountains under the pseudonym
Charles Egbert Craddock. William Dean Howells, the “Dean of American Letters,” published
her stories in *The Atlantic Monthly*; eventually, her “mountaineer” became the definitive type
in the minds of the public (Williams 152). Many outsiders were so convinced of the
verisimilitude of her portrayals that northern churches often used her short story collection as
a primer on Appalachia for home missionaries (Shapiro 57). The source of many stereotypes
prevalent in mountain literary fiction until the 1930s, Murfree’s mountain characters were not
the degraded poor “white trash” of Southern fiction, but rather “a lower middle” class and
status group (Williams 142).

For Murfree and other local color writers during the 1870s and 1880s, Appalachia’s
divergence from the American mainstream “was more a matter of difference in social class
than in culture, or more precisely it was a matter of class difference which amounted to
cultural difference” (Shapiro 69). In Murfree’s “Star in the Valley,” for example, outsider
Reginald Chevis’ camp on the top of the mountain and the valley cabin of the local
blacksmith’s daughter, Celia Shaw, illustrate their relative stations in life. The mountaineers’
ignorance of their low status confirms their lack of sophistication (69). Chevis, however, is
not only aware of the difference in social class; he has difficulties conceptualizing Celia in
other terms. When Celia informs her plotting family that killing defenseless, sleeping enemies
is wrong, Chevis thinks, “She was beyond her station in sentiment” (147). As is typical of Murfree’s work, the interaction of the Appalachian and outsider characters suggests that the mountaineers are poorer, less educated, and less cultured; in other words, they are of a lower social and economic class.

These attitudes may reflect not only the view of the outsider but also that of progressive local townspeople, according to David Hsiung’s *Two Worlds in the Tennessee Mountains* (1997). Hsiung theorizes that Murfree gained much of her knowledge of the mountain people from East Tennessee town residents, who by the late 1800s regarded themselves as distinct from the more isolated mountaineers; those residents who pursued economic ties to outside markets, especially through railroad expansion, often saw their rural neighbors as backward (181). However, local color writers depicted all mountaineers as a single group, thereby reflecting their own class prejudice on top of the local community’s (182). Smith recognized this class confusion in a recent interview, stating that while her hometown neighbors differentiated between town and “holler” or branchwater mountaineer residents, outsiders usually saw all Appalachian residents as one class (Appendix 345). Therefore, the class perspectives of Murfree and her contemporaries, combined with their obliviousness to local class divisions nonetheless implicated in their fiction, suggests that the early motifs of local color fiction are heavily influenced by social class.

By 1890, however, because local color writers and Protestant home missionaries had established Appalachian “otherness” in the popular imagination, “though still important, class distinctions could no longer be seen as the sum of this opposition” between Appalachia and America (Shapiro 70). In the turn-of-the-century work of John Fox, Jr., characters may
overcome class differences but have a more difficult time crossing cultural divides because their identities as Americans or Appalachians are determining and essentialized (73).

While Murfree’s background was privileged and she visited the mountains as a tourist, the situation of John Fox, Jr., was less stable. “Fox was tormented by matters of class,” states Darlene Wilson, noting that his private papers are filled with references to his family’s financial struggles and his own ill health (102). Fox consistently attempted to hide the fact that Garth Fund for Poor Boys in Bourbon County, Kentucky, paid for his elite Harvard education. Despite his reputation as an authority on Appalachia, Fox seems to have avoided the mountains as much as possible, preferring New York, and returned home only when financial matters required it. Originally from central Kentucky, Fox’s family had moved to mountainous Virginia to invest in and help develop the young bitumous coal industry. Some of his early articles were promotional pieces urging investment in the coal industry (104-106). Though Fox marketed his work as authentic representation of mountain culture (102) and traded on his supposed connection through texts, lectures, and minstrel-like “performances” of mountaineers (110-111), Fox’s relationship to his subject had more to do with financial necessity than a love for the mountains.

Fox’s work suggests that the mountain residents and bluebloods of Kentucky have common ancestors (Shapiro 75-77), a somewhat progressive view at that time. The primary theories of mountain “otherness” popular at the end of the nineteenth were cultural difference, created by mountain isolation, and biological inferiority (76). Some nineteenth century scholars believed that Southern “poor whites,” which the “mountaineers” were at times equated with, at times vigorously distanced from, occupied the lower tiers of society because of biological inferiority and could not respond positively to opportunities for improvement.
arguably, fox’s texts work through and attempt to dismiss mountain biological inferiority (pancake 91). fox’s the little shepherd of kingdom come initially identifies the social classes in protagonist chad buford’s mountain school by indicating whether the children have “gentle blood,” scotch-irish ancestry, or ancestors from the london slums. however, the book also “discovers” that mountain waif chad is descended from the same line as a bluegrass aristocrat. additionally, the ending of the book echoes the rising middle class theory of social mobility by suggesting that chad’s primary “capital” is a “strong body and a stout heart”; he possesses the personal qualities a middle class audience would want to believe facilitated mobility (pancake 91). whether based on biological inheritance or personal potential, mountain boy chad is not inherently inferior to kentucky aristocracy.

fox’s texts suggest that isolation and environment shape the lives and personalities of mountaineers (shapiro 76). this perspective is consistent with the fox family’s desires to profit from the region; if “civilization” coming to the mountains would improve the environment and character of the mountaineer, it certainly would not hurt absentee owners and investors (wilson 112-113). despite this, fox’s texts somewhat elevate the status of the mountaineer and offer possibilities for mobility by suggesting that environment, not biology, determines mountain culture, and that “culture [is] the critical difference between the mountaineers and the residents of the bluegrass” (shapiro 76).

---

3 henry shapiro observes that in the late 1800s, henry cabot lodge and john fiske explained the poor whites of the south through genetics and environment. some denominational workers applied the “poor white” category to the mountains and took offense at the imagined suggestion of degenerate mountain ancestry. after william goodell frost defined the mountaineers as “contemporary ancestors” in 1899, approaches to mountain ethnicity were pluralist rather than hierarchical (93-99). many authors continue to stress the highland ancestry of the mountaineers, even into the mid-twentieth century (gray 268).
Nonetheless, the patronizing slant to Fox’s defense indicates his attitude towards mountain culture, which he found generally inferior and inherently different from American culture (Shapiro 76). Typically, Fox’s mountaineers are “discovered” to have aristocratic ancestors or receive a lowland education before they marry outsiders, suggesting a need for improvement (Gray 245). While these patterns may be intended to demonstrate that mountain characters are not genetically inferior and are capable of improvement, they reinscribe social class by focusing on the classic markers of Southern social power: aristocratic family connections and genteel taste, especially in women. Fox does not indicate that class is unimportant; he simply finds ways to suggest that mountain characters may be “poor relations” of the Kentucky bluebloods or that individuals can “improve” through education, enterprise, and hard work.

In local color fiction, insider/outsider romances typically fail because of the supposedly irreconcilable differences between the regions that the lovers represent (Shapiro 22). Fox’s best-known novel, *The Trail of the Lonesome Pine* (1908), allows an engineer from outside Appalachia to marry a mountain girl. The process that both must undergo to make this union possible, however, suggests some of the recurring issues of culture and class that later shape Smith’s own depictions of mountain communities.

In *Trail of the Lonesome Pine*, John Hale travels to the mountains as a civil engineer to seek his fortune; while there, he meets a young mountain girl, June Tolliver. Initially, he sees her as an appealing child, though the feelings of each ripen as she matures. Nonetheless, the two are presented as an implausible pair before Hale pays for her to attend school in New York.
A gifted singer, June develops her voice and aesthetic sensitivity while at school, attending plays and operas, learning to dress, and acting as a late-nineteenth-century lady. Hale gives her the needed education “to fit her for his station in life” (268). While June is acquiring American culture, she is also learning the practices of middle class culture—hygiene, manners, and taste (Pancake 95). Though June’s musical education allows her to develop a natural gift, her acquisition of elegant manners and fashionable style suggests that her education is as much in status and class markers as it is in music.

June believes that Hale is paying for her education by managing her property investments; in reality, Hale struggles to pay her way with his own funds. While June is gone, the worry and lack of conveniences in the mountains lead Hale to allow the “superficial deterioration in habits, manners, personal appearance and the practices of all the little niceties of life” (249). The narrative suggests that “of all these things the man himself may be quite unconscious and yet they affect him more deeply than he knows and show to a woman even in his voice, his walk, his mouth” (250), especially if that woman, like June, has struggled to acquire manners. While June becomes well-educated and cultured, he becomes “not fit for her to marry [sic]” (268). Though Hale thinks of matters of style as “surface things,” by showing that money for education, clothes, and creature comforts can transform a mountain girl into a lady, while the rough conditions of the hills can cause an educated man to resemble a rough mountaineer, Fox suggests the intertwining role of class and culture in the perceived differences between the Appalachian and the American. Class conditions are fluid rather than stable (Pancake 96); material conditions of existence and lifestyle reflect and influence one another.
Home from school, June re-adapts to the hills; the addition of a flower garden, books, and a piano to her family farm and her new sensibilities allow her to make life in the mountains “civilized.” A feud divides the couple; June truthfully testifies against her kinsmen in court, breaking local mores and indicating that she has absorbed American values. However, she retains her mountain sense of loyalty and accompanies her injured father out West; Hale heads to England in a vain attempt to recover his fortune. The two return to the mountains simultaneously, but not before Hale becomes an unemployed engineer and June realizes that he financed her education. The couple is reunited and promises to always return to the Gap. In the final scene, they marry in rough garb, accepting the other “just as you are” (421). This statement is ironic because of June’s education and Hale’s loss of his vocation—both have been transformed by knowing the other. Furthermore, Fox has gone to pains to match the couple socially—June is a middle class lady, not a member of the leisure class, and Hale has become a “plain civil engineer” (417) rather than a capitalist entrepreneur, which may reflect the shift of the early-twentieth-century economy towards corporate capitalism. The couple is both culturally and socially admirable to a middle class audience (Pancake 96). While culture may divide the couple, class is inescapably part of the equation.

Murfree, the daughter of a well-to-do family, typically sees class as an essential difference between outsiders and mountaineers (Shapiro 69). Fox, whose family struggled and who wrote about the mountains partly from financial necessity, was less in a position to accept financial status and relegation to the hills as class restrictive; otherwise, he would be socially condemned himself. Fox depicts Appalachia as the “other,” culturally separate from the rest of America. Nonetheless, matters such as the financing for June’s education, which makes her a suitable bride but threatens to separate her from the mountain community, are
tied to class considerations. Culture and class may be distinct, but access to certain types of culture requires a degree of social class status and financial security.

This connection foreshadows the complicated relationship of culture and class in Smith. The differences between her working class/holler characters, who typically display overt elements of mountain culture; her more modernized professionals and merchants in mountain towns; and her well-educated and relatively wealthy outsiders are partly based on class, partly on culture, and partly on a culture that has been “classed” and is therefore assigned low status. The connection of mountain culture with the less prosperous hollers designates it as a marker of the lower class, or at least lower status, in Smith’s work. Smith’s characters often have a difficult time remaining connected with mountain culture as they become more educated or financially secure, suggesting a complex class/culture association. There are, however, instances in which her characters choose to retain elements of mountain culture, though they have the financial means to adopt a town lifestyle. This fact suggests that while holler culture is often rooted in financial necessity, Smith also recognizes it as a distinct lifestyle that may be chosen as a culture. The line between the two concepts often blurs, however. In The Southern Writer in the Postmodern World, Fred Hobson first states that Oral History “is very much a novel about culture” and closes by arguing that the book, “despite itself, [is] very much a statement about class” (26; 32); in both instances, he is discussing the relationship of folk, popular, and high culture in the text. This complicated relationship between class and culture is not unique to Smith; as Shapiro suggests, it reflects some of the same dilemmas faced by earlier writers in the mountain literary tradition, including Fox. The difference is that while local color writers often conflated class with culture and obscured it
through status markers, Smith’s work acknowledges complex relationships between class, culture, and status that limits and empowers her characters.

Rodger Cunningham observes that Lee Smith’s *Oral History* (1983), which established her reputation as an artist and an Appalachian writer, is “the *Trail of the Lonesome Pine* minus the sublimation and the wishful ending” (49). Smith’s tragic love story of mountain girl Dory Cantrell and schoolteacher Richard Burlage incorporates the familiar motif of an ill-fated romance between a sophisticated outsider and a mountain girl. However, as Fred Hobson observes, it is important to note the impact of social class on Burlage’s relationship to the community and his beloved (30-31). A blue-blooded Richmonder, Burlage came to the “primitive” mountains in search of God and himself, hoping also to do some good as a teacher. His class status as a member of the Virginia aristocracy shapes his relationship with both Dory and the mountains. When Burlage first struggles with his infatuation with Dory, his reasons to resist the relationship include, “she is not of my social class.” Like other girls of the mountain literary tradition, Dory has no idea she is socially inferior (Williams 137), a fact Burlage finds “charming.” Though Burlage and Dory share real passion, hinting that this relationship might help Burlage become his best self, he never seriously commits to his mountain paramour. During their tryst in the schoolhouse, he reflects: “of course it [their affair] cannot last. A knowledge rendered more poignant still by her ignorance of it. Each moment we spend together is a moment torn from time” (157). Repeatedly, Burlage tells Dory how the train will take them away; however, his half-hearted attempt to take her fails for lack of effort on his part (Hobson 31). Like the *Trail of the Lonesome Pine*, *Oral History* suggests that social class and culture divide the insider and outsider characters.
*Oral History* reflects early Appalachian fiction more clearly than any other text of Smith’s. It is her only novel that includes moonshining and feuding, two stock plot elements of local color Appalachia. In *Oral History*, Almarine Cantrell runs moonshine to feed his family; while other texts mention moonshining, it is not a source of income for the protagonists. Eventually, the leader of a rival family kills Almarine. Though violence occurs in other Smith texts, it is never again depicted in terms of family rivalries. In *Fair and Tender Ladies*, when Babe Rowe is murdered for having sex with another man’s wife, the violence is personal and in some ways justified, not the beginning of a family war.

*Oral History* was created in large part from Smith’s research into mountain traditions, folklore, and ethnographies. Smith has stated that she came to the text through research:

> I never felt like I wrote that [*Oral History*] anyway. . . . I had never used research in anything I had written before. I kept asking my editor, who kept reassuring me, ‘It’s all right.’ But I loved the folklore. I loved all the research. . . . I just sat down and tried to find a form that would allow me to put as much of this in as I could. (Hill 7)

Throughout the text, stories of hog-killings, moonshine, dew-poisoning, feuds, and granny cures help Smith depict a folk culture of greater depth than local color fiction because the folk details are not rendered as curiosities for the consumption of the audience. Instead, the folk customs are part of the fabric of the mountain culture. As Suzanne Jones argues, the narrative perspectives Smith juxtaposes and the engaging stories of her narrators force the readers to “see beyond quaint customs and picturesque scenery to the feelings and memories that enliven the landscape”; the encounter with the stories of *Oral History*’s narrators moves the reader through and past expected stereotypes (111-112). The perspective of the mountain residents is depicted as normative, while the outsider view is invasive and flawed (Wallace 366; “Orality” 268).
Though Smith explores the culture, music, and religion of the mountains in texts such as *Fair and Tender Ladies*, *The Devil’s Dream*, and *Saving Grace*, Smith never alludes as overtly to the early Appalachian fiction as she did in her break-through text, *Oral History*. In her discussion of the Appalachian woman in Smith’s fiction, Diane Ledford suggests that Smith used the image of the granny woman and the mountain girl in *Oral History* to explore the stereotypes of Appalachia women and then to move to a more complex depiction in *Fair and Tender Ladies* (10). Smith’s use of local color conventions in *Oral History* serves a similar cathartic purpose, allowing her to work through stock images and traditional themes of Appalachia; the novel allowed her to embrace and then move beyond these motifs to fresher fictional approaches.

**The Past Remains Popular—Smith’s Appropriation of Stock Characters**

The images and themes created through local color texts became an accepted part of popular culture and continue to resonate with audiences. In her 1972 study, *The Folk of Southern Fiction*, Merrill Skaggs argues that the images of Southern local color fiction, including the mountaineer, have been so thoroughly incorporated into the popular imagination that even people who have not read the original texts respond to those images. In her discussion of *Intruder in the Dust*, Skaggs says:

My argument is not that Faulkner went to third-rate local colorists to find out what mountaineers were like, but that the definition of southern mountaineers which the local colorists worked out became a part of Mississippi culture and in that way was absorbed by a Mississippi writer. (xii)

The relationship between Smith and the local color writers of the mountain literary tradition may be regarded in the same way. While Smith does not appropriate images and themes that originated in texts such as Mary Noailles Murfree’s short story collection, *In the
Tennessee Mountains (1884), because she finds them authoritative or even well drawn, Smith regularly incorporates in her fiction stock characters and motifs from popular culture’s perception of Appalachia. Inevitably, these images and themes are colored by the class connotations of their creation or use in the popular imagination.

However, Smith’s work suggests a greater consciousness of the process than Skaggs recognizes. Many of the themes and stock characters employed by Smith—such as the insider/outsider romance in Oral History and the recurring image of the mentally challenged character—are so clearly drawn from the Appalachia of the literary and popular imagination that she must be aware on some level of her borrowing. Though Smith undercuts many popular images and motifs, she utilizes many as well, avoiding a simplistic project that merely disproves stereotypes. Rather, Smith embraces and explores traditional Appalachian themes and characters, both complicating their simplicity (Hill 6-8) and at times undermining them (Buchanan 335), but also celebrating their resonance.

Smith’s sources for these stock elements may include the mountain literary tradition, perhaps filtered through later writers or popular culture, and separately produced, popular culture images of Appalachia. While the current discussion focuses on Smith’s connection to literary rather than popular Appalachia, the two are related and may reinforce one another. Henry Shapiro argues that, for decades, Mary Noailles Murfree’s short story collection “remained the principal text used to understand the peculiarities of mountain life” (198); Northern missionaries understood her work as ethnography, not fiction. The year 1934 marked the first appearance of Paul Webb’s cartoon hillbillies, featured in the elite Esquire, Al Capp’s comic world of Li’l Abner, and Billy De Beck’s Snuffy Smith, included in Barney Google before gaining his own still-existent strip; as the 1930s economic collapse caused the
national middle class to worry about their future, these comic hillbillies provided an outlet for nervous laughter (Williamson 41-42) as well as a reassuringly inferior social group (20). In *Hillbillyland: What the Movies Did to the Mountains and What the Mountains Did to the Movies* (1995), J.W. Williamson argues that the various incarnations of the hillbilly through the years, from the inept but triumphant fool in *No Time for Sergeants* and *Gomer Pyle*, to the violent barbarians in *Deliverance*, to the ignorant bravado of Jeff Foxworthy’s Rednecks, each provide a scapegoat for the audience to use for projecting, affirming, and perhaps rejecting their worst fears about themselves and society.

However, context makes a difference in how stereotypes such as the hillbilly are perceived, as Williamson’s discussion of Shriners’ “Hillbilly Days” celebrations suggests. Embraced by Shriners’ chapters inside and outside of the Southern Mountain Region during the 1970s, “Hillbilly Days” allowed respectable professionals to dress up as hillbillies and act out in sometimes obscene and outrageous ways. The Pikeville, Kentucky, Shriners saw the event as a celebration of regional pride and neighborly values. However, when the nearby Cincinnati, Ohio, chapter invited the Pikeville revelers to join one of their Hillbilly Days event in 1981, urban Appalachian activists objected; they found the antics “insulting and distasteful” to Cincinnati residents who had emigrated from Kentucky. Middle class Appalachians could pretend to be hillbillies at home and thus celebrate equality, enjoying the freedom of pretending to be a marginal character. When those images are transposed into a larger context, however, they may become badges of dishonor, dangerous to those with a mountain identity (12-13).

This incident suggests the complicated play of class and culture in Appalachian stereotypes. While most suggest a marginal status, the images provide varying degrees of
power, depending on the context and audience. While the hillbilly stereotype may even be depicted as morally superior to the modernized Americans (as the generous and honest Beverly Hillbillies often were), that power has limits. Individuals who trade on the image may become caricatures, “easily marginalized and controlled” (261). Williamson suggests that the difficulties inherent in the hillbilly image may be connected to social and economic issues:

The point is that when urbanites and suburbanites enjoy hillbilly displays, as they do from time to time, they may be seeing someone else’s heroic cultural gesture as nothing more than a clown show—the rural boobs let loose for an hour to provide the vicarious and therefore safe thrill of ignoring or offending the rule from a safe distance. (260)

Therefore, stereotypes common to the mountains may not have fixed meanings; the social and economic situation of their creation and reception can determine whether a stock character empowers or oppresses.

Numerous critics have acknowledged Smith’s use of various character types in her work. As Smith explains, “often we have a particular kind of character who turns up again and again because he’s at home there” (“Voice Behind the Story” 96). Smith states that her imagination works through character rather than plot (Hill 6); often she first will create characters and then put them in situations to see how they act (210). Critics variously identify repeating character patterns in her work: Underwood labels characters supporting characters as “self-righteous” or “renegades” (27); Dorothy Hill sees female characters as managerial or generous (158) and even argues that Smith evokes Celtic and Greek archetypes; Anne Hendricks Wallace demonstrates that stereotypes in Oral History allow outsiders to commodify the mountaineers (365-366); and Virginia Smith identifies the women artists, intellectuals, mad women, and clergymen as stock characters in Smith’s work (277-278).
Furthermore, Smith’s fiction also contains Southern types in *Family Linen* (“Rednecks, Belles and K-Mart Girls”) and *Fancy Strut* (Buchanan 320).

One non-Appalachian image Smith often incorporates is the class-based image of the Southern lady. Submissive, lovely, devout, and dependent on her adored spouse (Scott 4), the lady provided a near-impossible standard for Southern women during antebellum times (8). Anne Firor Scott perceptively chronicles this gradually weakening but persistent image from the Civil War through the early twentieth century in *The Southern Lady: from Pedestal to Politics, 1830-1930* (1970). Anne Goodwyn Jones also observes that this version of “true womanhood” has lasted longer in the South than in other regions, perhaps because of its connection to the region’s self-definition (4-5). Significantly, the Southern lady originates in the plantation South and its slave economy; the most articulate apologists for slavery were often the most adamant about women’s subordination, since any rebellion could endanger the whole system (Scott 17).

Deborah Wesley perceptively argues in her dissertation on Lee Smith and Gail Godwin that many of Smith’s women struggle with the icon of the Southern lady, a role that can both provide status power and restrict the adherent’s experience of life (42-43). The images originating from Appalachian local color represent a similar negotiation with class-related stereotypes in Smith’s work, but with an important difference. A number of the women that Wesley identifies are at some level conscious that they are accepting or rejecting the image of the lady. Most of Smith’s mountain characters, however, do not feel compelled to embody mountain stereotypes and are unaware of any traditional images that they reflect. Granny Younger in *Oral History* may know that she is a community healer, but she does not realize that she is fulfilling the literary stereotype of the granny woman; she simply lives her
life. Likewise, Dory Cantrell in the same novel has no idea how well she fits the image of the
gifted and lovely mountain girl. While individuals from outside the region may view
mountain residents in terms of stereotypical images (Wallace 365-366; Hobson 25)—and
some mountaineers, like the dulcimer-playing Little Luther in *Oral History*, “perform” for
their own profit and entertainment the roles outsiders expect (Hobson 26)—Smith’s
mountaineers feel little internal compunction to fulfill these roles in their private or communal
life. Therefore, these stock characters primarily live in the imagination of the reader. While
Smith’s use of these images is more sophisticated and nuanced than in the local color tradition
or popular imagination, by employing them, she acknowledges the class-based expectations
that readers likely bring to Appalachian texts.

Some of these stereotypes first appeared in Mary Noailles Murfree’s short story
collection, *In the Tennessee Mountains* (1884), which “presents the basic props and most of
the character stereotypes to be used in mountain fiction down to 1930” (Williams 142). As
noted earlier, these depictions, though viewed as factual by the popular audience of the day,
were doubly class coded, gathered by outsider Murfree from residents of mountain towns
about their rural neighbors (Hsiung 182). Murfree’s most recognizable stock characters
include the “lissome girl,” the drunk, the impetuous young man, the older man with special
powers, the educated outsider, and the victim or idiot (Batteau 49).

The “idiot” or mentally challenged stock character recurs with surprising frequency in
Smith’s fiction; almost every Appalachian novel she has written features a mentally
challenged character as a plot device, a pattern that reflects the fiction of Murfree and her
successors (Williams 141; 159). According to James Trent’s *Inventing the Feeble Mind: A
History of Mental Retardation in the United States*, “[b]etween 1880 and 1950 mental
retardation had largely been seen as a problem of lower-class teenagers and adults. Not infrequently, that group was regarded as a threat to the social order” (265), partially because of their inability to participate in the late-nineteenth/early twentieth century gospel of success (133-134). In the 1910-1920s, the eugenics movement proposed that social problems such as poverty and “feeblemindedness” could be eliminated through the careful “reproduction of superior human stock” (136). Intriguingly, some identify eugenics as a reaction to the surge in immigration (137-138), an influence also cited for the earlier popularity of local color fiction.

Despite popular perceptions, Cratis Williams argues that the Southern Mountain Region has never had an unusually high percentage of mentally handicapped individuals. Instead, he maintains that the resistance of mountain families to committing impaired relatives caused local color writers to overestimate their numbers (599). In her 1988 introduction to Appalachia Mental Health, Susan Keefe echoes Williams’ view, suggesting his theory continues to have currency. Both texts anticipate in their arguments that readers will assume Appalachia has a high percentage of mentally challenged residents, suggesting through their protests the likely prevalence of this attitude. Furthermore, the explanation that institutions were not available to receive mountain families’ impaired members, a fact now likely regarded as a blessing, may have been a marker of deprivation earlier in the twentieth century, just as an absence of ordinary hospitals is regarded as an evidence of lack now.

Mountain fiction has featured mentally challenged characters from the beginning, often using the stock character as a plot device, as in Murfree’s “Drifting Down Lost Creek” (Williams 598). In that story, mentally challenged but noble Elijah Price attacks men who try to arrest his brother, Evander, killing one; Evander takes responsibility for the crime, setting
in motion the major action of the story. Elijah is devoted but unthinking in his actions; Evander Price is just as loyal, taking the punishment for his brother; and Cynthia Ware, who loves Evander, demonstrates her commitment by her tireless and unappreciated efforts to secure Evander’s freedom. Without Elijah’s actions and his impaired status, the story would be quite different.

The mentally challenged character continues to make sporadic appearances, in various guises, in twentieth century Appalachian fiction. For example, in Wilma Dykeman’s complex *The Tall Woman* (1962), which Smith cites as an influence (Appendix 339), the protagonist’s beloved eldest son is mentally challenged, damaged during a difficult birth when the only local doctor was unavailable—drunk. More recently, the literary and film versions of James Dickey’s *Deliverance* (1970) include a mentally challenged hillbilly in a much less lovable role. Whether caused by material deprivation or genetic abnormality, the presence of a mentally challenged character in Appalachian texts has become expected rather than shocking to contemporary American audiences, often suggesting a lower status for the mountain milieu.

The mountain stock character of the mentally challenged character in some ways reflects the grotesque of Southern literature. The definition of the “grotesque” is notorious slippery, having evolved over several centuries of literary and artistic criticism. In an essay on Joseph Conrad, Thomas Mann argues that “the grotesque is the genuine anti-bourgeois style,” presumably because it confuses the neat categories of tragedy and comedy (240-241). George Santayana identifies the grotesque as “the half-formed, the perplexed, and the suggestively monstrous”; when a form’s incongruity with conventional categories is accepted, however, it ceases to be grotesque (97-98). Flannery O’Connor famously exaggerated, “[A]nything that comes out of the South is going to be called grotesque by the Northern reader, unless it is
grotesque, in which case it is going to be called realistic” (40). O’Connor valued the grotesque for its power in depicting spiritual mysteries (44); in *Flannery O’Connor’s Dark Comedies*, Carol Shloss observes that the grotesque uneasily balances comedy and terror, undercutting sympathy by depicting horrific experiences ironically or humorously (38-39).

Wolfgang Kayser’s much-cited tome, *The Grotesque in Art and Literature*, describes grotesque art as featuring an “estranged world” (184), with the familiar made strange by the work’s perspective; “a play with the absurd” (187); and “an attempt to invoke and subdue the demonic aspects of the world” (188). Kayser further observes that the grotesque typically appears when a community’s belief in a past order is waning (188). In “The Grotesque in Recent Southern Fiction,” Lewis Lawson ties the Southern grotesque to themes of cultural disintegration (177) and agrees with Kayser that this character recurs during cultural crisis (178), of which the industrialization of Appalachia and its subsequent “classing” may be an example. The grotesque is often defined as “a fundamentally ambivalent thing, as a violent clash of opposites” (Thomson 11) that produces mixed and conflicted feelings in the audience (2).

In *The Phenomenon of the Grotesque in Modern Southern Fiction*, Maria Haar classifies grotesque characters and situations as the macabre-grotesque, the repulsive or frightening grotesque, and the comic grotesque; the last two categories include subsets for the mentally deformed or disturbed characters. Each type is used not for shock value but to advance the plot, theme or characterization of the story, though purposes such as entertainment or cultural commentary also may be included (50).

Alan Spiegel’s definition of the grotesque character is particularly useful for discussing the mentally challenged character in Smith’s fiction. Spiegel identifies the
grotesque as “a physically or mentally deformed figure” that succeeds in literature by transcending his or her impairment, connecting with the reader’s humanity and becoming the archetype of the scapegoat (428-429). While several of Smith’s early mentally challenged characters appear frightening or mildly repulsive at first, almost all become sympathetic as the texts give them voices and explain their stories. These characters cease to be grotesques as they become humanized, suggesting the commonality of human experience.

Complimenting Spiegel’s definition is Patricia Yaeger’s discussion in Dirt and Desire: Reconstructing Southern Women’s Writing, 1930-1990 (2000). Her primary argument in “Beyond the Hummingbird: Southern Women Writers and the Southern Gargantuan” is that the grotesque as revealed through the “gargantuan” bodies of Southern female characters challenge the oppressive social standard of the petite, white body. However, in the book’s introduction, Yaeger acknowledges other uses of the grotesque. She employs Terry Eagleton’s term, the “semiotic switchboard,” to suggest that the grotesque can move partially hidden political issues into the foreground; conversely, she also argues that the grotesque can obscure cultural tensions by combining and confusing them in the monster. Finally, Yaeger suggests that the grotesque can reveal what literally happens to human bodies in terrible conditions, such as slavery, thereby communicating the horror of reality through graphic descriptions.

This last use of the grotesque appears frequently in Smith’s texts, often in connection to the mentally challenged character. The broken bodies and minds of Smith’s characters in Oral History alone testify to the difficulties of mountain life;4 crippled musician Little Luther,

---

4 Nancy Parrish, Tanya Bennett, and Anne Goodwin Jones observe that Smith’s nostalgia for folk Appalachia does not uncritically ignore the real suffering and poverty in the region.
man-crazed and deranged Rose Hibbits, and sickly little Sally Cantrell mutely announce the hardships of their world simply by existing. Life in mountain towns, especially coal-mining towns, also produces its fair share of lingering illness and injuries for the middle and working classes alike. Those who accuse Smith of idealizing life in Appalachia should count the staggering number of physical and mental cripples in her work—none depicted symbolically like Flannery O’Connor grotesques, but revealed simply as the ordinary, fallible, and unlucky folk of the Appalachians. While Smith never spares her middle and upper class mountaineers from the hardships of the mountain environment, those who can circumvent the coal mines generally fare better.

Smith’s own definition of the “grotesque” appears in Niles Reddick’s 1996 dissertation, “Eccentricity as Narrative Technique in Selected Works of Lee Smith, Clyde Edgerton, and Janice Daugharty.” Reddick asked Smith to differentiate between the eccentric (his focus) and the grotesque. She obligingly defined eccentrics as individuals not understood by those in normative society and grotesques as characters who are repellent or frightening to the reader, the writer, or other characters (46). Smith’s definition suggests that while some of her mentally challenged characters are grotesques, others are either simply impaired individuals or, as Haar argues, cease to be grotesque as they become sympathetic (206-207). Thus, Smith’s mentally challenged characters either transcend grotesque status because the reader understands them, or they are never grotesques, but are individuals who happen to be impaired. They are not marginalized or stigmatized as depraved poor whites, existing grotesquely like the lubberlanders of William Byrd’s The History of the Dividing Line or James Dickey’s idiot in Deliverance; they are humanized and, when their impairment is
related to the deprivation, it is not played for voyeuristic fascination but simply as part of the inherently dangerous life in the hills.

Almost all of Smith’s novels with Appalachian settings feature a mentally challenged character; a number of her short stories with varied settings also include this stock character. Smith’s first novel, *The Last Day the Dogbushes Bloomed*, hints at the destructive power of a mentally disturbed character through Eugene, a strange youngster who tricks the protagonist Arthur into a sexually abusive “game.” This sexual deviance connects the odd boy to the Southern grotesque (Haar 103); however, this slim novel has a non-Appalachian setting and Arthur is truly unbalanced, not merely mentally challenged.

Smith’s first novel to focus on the mentally challenged stock character also is her first long text with an Appalachian setting, *Black Mountain Breakdown*. In that book, protagonist Crystal is raped by her mentally damaged Uncle Dever, but his disability makes it impossible for him to realize his crime and her pain. Because Dever’s handicap is caused by a childhood fall and later a methane gas leak in a mine, his mental limitations are not immediately obvious to Crystal: “he doesn’t seem retarded to Crystal, not like pictures of retarded people in books in the public library with their tongues all hanging out” (30). Dever is an owner-class character, a Spangler who stood to inherit part of the family coal mine operation before it failed. Ironically, he is damaged as an indirect result of his father’s capitalistic enterprise; his father’s “rape” of the countryside for coal led to Dever’s impairment and facilitated Crystal’s attack (Howell 115-116). The rape, which Crystal’s memory represses, nonetheless focuses

---

5 The mentally challenged character as indicator of the decline of a fine family appears in Faulkner’s *The Sound and the Fury*; this type may suggest with downward mobility.
her innate passivity; years later, the recovery of the memory triggers her final retreat into catatonia.

However, passivity and an obsession with pleasing others are Crystal’s real problems, not the aftermath of the rape. Smith’s original text did not include the rape, which was added at an editor’s suggestion to provide an external motivation for Crystal’s passivity. Dever’s impairment is critical to the plot; were he intentionally hurtful, Crystal would have an enemy to fight. Dever’s inability to perceive his crime compounds Crystal’s tendency to surrender her will. Nonetheless, Dever’s actions provide a supplement, not a catalyst, for the novel’s longer pattern.

Dever’s combination of impairment and sexual deviance do reflect elements of the grotesque (Haar 103). Furthermore, Crystal believes Dever looks like her father, hinting at a darker undercurrent; the rapist/father are conflated, as Minrose Gwin observes (425). Yet, Smith makes a point of depicting Dever as neat, polite, kind to his pets, and attractive. There is no suggestion that he intends to hurt Crystal or that he realizes he has. Furthermore, Cynthia Howell observes that Crystal is subject to a series of metaphorical rapes throughout the novel, as the community, especially as represented by beau Roger Lee, systematically imposes restrictions and expectations on her while denying Crystal a voice (111). John D. Kalb even discusses Roger Lee’s calculated verbal assault and manipulation of Crystal, which pushes her into the marriage he wants, as a “second rape” (28-29). By making Dever’s actions symbolic of the entire community’s unthinking abuse, Smith uses the grotesque to help communicate her primary theme, as local color fiction might, while refraining from making Dever a monster.
Smith’s familial experience has some bearing on Dever. Smith had an uncle who was “partially retarded or maybe a kind of schizophrenic who always lived with my grandmother. . . . He raised dogs and I always was crazy about him” (Loewenstein 495). In *Black Mountain Breakdown*, Dever lives with his great-aunts and raised dogs, just as Smith’s uncle did. While Smith has never suggested more than a passing similarity between her uncle and Dever, the recurrence of mentally challenged characters in her work may be connected to Smith’s familiarity and comfort around disabled individuals because of her background. Therefore, personal and literary sources combine in the creation of Dever.

In *Family Linen* (1985), a mentally challenged character is important as a plot device. Again part of a fine family that loses its modest fortune, Fay Bird seems to have been damaged during a difficult birth and further traumatized by her mother’s early death; relative privilege cannot completely shield the Birds from medical difficulties. As a result of these events, Fay’s thinking is fragmented, but like Dever, she is physically healthy and attractive as a young woman. Unlike Dever, Fay is the victim rather than the victimizer; she is repeatedly sexually abused by her brother-in-law and eventually she has his child, a girl named Candy, which her sister Elizabeth passes off as her own. When the brother-in-law tries to leave the family without taking Fay, she murders him with an axe. Her niece Sybil’s repressed and confused memory of the murder (she thinks Elizabeth was the killer) and the family’s attempt to solve the mystery years later provides a frame story for the text.

As an adult, Fay is inarticulate and obese, perhaps from trying to soothe her emotional wounds with food. She spends her later years living in her sister Nettie’s den, watching television and reading tabloids. Fay’s alcoholic nephew, Arthur, describes her as follows:
[Fay] looks like the Pillsbury dough girl. You can’t see her eyes over the top of her puffy cheeks. Her wrists pooch down over her hands now, those ankles as big as a child’s waist, she keeps both feet stretched flat out in front of her on this round orange stool. Wears white bobby socks and shiny gold house shoes. It’s hard to see a thing like that. (136)

Reddick regards Fay as more of an eccentric that a grotesque because she demonstrates agency through actions such as refusing to attend school. However, the portrayals of Fay’s bulk and the scene in which her sister, Nettie, observes a young, thin Fay being sexually abused by a brother-in-law are clearly repellent and disturbing, suggesting that she is more of a grotesque than an eccentric. Furthermore, if the conflation of irreconcilable terms, most often the comic and the horrible, is accepted as the definition for grotesque, then the continuation of Arthur’s description of Fay is persuasive:

Fay was wearing a hat.
It was a green felt hat like a turban, with a feather on the side. Naturally, it looked horrible. (136)

Arthur proceeds into the kitchen, where he meets his Aunt Nettie’s retarded step-son, Clinus.

Clinus’s apron, which had net ruffles on it, used to belong to Miss Elizabeth.
“You look real cute,” Arthur said.
Dress-up day at the One Stop. (37)

This scene, which begins with Arthur avoiding his mother’s funeral and encountering the obese and silent Fay, becomes humorous as he observes Fay and Clinus’ attire. Clinus, who is slightly more articulate than Fay, is a content and functional mentally challenged character, quietly cooking hushpuppies and listening to his cousins; he “might be crazy, or he might be crazy like a fox. You can’t tell” (139). The implication seems to be that the sexual abuse and trauma Fay has suffered turned her into a grotesque. Fay’s impairment may have contributed to her victimization, making her easy prey for her cruel relation, but the presence of Clinus
suggests that being mentally challenged does not necessarily make a character grotesque in Smith’s work.6

Just as with Dever, Fay’s mental impairment does not lessen the destructive power of her actions—she is eventually revealed as her brother-in-law’s murderer—but the abuse and her impairment also mitigate her culpability. However, Fay is not an innocent like Dever; she knows she has killed, though whether she understands the implications of her actions is unclear.

As intriguing as Fay’s story is, it is not the focus for the text. Instead, the murder mystery provides a frame story that causes each family member to reflect on their relationship with Elizabeth as they ponder whether she could have killed her husband. The heart of the book is not the mystery of the murder but the mystery of the mother (Buchanan 340). The frame story of the murder, which is tied to mentally challenged Fay, gives a plausible reason for these reflections and for Smith to explore the history of the family’s dynamics.

Like these earlier texts, Fair and Tender Ladies (1988) also relies heavily on the device of a mentally challenged character; in this case, however, Smith incorporates the character in a more traditionally mountain family. Silvaney Rowe, the older sister of protagonist Ivy Rowe, was damaged by brain fever as a child, perhaps suggesting an absence of adequate medical care; most of her days are spent wandering the woods. Like Dever and Fay, she remains lovely during her youth and resembles a “Princess in a story” (9), with her delicate features and silvery hair. Like Fay, Silvaney may have been sexually abused, except the family member that may have abused her is her twin brother, Babe. His return home after

6 Yaeger argues that the Southern gargantuan, the female body refusing to be petite, can be a politically powerful grotesque. However, because Fay’s bulk seems connected with
an absence severely distresses Silvaney; teenage Ivy has to fend off a sexual advance from Babe, which hints at the cause of Silvaney’s violent reactions. Because of the latter’s increasing wildness after Babe is killed, Ivy’s schoolteacher has Silvaney institutionalized. Ivy bitterly resents this bit of middle-class meddling by her outsider teacher and the doctor from the nearby town, insisting that since Babe, the source of Silvaney’s distress, was gone, she would have settled down. Tragically, Silvaney dies in the institution during an influenza outbreak, suggesting that the mountain practice of caring for impaired individuals at home is safer.

As in the earlier cases, the combination of impairment and sexual deviance appears, but is only hinted at and forms a brief part of the narrative, though Silvaney’s reaction to Babe does lead to her institutionalization. Ivy’s letters to this absent sister comprise the bulk of the text. When Silvaney dies, Ivy continues to write to her, creating an alternative self through Silvaney. Though the novel could conceivably have been written without the Silvaney device—Ivy could have kept a journal or written to family and friends—Smith has stated, “somehow I couldn’t see Ivy writing in a journal. I don’t know why; Ivy just seemed a little too direct for that” (Underwood 166). Beginning Ivy’s self-exploration through correspondence seemed more realistic to Smith; indeed, the self-creation made possible through writing to a trusted and non-judgmental sister gives Ivy both freedom and focus in her writing. Had Silvaney been able to write back, Ivy might have censored herself and been less bold in self-revelation (Elliot 61).

Silvaney is an innocent victim rather than a partially irresponsible victimizer. In The Devil’s Dream (1992) Smith creates an innocent who unwittingly harms his family simply by her victimization, her size decreases her control over her life.
being himself. Mountain farmer Ezekiel Bailey, who is described as childlike and troubled by voices in his head, accepts the pregnant Nonnie as a wife, though her child is not his own. However, though his limited mind allows him to accept her, his impairment eventually poisons the marriage. One day, as Ezekiel roughhouses with their children, “it hit her [Nonnie] that she did not want to be everybody’s mamma, which she was” (70). When Nonnie leaves her family for a traveling con artist, the reader understands her need for adult companionship. Nonetheless, Nonnie’s abandonment has a long-lasting, negative impact on her family and leads to her own death in a hotel fire. While Nonnie’s choices were her own, once again, a character's mental impairment and unwitting failings shape the story.

Like Fay, Billie Jean in 1995’s *Saving Grace* is sexually abused by a relative, her vengeful half-brother, and has a child by this union. However, Billie Jean does not seek revenge and ultimately moves to a group home that suits her. Her victimization illustrates the depravity of her stepbrother, but serves no other purpose for plot development. Billie Jean’s status as a mentally challenged character seems to relate more to Smith’s habit of carrying types from one text to another than from a conscious “need” for a mentally challenged character. Just as Grace Shepherd resembles the plucky Ivy Rowe in a number of important ways, Billie Jean serves as a childlike playmate for her, though her importance to the text is negligible compared to Silvaney’s in *Fair and Tender Ladies*.

More recently, Smith placed a Down’s Syndrome character in “The Bubba Stories.” Charlene Christian’s Uncle Sam lives with her family and is quite sweet. When Charlene returns home from college for the summer, her realization that Sam is not growing up with her signals maturation on her part. However, as with *Saving Grace*, Sam is simply a character who happens to be mentally challenged rather than an important plot device.
These examples do not exhaust Smith’s surprisingly frequent use of mentally challenged characters in her work. In “Between the Lines,” Joline Newhouse insists, perhaps a bit too defensively, that her son is not mentally impaired as a divine penalty for her adultery. In “Heat Lightning,” Smith’s first short story with an Appalachian setting, Geneva’s son has difficulty talking and beats his head bloody when he does not get his way, but she “can understand him just fine.” In *The Devil’s Dream*, Ira Keen’s brother, Dummy, is impaired but can whistle extraordinarily. While most of these characters are in Smith’s Appalachian works, some appear in stories with more Southern settings; for example, in “The Bubba Stories,” Uncle Sam lives in flat, peanut-farming country.

Furthermore, this list does not begin to examine Smith’s frequent inclusion of mentally ill characters, such as the schizophrenic Johnny in “News of the Spirit.” This recurring character could be considered a more complex version of the type; it may also reflect Smith’s experiences with the periodic depression and institutionalization of both of her parents. However, the examples mentioned suggest the prevalence of the mentally challenged character in Smith’s work and her imaginative adaptation of the character.

In some ways, Smith undermines the genetic and class-based explanations for the mentally challenged character. While Smith’s texts do acknowledge that improper medical care often causes mental deficiencies, economic privilege does not protect her characters from impairment. Dever in *Black Mountain Breakdown* is injured by a methane leak in his father’s mine; Fay of *Family Linen* becomes impaired by an early illness and subsequent trauma. Both come from families of once relatively wealthy insiders who own either mines or lumber mills. Uncle Sam of “The Bubba Stories” and Joline’s son in “Between the Lines” both come from contemporary middle class families. While Silvaney of *Fair and Tender Ladies* and Billie
Jean of *Saving Grace* are harmed by a lack of proper medical care, the outside care given to Silvaney (institutionalization) leads to her death during an influenza outbreak. In contrast, Billie Jean ultimately benefits from a connection with middle class culture; when family friends place her in a group home she reportedly flourishesh. Therefore, Smith counters the idea that rural characters are genetically as well as socially and economically inferior by demonstrating that both town and rural individuals are often victims of mental impairment.

However, employing this character in Appalachian fiction in any capacity invokes class and culture issues; outside readers seldom differentiate between town and mountain characters, and featuring any mentally challenged characters can introduce issues of *regional* inferiority. Furthermore, a number of Smith’s depictions of mentally challenged characters reflect the grotesque in the connection of mental impairment and deviant sexuality. Dever, though not evil, unthinkingy rapes his niece; Fay is used sexually by her brother-in-law; Silvaney may be abused by her twin brother; and Billie is impregnated by her half-brother. Though Smith creates a number of mentally challenged characters with no connection to sexual deviance, such as Sam in the recent “Bubba Stories,” the frequent conflation of these elements is disturbing and, frankly, grotesque.

And yet, these impaired characters are never repellant or disgusting in the same way that Erskine Caldwell’s might be perceived. As Reddick implies, Smith individualizes and humanizes the characters, as suggested by Alan Spiegel’s definition of the grotesque. Her imagination does not flee from such scenarios in the name of “authentically” depicting mountain life; rather, she embraces and complicates them (Hill 6). Rather than avoiding potentially stigmatizing stereotypes, Smith seems to use them for her own purposes.
In addition to the mentally challenged character, Smith’s work also features a recurring male type best identified as the Outlaw. The closest thing to a consistent villain in her work, the Outlaw can be viewed as an internalized version of the violent and sexualized “wild man” that Hayden White identifies (35), suggesting the dark and seductive possibilities within the human psyche. Dangerous, sexual, and often haunted by past misdeeds, the Outlaw is marginalized socially, symbolically, or emotionally. Though the Outlaw may be a loner in the midst of equals, Smith at times uses social class status to emphasize his isolation, socially and psychically separating him to illustrate the depth of his estrangement. While Smith does have marginal female characters with similar profiles, they seldom manifest the threat of this character. Because the type seems to recur most obviously in Smith’s men, this section focuses on the male manifestations of Smith’s stock character.

In some ways, the Outlaw hearkens back to the mountain bad man of local color fiction and the popular imagination. He resembles Dave Tolliver of Fox’s *The Trail of the Lonesome Pine*, the hard-riding and shooting youth who rightly sees outsider Jack Hale as a rival for mountain girl June’s affections; or Fult Fallon, the moonshiner and dishonest

---

7 In her dissertation on memory and imagination in Lee Smith’s fiction, Gloria Underwood divides Smith’s secondary characters into the “self-righteous” and the “renegades,” whom she also refers to as “outlaws”; however, Underwoods’ “outlaws” are artists whose personal and aesthetic success depends on their imaginative connection to and ownership of their past.

8 Ora Mae Cantrell of *Oral History* could be considered a female “Outlaw.” Part Native American, and the only Cantrell of her generation not fathered by Almarine, Ora Mae is marginal in her family and community. Her prophetic visions suggest the Outlaw’s torment, her romance with a traveling salesman the sexual magnetism, and her jealous destruction of her sister’s romance the Outlaw’s villainy. However, possibly because of her gender, Ora Mae is not depicted as dangerous; she is bitter and hurtful, but mostly annoying to those who know her. As Ora Mae indicates, the characteristics associated with the Outlaw are not limited to male characters; however, because Smith’s male villains so consistently have these traits, discussing the type as a male stock character is more useful than a genderless model.
teacher-wooer in Lucy Furman’s *The Quare Women: A Story of the Kentucky Mountains* (1923). Though neither character is truly villainous, their actions oppose the protagonists or reflect lawless behavior, hinting at Smith’s later type.

Furman’s novel, inspired by the author’s experiences with the Hindman Settlement School in Kentucky, features a local moonshiner, handsome but dangerous, who falls for the protagonist teacher rather than the lovely mountain girl who loves him. Fult is described as “young and extremely handsome, with large dark eyes, blue-black hair, and olive skin” (74); the most adventurous and youngest teacher at Hindman, Isabel, finds him attractive. Though Fult pretends to reform from moonshining and feuding to impress the young teacher, even singing traditional ballads and faking sensitive emotions to please her, Isabel will not marry him because her attraction is based on fascination, not love, and because she worries about Fult’s former fiancée. Fult ultimately kidnaps Isabel, intending to force her to marry him. Isabel talks her way out of the situation and Fult, who has a decent side, agrees to end a local feud and returns to his mountain sweetheart. Though the story ends happily, the message is clear: mountain men are not easily civilized, a quality that makes them attractive but also a real threat to nice middle class teachers.

In addition to these literary versions, Smith’s Outlaw resembles the popular culture “hillbilly” as defined by J.W. Williamson. In *Hillbillyland*, Williamson argues that the hillbilly stereotype provides a social safety valve for lower, middle, and upper class audiences alike, both inside and outside of the mountains. First named in a 1900 *New York Journal* article, the “hillbilly” (37), according to Williamson, is a marginal character: rural, poor, often dangerous, and sexual, though not necessarily mountain (16), the hillbilly serves as a social mirror that Americans alternatively identify with and reject (2). Versions of the hillbilly have
appeared in such varied sources as the movies (Ma and Pa Kettle, Deliverance, Raising Arizona), television (The Beverly Hillbillies, Green Acres, The Dukes of Hazard), and local entertainments like the “Womanless Wedding” or Sadie Hawkins Day. While some hillbillies are comic, other subsets include the frontiersman, the bandit, the monster, and the good old boy. Williamson’s identifies as a “good old boy” type Robert Mitchum’s complex, contemporary moonshiner in Thunder Road (1958), the same film that Smith places on the drive-in movie screen in two of her novels: in Black Mountain Breakdown, when Crystal Spangler catches her working class friend, Pearl, “petting” and again in Family Linen, when Lacey Hess “pets” with a working class boy, Red, who never calls her again. Smith’s inclusion of this movie is historically accurate—Thunder Road “was an incredible hit in the drive-in trade all across this more rural land” (130)—but its conflation of working class characters and sexual activity reinforces the view of the Outlaw as dangerous, alluring, and marginal.

However, Smith’s influences for this character are not confined to Appalachia and its stereotypes. The marginality, the torment of the Outlaw, suggests the mythical image of Cain. In the Biblical story, Cain kills his brother, Abel, because he envies God’s preference of Abel’s offering. As punishment, Cain is banished from the Garden of Eden but is graciously marked by God to prevent others from taking vengeance on him. In the Biblical, early Christian, and medieval versions, Abel is the hero and Cain the villain; through the years, however, literary texts began to show sympathy with Cain, the exile. Lord Byron famously altered the story to make the banished Cain “the heroic quester, the dissatisfied sojourn” (“Byron’s Cain” 46). By the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Cain often symbolized the questioning, critical intelligence while Abel became the complacent and convention (The
Modern writers have favored Cain because of his symbolic challenge to moral authority through his murder of conventional Abel (19). Cain’s awareness of division makes him the potential source of reconciliation (88), though in Romantic versions, Cain only has a vision of unity that he cannot fulfill (107-108).

While some elements of the Cain figure are not typical of Smith’s Outlaws, the estrangement in the motif resonates with her character type. Separated from the community, emotionally if not physically, and often haunted by guilt or depression, the Outlaw suggests the alienation of the wandering Cain. Some Smith characters, like R.C. Bailey of *The Devil’s Dream*, feel that they are negatively marked; the illegitimate son of a mixed-race man, R.C. believes he is separated from the community by virtue of his parentage. Others, like Mack Stilner in *Black Mountain Breakdown*, are negatively marked by social class; an orphan from the wrong side of town, Mack experiences social and occupational segregation before he leaves town. Franklin Ransom, the mine owner’s son in *Fair and Tender Ladies*, comes the closest to the Biblical Cain story, tormented by the memory of seeing his brother commit suicide. The marginal nature of the Cain figure and his deserved isolation suggest the separateness and angst frequent in the Outlaw, and extend the image of the marginalized and dangerous hillbilly into a more profound, spiritual separation. Often intelligent and artistically gifted, Outlaws are nonetheless cut off from the community in some meaningful way, a sad situation for characters in Smith’s relentlessly social fiction. Many die violently, either at the hands of betrayed loved ones or themselves, perhaps reversing the Cain-Abel myth by turning the bloodshed on the self.

As in the case of the mentally challenged character, Smith has several versions of this type. Some, like the alcoholic, artistic father in *Black Mountain Breakdown*, are moody
dreamers, more “tormented” than destructive, exhibiting the Outlaw’s anguish without his threat. The Outlaw in Smith’s work that most overtly resembles the fictional mountain bad man is Ivy’s brother, Clarence Wayne Rowe, nicknamed Babe, in *Fair and Tender Ladies*. Babe is ominously defined as “dark” (60) in contrast to his lovely and fair twin, Silvaney. Babe refuses to do his share of work on the struggling farm and stays involved with dubious “business” that he will not name. Babe even participates in one of the worst stereotypical mountain depravities, making sexual advances towards his sisters; Silvaney’s increasing agitation and mental unbalance during his presence suggests that she may be unable to thwart his sexual advances as Ivy does. Eventually, Babe is killed by the husband of a woman he seduced and spurned. Babe is the classic negative stereotype of a mountain man, unchivalrously letting his women do the manual labor; participating in questionable business practices, perverse sexuality and violence. Missing is the inner torment that motivates Smith’s most complex Outlaws; while Babe “has been looking for this bullet all his life” (64), according to his mother, the only reason given for his malicious, selfish behavior is that he is the bad twin to the angelic Silvaney. Like Murfree’s mountaineers, the explanation for his personality is simply that he is of the hills (Gray 224). Marginal in his mountain identity and criminality, violent and sexual, though not overly tortured, Babe in many ways represents the purest expression of the mountain stereotype Smith appropriated and complicated into the “Outlaw.” Connected by his behavior to the worst stereotypes of the depraved mountaineer and the poor white in literature, as epitomized by Dorothy Allsion’s tale of the “undeserving poor” in *Bastard Out of Carolina*, Babe codes for violent mountaineer, marginal outlaw, and lower class threat.
Bentley of *Something in the Wind*, Smith’s second novel, defines himself as a “destroyer,” a dramatic label that is not completely accurate (“Orality” 257). Bentley’s rural past as a child evangelist places him in a different social class than the fraternity boys that college coed Brooke Kincaid normally dates; attempting to create an identity separate from his past results in ongoing “guilt and anger” (257). Going against her “Southern” upbringing, Brooke lives with Bentley; their breakup is painful because their connection was real. Nonetheless, Bentley’s rural past, personal torment, sexual allure, and belief in his own power to destroy hint at the ominous “Outlaw” that evolves in Smith’s work.

Mack Stiltner of *Black Mountain Breakdown* suggests a positive version of the Outlaw. As an orphan “holler” boy with bad teeth and greasy hair, Mack is perceived by town girl Crystal as lower class, making their relationship both inappropriate and appealing to her. A juvenile delinquent who skips schools and lives with an uncle who once killed a man, Mack intrigues Crystal’s rebellious side. Mack’s musical ability and his understanding of Crystal suggest that her dismissal of him because of his social class is a mistake. However, because Mack is a borderline figure who lives both physically and socially on the edges of town and because Crystal primarily relates to him sexually, he foreshadows the later, more negative Outlaw type in Smith’s work.

Mack Stiltner is recycled by Smith as the alcoholic, misogynistic Blackjack Johnny in *The Devil’s Dream* (Byrd 102). A fatherless boy who skipped school and was perceived as a bad influence, Johnny leaves his rural childhood home after his sexual relationship with his mother’s niece (no blood relation) is discovered. Johnny drifts from job to job before becoming a rockabilly singer who cultivates “that dark dangerous look the women like” with his “trademark black Nudie jacket with silver piping, silver studs” (165). He develops a
penchant for alcohol, drugs, and lying to women. Johnny eventually meets up with his childhood sweetheart, whom he marries, cheats on, and who eventually murders him. His combination of selfishness and sexuality, his criminal inclination, and his lack of respect for women make Johnny one of the most negatively depicted characters in Smith’s texts.

In the chapter of *The Devil’s Dream* told from Johnny’s perspective, he picks up a single mother who works as a dental assistant after one of his performances in a bar. To convince the nervous woman to have sex with him, he tells her a long story about his past:

[I] became a wayward youth, you might say. I went all over this country, honey, hopping freights, working here and there, picking apples, you name it. Sure, I got in trouble but I’ve served my time. And I’m good inside, honey, I really am, only I ain’t had nobody to bring it out in me. (173)

Of course, Johnny suggests that she is the woman who can help him be good. He lies to her to bed her, steals from her purse after she falls asleep, and never expresses remorse. When he pays for breakfast the next day, he leaves an excellent tip “courtesy of, what was her name? *Shelia*. Thanks to Shelia” (182).

However, Johnny recalls another post-show meeting with two “college-girls, smart-ass, got-it-all and know-it-all rich girls” (179) who he accompanies to the house and pool of one the girl’s families. Possibly because he realizes that no sex is forthcoming, he tells the girls the true story of his life—the freight trains, the army, the stolen cars, the wife and child he abandoned. When they are appalled, instead of claiming that he just needs someone to bring out his innate decency, Johnny explains, “Men are shits” (180). He becomes frustrated because “the thing about rich girls was, when they were nice . . . you couldn’t touch them, you couldn’t just fuck them if you felt like it and they didn’t, and this kind of girl could break your heart” (181). Wealth and education give the girls power to talk back to Johnny (R. Smith 169).
and he responds to them differently than to the dental assistant. With the college girls,

Johnny’s dangerous qualities melt:

It had not occurred to Johnny that they’d be swimming naked, but hell, he was all for it. The only problem was, once he got in there with them, it wasn’t really sexy, it made him kind of sad, in fact, for some damn reason . . . This pool was painted aqua, so the girls’ bodies looked kind of aqua too, aqua and insubstantial, dreamy mermaid bodies. . . (179)

The setting and the demeanor of the young women, attitudes based in their social and economic position, alter Johnny’s perception of the women and destroy his power of sexuality and threat, neutralizing the sense of danger and sensuality consistently associated with Smith’s Outlaws. As a marginal character, like the hillbilly, Johnny gains power from his ability to rebel against the system; however, women with the money, education, and social clout to match his freedom and trump it with power can return him to his place on the sidelines. In the case of Black Jack Johnny, the juxtaposition of the working class woman and college girls emphasizes that education and social class can modify the way that even the rebellious Outlaw responds.

Not all Outlaws are tamed by rich women, though. Johnny’s uncle, R.C. Bailey, goes on a drinking and whoring spree in his youth after discovering he is the illegitimate son of a Melungeon, a mixed race individual. “They’re all whores, I says to myself, and I proved it pretty good too” (87). Eventually, however, he wakes up with a woman who appears dead, a child he does not remember, and no idea where he is. He leaves the hotel and hears his deceased mother say, “Go on home now, son,’ she told me, and so I did” (88). R.C. arrives home to find his father has had a stroke; he promises to care for him. Shortly thereafter, R.C. meets Lucie, a beautiful girl from a nearby town, and they marry. R.C. changes for the better
because two women, despite their real personal flaws, care deeply for him; his mother and Lucie are ultimately “classy” rather than “classed.”

_The Devil’s Dream_ takes place within the world of country music, and the story of R.C. reflects one of its most persistent themes: redemption through the love of a woman. Recurring throughout country music culture, this motif provides an earthly alternative to the spiritual salvation in sacred country and gospel music (Ellison 118-119). R.C.’s salvation combines the sacred and the secular in his dead mother’s mystical message. Though arguably R.C.’s mother caused his isolation by her affair with the Melungeon, which marked him as racially different, her guidance from beyond the grave alludes to both a positive though unconventional spirituality and the healing power of a woman’s pure love. R.C.’s later marriage to the beautiful Lucie continues the theme, as she provides a consistent nurturing force in his life. R.C. and Lucie are modeled on country singers A.P. and Sara Carter, and many details of their story reflect the famous pair (Dawidoff 54). However, Sara divorced the temperamental A.P., who never really got over her. In Smith’s work, Lucie only leaves R.C. when she dies suddenly, though the effect of the loss on R.C. is similar. Smith’s departure from the story of A.P. and Sara Carter ironically allows her to give added emphasis to a classic theme of country music: salvation through a good woman.

However, even while Lucie lives, R.C. never quite shakes his demons. Haunted by the facts of his birth, he always feels separate and alone. His sister, Lizzie, describes him by stating, “I am persuaded that R.C.’s anguish is habitual with him and has always been so” (91). He eventually commits suicide while listening to his famous song, “Melungeon Man.” Though R.C. and his moral behavior are redeemed from the villain category by his mother and wife, he never really integrates into the community and always feels apart, marked like
Cain, still dark and marginal. While R.C. is never isolated socially from his community, instead becoming a voice for the rural working class through his music, he remains isolated because of his personal struggles.

One character who represents the Outlaw from an upper class perspective is Frank Ransom, the self-destructive mine owner's son in *Fair and Tender Ladies*. A transplant to the 1910s company-owned mining town of Diamond, Virginia, Ransom has “very white teeth and dark eyes with the longest eyelashes ever, and perfect slicked-back black hair” (150), the soft hands of a man unaccustomed to manual labor, and an upper class sense of entitlement. He embarks on an affair with protagonist Ivy Rowe, a mountain girl that he would never marry. Ivy finds Ransom attractive and fun but driven by inner demons. Ransom’s brother died—or committed suicide—years before in Ransom’s presence, and he seems bent on self-destruction. His parents hate Ivy because she is socially inappropriate for him; he tries to flaunt their relationship by asking Ivy to wear his mother’s clothes in public, an act of disrespect that she refuses. When Ivy will not accompany him to Memphis (“You haven’t been there, of course. You haven’t been anywhere”), Ransom purposefully drives his car into a bridge abutment, wrecking it. Ivy becomes more distant and eventually chooses to marry Oakley Fox, a boy from her home mountain community, rather than remain Ransom’s mistress. Like most Outlaws, Ransom comes to a tragic end, intentionally flying an airplane into Stone Mountain during an air show. Handsome and tormented, self-centered and destructive, Ransom illustrates that the violence and sexuality of the Outlaw are not limited to the mountain or working class in Smith’s work.

Perhaps the saddest pseudo-Outlaw is Travis Word, Grace’s older, preacher husband in *Saving Grace*. A genuinely good man who tries to do right by his family and congregation,
Travis nonetheless suffers bouts of depression, partly brought on by a mysterious wartime past and partly from inheriting his father’s troubled nature. Like R.C., he has a public role that keeps him socially involved in the community while his depression makes him emotionally isolated. Travis carries guilt from some sins of the flesh during the war, which leads him to manifest intensity in, as well as illogically overwhelming guilt over, his marital relations with Gracie. She eventually leaves him; Travis never stops hoping she will return, but ultimately commits suicide. Travis lives in the emotional shadows, haunted and guilty, but never demonstrates the danger integral to the Outlaw; therefore, he remains a borderline version of the type.

The most notable and threatening Outlaw also appears in Saving Grace: Lamar, Grace's half-brother. Abandoned by his father, who is also Grace’s father, Lamar watched his mother die of a broken heart. Described as having “dark brown curly hair and black eyes and look[ing] like a foreigner, maybe an Italian” (70), Lamar becomes the destroyer of Grace’s troubled family. Lamar hides his identity from his preacher father but not from Grace. Pretending to be saved, he earns the minister’s trust and becomes a helper in the church and to the family. This gives him the opportunity to seduce Grace’s mother, Grace, and her sister Billie, who are his half-sisters. The mother commits suicide in remorse, mentally challenged Billie Jean becomes pregnant, and prepubescent Grace becomes her father’s assistant as penance, something she would never do otherwise (R. Smith 178). Lamar is not completely evil; he forces Grace to go to school, and she says that he “was trying to take care of me, in his way” (82). However, his actions destroy a family and the girls’ innocent lives. Lamar is even is likened to Satan in a dream of Grace’s. His connection of a dark past, purposeful destruction, and sexuality make him the quintessential Outlaw.
In Smith’s work, the Outlaw may be an insider, outsider, or border figure. By suggesting that the threat to the local community is not only from violent moonshiners and feuders, but also from industrialists and abandoned sons, Smith uses this figure to undermine a class-based perception of danger and “civilization.” The Outlaw, an alluring figure of violence, can also be an invader from the outside. While Smith clearly draws on the depraved version of the mountain figure in characters like the incestuous Babe, she balances them with the predatory slumming of Ransom. Certainly, Smith is not the first writer to see evil in encroaching industrialists; even some local color fiction writers bewailed the destruction of the folk culture by invasive outsiders. However, by spreading the image of the Outlaw over the social classes, her work subtly dismantles the notion that working class men are inherently the most dangerous.  

One final example of the class-related stereotypes that Smith employs is the lovely mountain girl. Murfree was among the first to depict the archetype of the lovely and intelligent mountain girl who is superior to her fellows; often, Murfree provides her girls with the appearance and sensibilities of a Victorian heroine (Miller 38-39). However, one of the popular stereotypes of the mountain lass in late nineteenth and early twentieth century America was the “promiscuous mountain girl,” an image that “flits alluringly in and out of southern local color fiction,” but was never overtly acknowledged (Skaggs 151-153). Even John C. Campbell, one of the most subtle early mountain ethnographers, stated that “the nature of animalism . . . the lack of privacy in the home, early acquaintance with the sexual relation, and a promiscuous hospitality” led to a striking number of illegitimate births in the

---

9 Other potential “dark men” figures includes Jerold Kukafka, Crystal’s suicidal poet/lover inform New York in *Black Mountain Breakdown*; drunken but harmless Arthur
mountains. As Danny Miller observes in *Wingless Flight: Appalachian Women in Fiction*,
Campbell’s attempt to defend mountain women by suggesting they are animalistic does little
for their reputations. As a group, late nineteenth and early twentieth century mountain women
were considered less morally responsible than women in other parts of the country (50).

In a passage similar to Campbell’s rationalization, *Oral History*’s Richard Burlage
explains away the lovemaking knowledge of his mountain girlfriend, Dory Cantrell: “but then
I recalled her upbringing in that randy cabin with all those boys, the animals around the
mountain farm and I understood her desire as a kind of purity” (146). Burlage, not Smith,
utters these words; in the context of the novel, the intellectualization reads as Burlage’s
attempt to cast Dory simultaneously in the roles of virgin/lady and spiritualized/natural, thus
sacralizing a physical relationship he would normally regard as sinful. Though Linda Byrd
and Dorothy Hill argue that Smith uses the myths of the Great Goddess Mother and Virgin
Mother to affirm the sexuality of her women against communal restrictions (Byrd 120), the
popular image of the promiscuous mountain girl seems like a more accessible and
aesthetically consistent starting place for Smith’s exploration of female sexuality. Because of
Smith’s frequent employment of the image of the lovely mountain girl, and because of her
exploration of female sexuality throughout her work, the stereotype of the promiscuous
mountain girl plays an important role in her fiction.

The late nineteenth century myth that mountain girls “make good mistresses” (Skaggs
151) suggests a class-based perspective niggling at the edges of Murfree’s virtuous mountain
girl. Because middle class respectability is connected with morality, especially sexual purity
in women, the popular assumption that mountain girls were promiscuous indicates not only a

Hess in *Family Linen*; and the fearsome prophet Ezekiel Bailey in *The Devil’s Dream.*
lack of character but also a lack of social status. When combined with the poverty that the mountains were assumed to possess, it is clear what social class these fictional mountain girls belonged to.  

Nonetheless, local color fiction edges around such depictions. Contemporary standards made local color writers nervous about embracing this aspect of the image (Skaggs 151-152). Later texts, such as Harriette Arnow’s *Hunter’s Horn*, depict illegitimacy as not unusual in the mountains (Miller 30), as do Smith’s own texts, *Oral History* and *Fair and Tender Ladies*. Twentieth century popular culture embraced the images of the highly sexualized mountain girl, as Al Capp’s *Lil’ Abner* characters of Stupifying Jones, Daisy Mae, and Sadie Hawkins indicate. The Sadie Hawkins Day Dance, the one occasion when “nice” girls could ask the boys for dates, permitted this act of sexual aggression because it was “playing” at being a randy mountain girl. Implicit in the mountain girl in fiction and popular culture is the notion that her hospitality is not confined to baking cookies and playing the piano.

Smith’s work takes advantage of the association of mountain girls with promiscuity to explore women’s sexuality. Texts such as Linda Byrd’s dissertation, “Sexuality and Motherhood in the Fiction of Lee Smith: A Divine Integration,” and Anne Goodwyn Jone’s article “Orality in Lee Smith’s Oral History” discuss Smith’s use of this theme, which will not be detailed here. What is significant for the current discussion is that Smith appropriates this class-based image of mountain girls to investigate and subvert the social expectations for all her women.

---

10 Smith’s work includes non-mountain women at home with their sexuality; often they are working class or reject the image of the Southern lady (Wesley 90).
From the ethereal and fragile Crystal Spangler of Black Mountain Breakdown to the lovely Rowe sisters of Fair and Tender Ladies, whose beauty makes their own mother weep, to the violet-eyed Rose Annie of The Devil’s Dream, stunning blonde and redheaded women fill Smith’s texts. Many of these women struggle with sexuality. In Black Mountain Breakdown, town girl Crystal Spangler only feels alive when reflected in the eyes of a man. Though she is often defined as passive, Crystal is active in pursuing a sexual relationship with Mack Stiltner, perhaps because he is not a self-appointed “custodian” (Underwood 41); he leaves when she cannot commit to him. In Family Linen, suburban mom Myrtle amazes herself by having an affair with a young working class man, despite the stereotypically ideal home she has with her dermatologist husband. Rose Annie has a teenage affair in The Devil’s Dream that marks her for life. Ivy Rowe in Fair and Tender Ladies offers an affirmative view of a woman who comes to terms with her sexuality; her relationships with lover Franklin Ransom, later husband Oakley Fox, and a brief affair with Honey Breeding all suggest a woman confident in her own body and her ability to connect with another.

Smith’s depictions of sexuality reject the notion that mountain women are less morally responsible than others. The fact that so many middle class women seek excitement in relationships with working class men (Stanley 339) emphasizes that town as well as “holler” girls can be sexually assertive. Outsider characters, such as Mrs. Brown, the married teacher in Fair and Tender Ladies, have affairs with local men at times, demonstrating that it is not just mountain women, town or holler, who do not always live in accord with middle class mores on female sexuality. Though many of Smith’s characters, such as Black Jack Johnny, associate female sexuality with class status, her work as a whole discourages such a connection.
While Smith’s texts explore the struggles that women of every social class have with sexuality, the class-based connection of the mountain girl and sexuality provides a ready starting point for the issue. Dory Cantrell, Ivy Rowe, Grace Shepherd, and Katie Cocker are all more easily connected to issues of sexuality because of their association with the mountains and the working class (Wesley 212-213). Rather than undermine the class-based image of the sexualized mountain girl, Smith uses it to explore a recurring thematic concern.

Each of the preceding types in Smith’s fiction begins with a potentially negative depiction of mountain life—the mentally challenged character, the mountain bad man, and the promiscuous mountain girl—but then Smith goes beyond the stereotype and uses it to create dramatic yet sympathetic texts. Part of the success of these appropriations is that Smith undercuts the class- and culture-based assumptions about these stereotypes. Because these images are often tied to a pejorative view of the mountains, each carries the taint of class stereotyping. By acknowledging but moving beyond those class-based connotations, Smith creates a complex social world without simply falling into the “myth vs. reality” trap that Batteau warns against. Instead of destroying the myth in favor of “facts,” Smith extends it with subtlety, nuance, and empathy.

Research and Sources

When Lee Smith writes novels about Appalachia or mountain culture (such as the snake-handling family of Saving Grace), she lists numerous reference texts at the end of her books. These resources help her to depict settings and cultures that she does not have firsthand experience with, such as Appalachia at the turn of the century or life in a country music family. Significantly, Smith’s first three texts and Family Linen, a novel about a prominent family in a small Virginia mountain town, list no additional sources; presumably
none were necessary for her to write about small town life. Smith did refer to local histories of Buchanan County and Grundy when writing *Black Mountain Breakdown*, indicating the connection between that apprentice novel and Smith’s hometown. Smith’s pattern of researching her Appalachian texts emphasizes that while she is a native of the Southern Mountain Region, her own experience is centered in mountain town life; she needs the additional research to write effectively about classes and cultures that are not her own.

A cursory examination of Smith’s sources reveals an impressive degree of reading in key texts on her subjects. For example, Smith heavily researched the history of country music for *The Devil’s Dream*, gathering information from such respected sources as *The Bristol Sessions* from the Country Music Hall of Fame and Museum, *Country: The Music and the Musicians* edited by Paul Kingsbury and Alan Axelrod, and Bill Malone’s essential *Country Music, U.S.A.* Her incorporation of information from the texts is both overt and subtle. Many readers will recognize the story of the fictional Grassy Branch Girls as modeled on the famed Carter family singers from the early days of country music; fewer will note that when fictional Virgie Bailey loses a job for maligning a fellow musician in the Coon Creek Girls, Smith is naming a real group popular around the time of the story. Smith pulls from these texts in the same way that she uses her own life, appropriating both overarching motifs and small details to create complex and believable fictional worlds.

Smith uses sources to give her background knowledge of her subjects and settings, as well as to supply specific stories for her texts. Once Smith internalizes the research, she creates characters and plots that fit the social world. She explains:

If it’s research, I mull it over and over. Or if it’s a more contemporary voice . . . I write down words and phrases . . . and think about them. And then when I start writing, I
write real fast, so that I do get a sense of the voice. But I do a lot of fooling around first until I know what constitutes it. (Underwood 173)

Intriguingly, Smith utilizes sources that are not mentioned in her reference lists. For example, Harry Caudill’s 1963 lament for Appalachia, *Night Comes to the Cumberlands*, is not among the sources Smith lists for *Fair and Tender Ladies*. However, Caudill’s text includes the following testimony from a father on trial for not sending his children to school:

> Me and my oldest boy have one pair of shoes between us, and that’s all. When he wears ‘em I don’t have any, and when I wear ‘em he don’t have any. If it wasn’t for the rations the government gives us, I guess the whole family would have been starved to death long afore now. If you want to fine me I ain’t go a penny to pay it with and I’ll have to lay it out in jail. If you think putin’ me in jail will help my young-uns, then go ahead and do it. (360)

In *Fair and Tender Ladies*, an outsider schoolteacher decides to prosecute a father who does not send his children to her school. The father’s defense, as related by protagonist Ivy Rowe through her letter, reads in part:

> Me and my oldest boy has got this one pair of shoes between us and that’s all. Bert Cope holds up his foot, wearing shoes that look sorry to me. When my boy wears em I don’t have any, and when I wear em, he don’t have any. If it was not for these rations the government given us, I guess our whole family would of starved to death long afore now. So if you want to fine me sir, why go ahead! Bert Cope grins a big grin that shows some missing teeth. I aint got a penny to pay it with, so I reckon I’ll have to lay it out in jail. So if you think that putting me in jail will help my younguns any, why you go right ahead and do it, and I’ll be glad of it. I need me a good long rest. And if any of you fine gentlemen will find me a job where I can work out something for my kids to wear, then I’ll be much obliged to you for all the days of my life. [sic] (299)

Though Smith does not mention Caudhill’s book in her list of reference texts, the similarity between the two passages cannot be coincidental. The choice of Caudhill is significant; *Night Comes to the Cumberlands* helped shape the attitudes of policy makers and reformers towards the region during the 1960s (Batteau 156-157), though it has also been critiqued as a purveyor of stereotypical attitudes about the mountaineers (Stanley 375-376).
The fact that Smith does not list the text as a source, yet borrowed from the book almost verbatim suggests both the breadth of her reading on Appalachia as well as the selective workings of her imagination. Smith is not using these sources only as background material; instead, as an oral storyteller might, she hears or reads a story that she likes and then retells it, with minor emendations, to fit her context. Sarah Elliot discusses how Smith chooses folktales from life or books, such as “Old Dry Fry,” and adapts them to context of her texts (65-66). The example of Caudhill demonstrates that Smith does the same with the material from academic sources.

This tendency complicates the interplay of class influences in Smith’s texts. Without analyzing every source text, its author, audience, and reception, it is impossible to confirm the class position reflected in each text—and even more difficult to pinpoint how these approaches interact in Smith’s work. However, comparing the class connections of two Smith sources suggests how both specific resource texts and more general, unnoted influences may interact within her fiction.

Perhaps the best example of the complicated play of class among sources in Smith’s fiction is the paean to country music, The Devil’s Dream. The book is framed by the reunion of a family of singers at Nashville’s Opryland Hotel. The family gathers to cut an album of songs with its most famous member, fictional country music star Katie Cocker. The bulk of the book is comprised of individual family and friends relating the Bailey and Malone family history through a variety of mediums. For example, Ira Keen plays his songs and tells their stories to a collector from outside the mountains; Lizzie Bailey writes in her diary; and Katie Cocker draws on the genre of the country music autobiography to chronicle her life story.
Smith lists a number of sources in the final pages of *The Devil’s Dream*. One intriguing source is *The Singing Family of the Cumberlands* (1955), written by Jean Ritchie, a musician whose music “inspired” Smith during the writing of the novel. Ritchie’s great-grandfather was the fabled “Uncle Sol” of Hindman Settlement School. According the story, Uncle Sol asked the school’s founders to move from Hazard, Kentucky, to the Forks-of-Troublesome, so that his descendents could gain an education; Uncle Ephraim in Lucy Furman’s *The Quare Women* makes the fabled request. The Ritchie family actually was a singing Cumberland family; the famed Cecil Sharp had collected songs from them. However, the family’s social and economic situation was not uniformly “folk.” Jean never went to Hindman because a public high school opened before she was old enough to attend the settlement school. As David Whisnant observes, the Ritchie family had connections to “progressive” culture; Jean’s father published the first local newspaper, despite his eighth grade education, and her uncle was an attorney. Set during the region’s transition from a relatively isolated subsistence farming community to a modernized industrial area, the nostalgic *The Singing Family of the Cumberlands* nonetheless depicts the Ritchies attempting to negotiate between these cultures, assimilating new ideas while still valuing “the old ways” (Jones 225).

While her accomplishments are many, including scholarly work on folk songs, launching the “dulcimer revival,” and winning the 1977 *Rolling Stone* Critics Award for *None But One*, Jean Ritchie is best known as a performer of mountain music. Though she never returned to the mountains to live after college, beginning in the 1940s, Jean served as a public exponent for its culture through the urban folk revival. Like most Appalachian natives, Jean maintains strong connections to her native region through her family and performs
occasionally at events such as anti-strip-mining rallies. However, Appalachian scholar and admirer Loyal Jones wrote in 1981 that “[t]he time has come when [Ritchie] is as popular and revered in her native area as she has been for years in the great cities whose citizens hunger for a sense of tradition and belonging,” (228); this quote, taken from a warm and laudatory review, affirms both Jean’s talent as a traditional Appalachian artist and simultaneously acknowledges that folk music is almost never marketed initially to the actual “folk.” Whisnant argues that the urban folk revival, whose audience was almost exclusively educated outsiders, suggests that while the real mountains were becoming more modernized, “in the urban, middle-class world,” “there was space, leisure and money to promote, acquire, and ‘appreciate’ it [mountain culture] as a cultural icon or possession” (Whisnant 97). Ritchie’s positioning herself as an Appalachian artist is therefore both an honest reflection of her cultural identity and a projection of difference from her audience that makes her music more novel, “authentic,” and valuable.

At the end of *The Singing Family of the Cumberlands*, though the Ritchie family goes their separate ways as industrialization and mobilization come to the mountains, Jean knows that they will “still be the Ritchie Family as long as we lived and sang the same old songs, and that the songs would live as long as there was a family” (278). The worth of the songs is their power to provide cultural and familial ties, a value emphasized by the outsider women from the Hindman Settlement School that Ritchie so admired.

Several elements in *The Devil’s Dream* were inspired by Ritchie’s text. Most notably, the “The Cuckoo Song” that Ritchie family sings together in the final scene, emphasizing familial unity and a sustaining cultural heritage, threads through Smith’s text. In Smith’s book, the song indicates the evolution of a family heritage. Little Nonnie Hulett first performs
the song in a local store; her children learn the song from her and pass it on to their sister-in-law, Lucie Bailey; Lucie records the song with her “singing family” and cries, feeling she has lost something private in the process. Later, Katie Cocker sings “The Cuckoo Song” instead of her own composition for a live radio show because the family song seems less personal than her own writing. The meaning of the song changes with the singer and the context in Smith’s book. It still suggests family unity, but the connection is individualized for each person, rather than generalized for the community.

*The Singing Family of the Cumberlands* focuses on the family’s continuing connection to each other and the hills, never mentioning Jean’s later role as a performer. Despite this fact, it is important to remember that at its publication, Jean has already recorded *Jean Ritchie, Singing Traditional Songs of Her Kentucky Mountain Family*, been awarded a Fulbright to collect songs in the British Isles, and was on her way to becoming part of the urban folk revival. Her musical activities place her in a tradition of ethnographers, collectors, and folk performers that appealed primarily to elite, educated groups outside the mountains. Her material is authentic and powerfully rendered, but the folk music field in which she performs belongs not to the “folk” but to educated urbanites who consume their culture.

However, Ritchie’s family is not the only or even the primarily source for *The Devil’s Dream*. The novel lovingly shapes its story around the lives of recognizable country stars, such as the A.P. Carter family and their infamous son-in-law, Johnny Cash (R. Smith 70-71). The final third of the book focuses on Katie Cocker’s life as a commercial country music singer, the very kind of performer whose influence on the mountains Ritchie bemoaned in her book. While R.C. Bailey and Black Jack Johnny Raines are clearly inspired by A.P. Carter and Johnny Cash, respectively, Katie Cocker is a composite of well-known female singers. To
research the book, Smith traveled with Kitty Wells (70), whose hit “It Wasn’t God Who Made Honky Tonk Angels” established her as the first successful female country music singer outside of a duet or family group. While elements of Wells’ dichotomy between her gutsy songs and domestic image recur in Katie’s story (70-71), the novel also offers glimpses of Katie as a Minnie Pearl-esque comedienne, as a honky tonk angel with a blonde wig, push-up bra and four-inch heels like Dolly Parton, and as a road-addicted star who leaves her twins home with her husband as Loretta Lynn did. Through Katie Cocker, Smith celebrates the many talented and hard-working female stars who made a place for their talent in the male-dominated world of country music (71).

Katie Cocker’s story takes the form of the country music autobiography, a genre epitomized by Loretta Lynn’s Coal Miner’s Daughter. The melding of oral and written speech typical of country music autobiographies (Fox 240-241) are familiar elements in Smith’s work, making the form a natural for her to appropriate. Stock events in Katie’s story, immediately recognizable to country music fans, include: a rural childhood; leaving home only to appreciate it later; problems with drugs and alcohol; the struggle to get recorded; a tragic bus accident; and a religious conversion. While her life is fictionalized and not modeled on a specific artist, the form of the country music autobiography is reflected throughout Katie’s third of the book.

Though country music has garnered an increasingly broad and diverse audience, the genre remains associated with the working class. Patrick Carr argues in “The Changing Image of Country Music” that in most industrial nations, the rural working class has been regarded with derision by urban residents. “Such prejudice is expressed in cultural terms as mockery of country ignorance and backwardness, but its driving forces are at heart socioeconomic” (485).
The rural roots of country music are therefore inescapably connected to a less privileged class and status position. Richard Peterson suggests that “country music lyrics both evoke working class consciousness and also diffuse it” by affirming the superiority of a working class identity or directing listeners to other sources of group identity, such as patriotism or regionalism (35-36). Affirming the value of a working class identity does not invalidate class relationships, but it diminishes the perceived power of the wealthier groups by suggesting that what is essential for life belongs to the working class, simultaneously devaluing upper class culture while discouraging working-class individuals from trying to change the social structure.

The literary genre of the country music autobiography often suggests the complicated relationship of class and country music by emphasizing the humble backgrounds of country musicians while highlighting their success (Fox 243). The gold standard for country music autobiographies is Loretta Lynn’s *Coal Miner’s Daughter*. The story of Loretta Webb’s childhood in a Kentucky coal town, her early marriage, and her subsequent struggle to country music stardom was well-known through Lynn’s publicity and lyrics. However, the version of her life published in *Coal Miner’s Daughter* was the first in a long line of popular country music autobiographies of female stars. The book corrects the unflattering portrait of a character similar to Lynn in Robert Altman’s 1975 film, *Nashville*, which used country music culture to evaluate American politics. Though Lynn denies seeing the movie, she states in the autobiography that the book, not the movie, “is me” (Ellison 171-172). Later made into a successful motion picture starring Sissy Spacek, *Coal Miner’s Daughter* emphasizes the rural roots and values of the star in a story that she approved. While Smith does not mention
Lynn’s narrative in her list of sources, *Coal Miner’s Daughter* hovers in the background as the best-known and most influential country music autobiography.

In “Recycled ‘Trash’: Gender and Authenticity in Country Music Autobiography,” Pamela Fox argues that the autobiographical impulse has long been associated with what Richard Peterson calls the hard country sound. In contrast to the slicker, more heavily produced “soft shell” performers, hard country singers have “not only a ‘raw’ singing style but also their propensity to write and record songs reflecting their own ‘rough’ life experiences” (235). This autobiographical penchant translates not only into lyrics but lends itself to the country music autobiography.

While singer Katie Cocker is not depicted as strictly a hard country performer, her narrative includes the personal, confessional tone of the country music autobiography. As Fox says is typical of such narratives, the more glamorous persona of Katie Cocker the star frequently reflects back on the activities of her more naive self. Chapters begin with contextual statements such as, “Lord, I hate to even tell this next part, it makes me look like such a fool” (248); and “I’m not going to tell the next part of the story in too much detail, because this here is where my story gets to be just like everybody else’s” (268). Katie continually and self-consciously identifies herself as a “country girl,” reflecting on her past self with the later perspective that both laments the loss of a simple life and acknowledges the present.

Successful country music singers, especially of the hard country variety, are expected to maintain ties to their rural roots (or invent them, as in the case of Nashville aristocrat Sarah Ophelia Colley, i.e., Minnie Pearl). Some contemporary female stars may feel a lesser need to stress a rural background, especially if they have adopted a “soft-shell” persona like Canadian
Shania Twain or Cover Girl spokes-model Faith Hill. However, even these slicker-sounding stars must maintain a sense of personal connection with their fans. The continuing popularity of Fan Fair, a country music festival held yearly on the Tennessee State Fair Grounds, is attributable partly to the booths where stars sit, speaking individually to each fan who wishes to greet them (Ellison 185). One would be hard pressed to find a similar event in hip-hop, rock, or classical music cultures. The identification of the stars with the fans, who are growing more demographically diverse but are still typically working or lower middle class, is a key ingredient in the success of traditional country music stars.

Once performers become successful, however, the tie is not simple to maintain. Loretta Lynn notes:

It’s a strange deal. I’m supposed to be a country singer, writing songs about marriage and family and the way normal folks live. But mostly I’m living in motel rooms and traveling on my special bus with my private bedroom in the back. (xii)

Country music stars, especially hard country stars, occupy a loaded class position. While they gain financial success as stars, they move farther away from the culture and values they promote, a situation that Fox notes country stars Loretta Lynn, Reba McEntyre, Dolly Parton, and Naomi Judd all mourn in their autobiographies (243). Keeping the connections necessary to be successful as a working class representative when the very definition of success—moving away from home and becoming wealthy—work against the local connections is a problem that country singers wrestle with.

Class identity has never been simple for country music stars. As Smith’s novel notes, early performers wore their Sunday best before embodying a rural identity through rustic dress became the norm. Fox argues that the natural look, epitomized by Loretta Lynn, the carnivalesque, favored by Dolly Parton, and the country rube style, adopted by Minnie Pearl,
all contrast with the more sophisticated “citified” personas of contemporary performers such as Trisha Yearwood (245). Lynn and Parton both explicitly connect their personas to rural roots, Lynn extending her good country woman persona from her earlier self and Parton attributing her flamboyant costumes to a newly rich mountain girl’s idea of glamour and beauty (258-259). Pearl, however, was a Nashville aristocrat who created a completely new personality for her stage performance. Fox notes the conflict in the country music autobiography of Sarah Ophelia Colley (no known relation to this author), who insists that her character is meant to affectionately represent a simply country girl, while regarding elements of her Minnie Pearl performance as parody. Colley also maintains a connection with her class origins, occasionally mentioning her education and her distance from Minnie’s perspective (255-257). Though there are clearly elements of classist mockery in Minnie Pearl, it is important to remember that the character was a beloved Opry staple for decades; it is only in the 1980s that Opry administrators declined to put Pearl on the network for being “not authentic” (255-256). Significantly, this concern surfaced only when country music’s popularity spread to the middle class. Perhaps the working class, which constituted the primary audience for country music for decades, understood the complexity in the self-conscious creation of the traditional rube character, while the middle class, concerned with romanticizing a simpler aesthetic, balks at such an approach—or, more disturbingly, may realize that, despite country’s focus on autobiography and genuineness, perhaps many of the performers are performing country rather than sharing “authentically.”

Ritchie’s, Lynn’s, and Cocker’s stories suggest rural backgrounds and the difficulty of remaining connected to the past when one becomes successful. However, Ritchie’s texts and songs are aimed primarily at outsiders who regard Appalachian music as intriguing but
intrinsically different from their own culture. She performs a particular version of mountain
music that suggests “authenticity” because that is what the consuming public desires. In
contrast, Loretta Lynn performs in the tradition of the “hard country” sound, which was
traditionally aimed at a rural, working class audience that identifies with the singer. Though
country music in the late twentieth century began to command a broader audience, Lynn’s
popularity in the 1970s and 1980s provided a point of identification for working class women
with songs like “One’s on the Way,” “The Pill,” and “Coal Miner’s Daughter.” However, like
Ritchie, Lynn must perform country with “authenticity,” a task that she acknowledges became
more difficult as her success increased and she became less like her audience.

“Authenticity” remains an elusive requirement for Katie as well. She cycles through a
number of public personas before she watches her great-aunt Virgie on PBS, telling a group
of reverent young folklorists about the early days of country music. Katie’s aunt is lying,
telling the story of the family singing group in a way flattering to herself. The incident leads
Katie to produce her own album featuring her singing family, honoring the spirit of the old
group as well as the new generation. The result is a family reunion that resolves some old
tensions, implying that they are still the family if they sing together, as Ritchie’s story
suggested.

The conflation of these sources in Smith’s texts indicates the complicated interplay of
class and sources in her work. Both Ritchie and Lynn hail from Appalachian communities and
have genuine attachment to the music of the region. However, their style of music and their
audiences alter their presentation of their art, self, and region in the music and in their texts.
By incorporating these two different texts as sources, one named and one unnamed, Smith
unintentionally reflects the variety of class-based perspectives of Appalachia and irresolvable tensions that resonate within her fiction.

Conclusion

Simply identifying random stereotypes and sources for an author’s work is an entertaining but rarely useful activity. However, because Smith writes about a subject so fraught with clashing perspectives and class connotations, even a cursory survey of Smith’s sources helps set the context for the discussion that is to follow.

While Smith tries to depict class and status relations accurately within her texts, the physical world of Grundy, Virginia, is not necessarily her strongest imaginative influence. The perspectives of local color and regionalist writers, ethnographers, the image of Appalachia in the popular imagination, and popular forms such as the country music autobiography provide a richness and depth to her fictional worlds that should be acknowledged in discussions of class.

No late twentieth century author, especially one with the varied background of Smith, can be easily pigeon-holed into a “class” perspective. The best that can be said is that an author has influences, which have different degrees of power and over which the author has varied degrees of consciousness and control. A Southern Mountain Region native with ties to town culture but a personal and literary disposition to explore the lives of “holler” characters, Smith both consciously appropriates and is subtly influenced by the class perspectives of her childhood role, the mountain literary tradition, and popular culture motifs. Her imagination tends to work in patterns of repeating characters, which reflects the stock characters of the mountain literary tradition but incorporates types from other sources and from the popular image of Appalachia as well. Further, the repeating patterns of characters in her texts may
owe as much to oral folktales, with working class connotations, and middle class ethnographies, as to the middle and upper class perspectives of the mountain literary tradition. Smith’s difference from her typical subjects is clear, but her connections to them are constantly shifting, depending on the class perspective of the source material she adopts and her use of it.

As the example of the country music autobiography indicates, even forms that are clearly associated with a particular group, such as the working class, can have strains of alternate perspectives incorporated in them. By utilizing imaginative images of Appalachia taken from the mountain literary tradition, academic resources and the popular imagination, Smith reflects popular and elite class attitudes towards the region, while her incorporation of working class and popular forms such as the country music autobiography may provide an alternate lens to help balance her view of the region.
CHAPTER THREE
COUNTRY COME TO TOWN: SOCIAL STRUCTURES IN LEE SMITH’S SMALL TOWNS

So the owner never comes here any more, and Mr. Ransom the superintendent gets to live in the house with his wife who likes to put on the dog and does not find Diamond at all depressing. I would not either if I was rich! (Ivy Rowe, *Fair and Tender Ladies*, 137).

In *The Southern Writer in the Postmodern World*, Fred Hobson argues that Smith’s 1984 book, *Oral History*, “a novel about a classless society, is finally, despite itself, very much a statement about class” (32). While Smith’s characters are not overtly class conscious and Smith is “anything but a didactic writer” (32), Hobson believes that the contrast of folk, mass, and high American culture in Smith’s text ultimately indict upper class Virginia and affirms a non-idealized version of folk culture. The clash of cultures in this text reflects a conflict between social and economic classes.

Hobson’s observations provide a useful starting point for examining class and status markers in Smith’s small towns. While Smith’s fiction is not “didactic,” it consistently depicts the impact of social class and status on individuals who have varying degrees of awareness of these forces. Issues of class and stratification in Smith’s fiction predate her signature setting of Appalachia and recur as a central tension in her fiction throughout her career. While social structures vary between settings and time periods, Smith’s work indicates that social class and status markers influence both the opportunities of her characters and their perceptions of each other.

The current chapter begins with the holler/town, urban/rural, and insider/outsider divisions that critics have identified in Smith’s work. Frequently, the criticism of the urban/rural and insider/outsider motifs focuses on *Oral History* or on the damage that
stereotypical views of Appalachia cause (i.e., S. Jones 108-111, A. Jones “Orality” 18, Wallace 374). Other critics have observed that Smith affirms rural perspectives (Teem 63), while recognizing the limitations inherent in that discourse (Cunningham 49). Because diverse studies on Smith acknowledge (in varying degrees) the impact of these splits and because Smith identifies the holler/town/outsider division as the basic social structure of her experience of Appalachia (Appendix 340-341), these categories frame the current discussion.

The purpose is not to survey previous scholarship, but to explore the shifting bases of stratification in Smith’s work and to provide scaffolding for the consideration of education and taste in the following chapters. The divisions will be referred to as holler/town/outsider (or, in Smith’s more traditionally Southern fiction, rural/town/outsider) because the terminology reflects the social and cultural, as well as economic, nature of the split.

Other unifying and divisive status markers in this chapter include kinship and marriage patterns, occupation, religious affiliation, and personal reputation, which are all colored by the rural/town/outsider divisions. These status markers may work in concert with class, as in the case of religious affiliation, or they may cut across them, as kinship patterns do at times. Class and status markers are examined together here because a single element seldom determines social position. Furthermore, an individual may hold dual status positions, being ranked highly by the working class as a local union representative, for example, but being less highly esteemed by local merchants, who recognize as primary the individual’s identification with the working class rather than his political power. This multi-marker approach is consistent with critical perspectives that acknowledge the connection of class with other stratification elements, such as culture, race, and gender. As Cora Kaplan states in the introduction to PMLA’s special issue on class, “class identity [cannot] subsume those
other incommensurable self-consciousnesses of race, gender, religion, sexuality, and
nationality” (13). In combination, class and status elements help determine an individual’s
position in Smith’s communities as well as the number of choices that individual has in life
(Appendix 346). Within Smith’s work, class and status markers interact, fluctuating in
importance in response to the temporal, cultural, and economic setting.

Smith’s rural characters recognize internal status differences based on kinship
patterns, religious affiliation, and individual behavior. However, overt class and status
markers appear primarily in interactions between town, outsider, and rural characters.
Because these interactions are more likely to occur within small communities rather than in
the countryside or cosmopolitan South, this chapter focuses on Smith’s small towns as a
nexus for examining the social class status markers that recur throughout her fiction.

Social Class Divisions

One of Smith’s contributions to Southern letters is her portrayal of the diversity of
Southern, and specifically Appalachian, social experience. Though Appalachia is often
popularly regarded as socially homogenous, contemporary scholarship acknowledges that the
Southern Mountain Region includes differences between sub-regions and among settlers.
While Smith’s fiction at times minimizes sub-regional differences, the body of her work
depicts Appalachia as a dynamic region with active social structures and structuring. The oft-
maligned company coal towns, though included in her work, are not her primary focus. Smith
also includes holler communities, independent towns, coal towns that are not company
owned, lumber towns, and mined-out company towns, as well as more generic small Southern
towns, in her novels and short stories.
Though Smith’s depictions of small towns often are based on her own experience, she writes fiction, not ethnography. Examining her work to determine whether it authentically reflects the Southern Mountain Region or the larger South is beyond the scope of this dissertation and the province of literary analysis. While this chapter will acknowledge Smith’s connection to her signature setting of Appalachia, the focus is the play of social class and status resources in her fiction worlds. This discussion will suggest the importance of class and status in Smith’s aesthetic and its fluctuating role in shaping the lives and perceptions of her characters.

Because Smith’s fiction focuses on particular communities and the individual’s relationship to those communities (i.e., R. Smith 5-6; Wesley 99), issues of class and status regularly surface in her texts. The situation is magnified in her Appalachian fiction when outsider and town residents class Appalachian culture, which Smith wishes to affirm. In his seminal work *Power and Powerlessness in an Appalachian Valley*, John Gaventa discusses the role of classing culture in the industrialization of Yellow Creek Valley, Tennessee. One strategy employed by outsider coal mining companies to insure local compliance was to first demonstrate the “exaggerated attractiveness of the industrial order [through consumption], on the one hand, [that] carried with it the degradation of the culture and society of the mountaineers, on the other” (65). Smith’s work also reflects a less calculated but similarly oppressive devaluation and classing of rural culture by many of her outsider and town characters. Individuals as varied as the confused, outsider schoolteacher Richard Burlage in *Oral History* and the beautiful mountain social climber Beulah Rowe in *Fair and Tender Ladies* regard mountain culture as indicative of a lower social class, suggesting a lack of education and income. The conflation of class and culture, while not universal in Smith,
occurs with enough regularity to make the split between rural and urban culture a consistent dividing line in her fiction (Hobson 31-2; Teem 63).

This valuation sets up one of the primary divisions in Smith’s Appalachian fiction: town versus holler. Smith’s description of this difference, quoted in Chapter Two, is worth repeating:

When you live in the holler . . . there’s a whole kind of society up there among neighbors and clans, different people from one family, a lot of them will be in the same place. It’s very close and very warm and really extended community. Traditionally, the people who live in the hollers or up in the creeks do not have a lot of money. They work in the mines or they work in the hospital or they might come to town and clean somebody’s house or they might work in the tire store or whatever. Whereas the town people own the businesses; the doctors, you know, the people who own things. . . . Their world was very different from the world of the holler. (Appendix 340)

As this quote suggests, holler characters tend to have working class jobs and less economic privilege. Holler lifestyles often reflect mountain culture more overtly than those of the town characters, who have greater access to amenities outside the hills.

In “The Poco Field: Politics, Culture, and Place in Contemporary Appalachia,” Talmage Stanley argues that class status and place of residence are frequently interchangeable terms in Smith’s work, most notably in Black Mountain Breakdown. In that novel, protagonist Crystal Spangler recognizes the holler kids at school as different socially, economically, and even physically from her fellow town students (332-333); dating holler boy Mack Stiltner is an act of teenage rebellion for her, crossing a taboo line. Smith’s other texts with mountain settings frequently manifest this recognized social line as well. In Fair and Tender Ladies, mountaineer Ivy Rowe briefly identifies herself as a “town girl” when her family relocates to a boomtown early in the twentieth century, demonstrating a connection between residence and social identity. In Oral History, 1950s teenager Sally Cantrell knows that no nice town
boy will date her because she is from a holler. Similarly, the title character in *Saving Grace* is consistently teased at school because of her family’s Holiness faith and snake handling, religious practices that suggest a lower class status and rural identity. Throughout Smith’s work, though the sharpness and nature of the division changes with time, the split between town and holler or town and county persists, perceived by her characters as a both a class and a status division.

In Smith’s non-Appalachian South, the distinction between town/professional and rural/working class characters also forms a significant social division. Working class characters in Smith’s non-Appalachian texts often live on the physical and social edges of the towns, residing in bordering rural areas and excluded from polite society. In *The Last Day the Dogbushes Bloomed*, handyman Frank and maid Elsie Mae exist on the edges of nine-year-old Susan’s community as employees rather than neighbors, living in houses at some distance from the neighborhood that serves as the center of action. In “Tongues of Fire,” Karen’s working class friend Tammy Lester “lived out in the county someplace” (84). “Shunned by Sub-Debs, sent to Detention, noticed by older boys” (84), Tammy lives outside the physical and social center of the community. In *Black Mountain Breakdown*, the holler that working class Mack Stiltner lives in is a socially insignificant landscape, on the margins of society and of the text (Stanley 341). Just as in Smith’s Appalachian fiction, place suggests economic, occupational, and social standing in the community.

In her Appalachian fiction, Smith suggests a division beyond town/holler: the separation between insider and outsider. Speaking of her childhood in Grundy, Smith explains:

> I was also aware of a third world, which wasn’t the creek [holler], it wasn’t the town, but was the world beyond our particular rim of mountains. Because my mother was
from eastern Virginia and she was from a family that had lost a lot of their money but
had been educated—they had pretensions of certain kinds. . . . My mother was so
markedly different and was determined to remain markedly different from other
women in Grundy. . . . Because she held to that so tenaciously, I think I was very
much aware of the three kinds of worlds. . . . For such a small town existence, it was
complicated as to class. (Appendix 341)

Further complicating the situation, outsiders tend to lump all Appalachia residents into one
category as social equals (Appendix 345), while local residents remain aware of differences
between town and holler. Critics have observed that outsiders in Smith’s work confuse holler
and town characters because of their preconceived ideas about Appalachia, to the continued
chagrin of the latter. Wealthier Southern Mountain Region residents historically have resented
local color fiction that equates them with their lower class neighbors (C. Williams 23),
suggesting a consciousness of perceived divisions and social identifications.¹

Therefore, the social divisions in Smith’s work are created by differences in place and
perception. Working class holler characters tend to be less wealthy and educated than town
characters, who are frequently professionals or merchants. The town characters, in turn, have
less money and schooling than outsiders, who often conflate the mountain classes or, if they
recognize differences, see town characters as occupying a lower status than outsiders. Social
class status routinely limits the opportunities of Smith’s characters to access education,
employment options, and social connections, thereby shaping their life chances. “I think a lot
of times social class is very much a determining factor,” Smith has stated (Appendix 346),
impacting both her characters’ options and their perceptions of each other.

¹ For discussion on the insider/outsider motif in Smith, see Wesley, S. Jones, etc.
Cutting Class

Despite these prevalent divisions, Smith’s characters do not necessarily agree that social regard and material capital should be equated. To understand the relationship of class, culture, and perception in her work, the impact of egalitarianism and kinship in mountain, especially holler, culture must be addressed. These elements recur in various guises throughout Smith’s fiction, at times undercutting but alternatively obscuring or compensating for social class restrictions.

The myth of egalitarianism recurs throughout the mountain literary tradition as a virtue of the mountaineer. Nineteenth century local color writers such as Mary Noailles Murfree and John Fox, Jr., created mountaineers who valued not wealth or worldly status but the worth of the individual. Ethnographers such as Horace Kephart have observed that early twentieth century mountain residents related to the individual, not to groups, and brooked no condescension (382-3; 283). Shaundra Scott notes in her late twentieth century profile of Harlan County, Kentucky, famous for its union struggles early in the century, that the language of egalitarianism is still frequently invoked, despite social inequity (118).

In Miners, Millhands, and Mountaineers (1982), Ronald Eller observes that pre-industrial rural communities of Appalachia often featured “strong egalitarian attitudes and beliefs,” partially because near economic parity made material distinctions meaningless.

Status (not class) distinctions . . . . were the more important social divisions in traditional mountain society. These distinctions were functions not of economics (wealth, land ownership, or access to natural resources), but of the value system of the community itself. . . . The rural social order was divided not into upper, middle, and lower social classes but into respectable and non-respectable groups, and each community determined its own criteria for respectability. (10)

Eller goes on to say, however, that “[t]his status system, of course, tended to break down in the villages and county seat towns, where class distinctions . . . were more noticeable” (10).
While Eller’s depiction of pre-industrial Appalachia has since been critiqued as too homologous and slight (Pudup, Billings and Waller 9), his view arguably reflects the popular understanding of Appalachian egalitarianism, especially as reflected in Smith’s texts.

In her discussion of three contemporary North Carolina holler communities, Patricia Beaver identifies independence and egalitarianism as the communities’ core values. Though relative isolation has made self-sufficiency a highly prized local value, the difficulties of farming and battling the elements cause residents to routinely turn to others for help. Therefore, cooperation must be maintained within the community. Egalitarianism minimizes social and economic differences to promote local communication and cooperation (153-154).

In *Appalachia’s Path to Dependency*, Paul Salstrom presents the somewhat contrasting view that most cooperative work sharing actually occurs within extended family groups and that community-wide projects are rare in the mountains (xxvi). Beaver agrees that kin provide the primary source for support outside the immediate family, though non-kin neighbors may be called upon (63). Furthermore, because extended mountain families often live in close proximity, neighbors are likely to be kin. Egalitarianism and kinship therefore work in concert to shape social relationships in mountain communities.

“Kinship survived as the prime social institution of mountain life” into the 1930s, despite the early twentieth century influx of lumber and coal companies (Eller 236). From pre-industrial times, the basic Appalachian social unit was the nuclear family, but that group was “enmeshed in a larger network of kin relationship” (28). Because kinship is determined through maternal and paternal lines, as well as spousal families, mountaineers in small holler communities often are related to many of their immediate neighbors (Schaltzweller 35; Beaver 56).
Historically, the family was the primary mountain economic unit, providing labor for the farm, and kinship served as the key organizing force for religious and political life (Eller 29-30). As in the larger South, the family has served as a source of group identification and helped structure social relationships (Stephens 5). John Stephenson’s *Shiloh*, a landmark study of social change in an Appalachia, discusses community structure in terms of family type rather than social class because the approach is more “fluid” and inclusive (51-52). However, Stephenson also divides these family types based on their occupation and employment (50), suggesting a connection between kinship, class, and prestige. Kinship continues to shape identity by connecting individuals to those with similar genetics, heritage, and, supposedly, personality traits, and by providing the community with a context to place the individual in (Scott 109).

Smith’s *The Devil’s Dream* illustrates the persistent shaping power of kinship ties in the South and Appalachia. In this multi-generational story, many of the descendants of Moses Bailey and Kate Malone occupy adjoining farms on inherited land in Grassy Branch, Virginia. Family members share farming chores, such as hoeing the fields and hosting sugar cane stir-offs. They also share a family spiritual history that all descendants must find some way to resolve. Ancestral patriarch Moses Bailey had grown up with a hard-shell Baptist faith; in contrast his young wife Kate Malone came from a fun-loving family known as back-sliders who loved secular music. The psychic inheritance from this passionate mismatch creates the central tension in the lives of their offspring and in the book. The tension between the family’s Calvinist faith and their phenomenal talent in country music, a conflict between the spiritual and the earthly, haunts these characters. Significantly, these warring dispositions are portrayed as characteristic of the clan, not the individual or the environment; one neighbor
observes that “religion has always run strong in that family, like red hair or cross eyes in others” (158). Only in the final chapter does Moses’ great-great-granddaughter, country music star Katie Cocker, integrate these elements through a personalized faith found at a Nashville New Age/Christian church. In this novel, kinship helps structure the story and the community, providing ties of love and responsibility but also indicating an individual’s relationship to the church and explaining socially recognized personality traits.

However, kinship ties are not inflexible or inviolable. Esteemed friends may be designated honorary “uncles,” “aunts,” or “young-uns” in some mountain communities (Beaver 60); in Smith’s *Fair and Tender Ladies*, Geneva Hunt is regarded as almost kin because of her long friendship with the mother of protagonist Ivy Rowe. Furthermore, kin relations can be consciously severed or gradually fade if the reciprocal ties of support and regard are not maintained (S. Scott 110-112). Again in *Fair and Tender Ladies*, Ivy’s sister Beulah finds that her mountain kin hold her back socially, so she distances herself from the family. While Ivy always hopes she will return, Beulah is no longer kin to her in a practical sense, though she remains her sister. Conversely, Dreama Fox, Ivy’s sister-in-law, cares for Ivy during her last illness. Dreama refuses to speak to Ivy, who once cheated on Dreama’s brother, but waits on her dying relative, as kin are expected to. Understanding the principle the care is based upon, Ivy accepts Dreama’s help, though she refuses the aid of her children.

Many of Smith’s texts use kinship as an organizing principal, bridging generations and social structures. The family saga is a familiar form in Southern literature, reflecting the importance of the extended family in Southern social life and providing a method for examining the continuities and changes in Southern society (Stephens 6); Smith’s *Oral History* and *Family Linen* are notable examples of this multi-generational form (184-201).
Kinship is an integral part of social life in Smith’s work and may unite characters across class lines. For example, in “Life on the Moon,” the protagonist and her cousin live on opposite sides of the town/holler split. June shares an old company house with her widowed mother, while her vibrant cousin, Lucie, lives in a brick home near her father’s Rexall drugstore in a valley town. The kinship ties makes playmates of the girls, but as a teenager, June begins to realize the experiential difference between her sheltered cousin’s longing for excitement and her own desire for stability and respectability. It takes a number of years and life experiences to bridge the social class-based differences between them, which are tinged by June’s sense of herself as a “poor relation.” Though Smith’s work acknowledges the difficulty of maintaining ties across the classes and years, she also consistently affirms the inherent value of kinship ties and their promise for uniting family members across class lines.

The importance of kinship and egalitarianism in the mountains suggests that a denial of social class is an inherent part of rural Appalachian values. Beaver observes that egalitarianism may be enforced through leveling techniques (154-160). While Beaver’s discussion of late twentieth century North Carolina communities does not blend seamlessly with Smith’s depiction of coal-mining communities, one leveling technique that she identifies resonates with Smith’s texts. Beaver argues that “uppity” behavior or “having aspirations for or pretensions of higher class” (162) are censurable offenses because they endanger community cooperation. In Distinction, his celebrated study of taste, Pierre Bourdieu agrees that working class men especially are discouraged from the feminine and bourgeoisie “pretensions” of aesthetic refinement (Distinction 380-382), employing the same language that Smith uses to describe her mother’s genteel aspirations (Appendix 340). Critics agree that Smith’s work is filled with characters critiqued for acting “uppity” or pretentious; conversely,
her most admirable characters often resist “getting about their raising.” In *Fair and Tender Ladies*, when Ivy Rowe has an extended visit with her teacher and the teacher’s wealthy niece, her letters home repeatedly reassure the family that she is not “spoilt, nor putting on airs” (45). Later, when living in a coal camp, Ivy reports that her sister Beulah “is getting so uppity” because of her husband’s financial success (132); Beulah has less and less to do with her mountain past because she is distancing herself to improve her social status.

One source for these pretensions may be the class-based image of the Southern lady. The restricting and restrictive image of the lady has historically suggested an aristocratic or upper class identity (Scott 4; Jones 5). Despite this, Margaret Wolfe argues that the image has been so pervasive that its influence cannot be limited to the upper class or the mainstream South (7); even Smith’s coal-mining Virginia was touched by the image. Generally, town characters in her work are more likely to assume “lady-like” qualities because their connection to the larger South is stronger, though rural characters may ape the image in the hopes of improving their status. In Smith’s work, pretentious ladies routinely identify with town and outsider rather than rural culture (Wesley 212), distancing themselves from their mountain kin and community. Those who seek to become ladies in Smith’s work typically elevate themselves above the community (Wesley 48), a practice that her narrative consistently undermines (308).

Smith’s characters, both holler and town, often disapprove and gossip about others who socially distance themselves, whether because of class (Wesley 81) or intellectual pretensions (A. Jones 249). Perhaps more significantly, the authorial voice and narrative choices often critiques “uppity” characters as well, portraying them as pathetically mistaken at best and seldom allowing them a completely happy ending. Ivy’s sister Beulah, for
example, becomes so worried that the aristocratic women of Charleston will ostracize her because of her background that she becomes a closet alcoholic and never enjoys the luxuries or status that her social climb has garnered. Underwood notes that people like Beulah generally drink to forget, to lose not only the connection but even the memory of their previous association (116). Smith states that “I think you do find in any culture people who simply want to grow beyond it and not look back, like Beulah. . . . And a lot of times, that’s pretty dangerous because you start losing your underpinnings” (182). Smith’s characters and texts routinely disapprove of those who would abandon their rural connections to construct a wealthier future.

The importance of kinship ties and the informal endorsement of egalitarianism indicates that, rather than being passive victims of social stratification, Smith’s rural characters engage in structuring behaviors of their own. Often, they utilize compensating mechanisms to retain at least the illusion of power in their lives. Social and economic markers in Smith’s works are dynamic forces, and lower class characters have some power to shape their perspectives and lives, even if they do not have control over the economic capital of the community.

To discuss the social structure in Smith’s rural towns, this chapter begins by examining as a group Smith’s first three novels, which have a Southern but not specifically an Appalachian setting. Next, the transitional text of Black Mountain Breakdown will be discussed to indicate the continuities between Smith’s Southern and Appalachian settings. Lastly, Smith’s most prominent Appalachian towns will be examined, emphasizing the most notable class or status markers in each setting; significant deviations from the pattern suggested by each will be noted.
Early Novels–Southern Discomfort

While Lee Smith is best known for her Appalachian fiction, her earliest texts utilize more traditionally Southern social settings. Smith has stated that her writing career is divided into two segments (Hill 313-314). While her first three novels, *The Last Day the Dogbushes Bloomed* (1969), *Something in the Wind* (1971) and *Fancy Strut* (1973), received favorable notices, none were financial successes, and Harper and Row declined to publish further works. Though Smith’s short stories appeared in periodicals and journals throughout the 1970s, she did not find a publisher until 1980, when *Black Mountain Breakdown*, her first Appalachian novel, appeared.

This shift in setting does not indicate a complete break with the earlier fiction, however. Smith’s earliest novels forecast some of the social and economic structuring elements of her Appalachia fiction. While Smith does clearly distinguish between the Appalachian sub-region and the larger South in her work, her earliest fiction suggests the tendencies and continuities of her evolving fictional imagination.

*The Last Day the Dogbushes Bloomed* (1968) focuses on the social world of children. The novel chronicles protagonist Susan Tobey’s ninth summer, during which “Mother had left us and Betty (her sister) was engaged and Frank (the gardener) had died” (180). In addition to these events, Susan and her friends are introduced to death, violence, and sex through Eugene, a strange little boy visiting for the summer, and his imaginary friend, Little Arthur. The story culminates with Eugene playing Iron Lung, i.e., raping Susan, while the other children assist. Fortunately, another child informs his parents; Eugene is spirited away by the adults, but Susan knows that Little Arthur will always be lurking nearby. In the last
scene, Susan smiles at Little Arthur so that he will know she is not scared. She has been initiated into a larger, less secure world and has learned to cope in her own way.

Because the novel unfolds through the eyes of a nine-year-old, the markers of class and status are essentialized. Susan and her friends live in a small community of relatively wealthy upper-middle class families. Her family has both a maid and a gardener; sister Betty has summered in Europe; the parents give parties in which men wear tuxedos and women sparkle. However, the father left a promising career as an artist to provide for his expensive wife, indicating that the family is well off but not rich.

Although the town/holler division that pervades Smith’s later fiction does not appear clearly here, the mountains do suggest the “other” for Susan. While Eugene is from the city (the first of Smith’s many outside destroyers), the aunt he visits for the summer lives slightly nearer the mountains than the rest of the community:

The Parks’ [Eugene’s aunt’s] house was in the middle of a bunch of trees and green stuff, a new house stuck onto the mountain right where it started to go up. There were lots of mountains all around where we lived, only they were closer on the Parks’ side of the road. On our side the mountains were back behind the little river. I liked to go up in them but not too far. (18)

The combination of the city and the mountains creates a threat for the middle-class girl. While Susan does imaginatively draw strength from the wild “king of the dogs” who lives in the nearby hills, the conflation of danger with the “other” is clear. Outsiders from beyond and in the hills are equally “other.”

The only non-middle class characters in the text are Elsie Mae, the black maid, and Frank, the gardener. Susan has a strong affection for both; Elsie Mae answers her questions with an honesty her family avoids, while Frank speaks so seldom that Susan can count his words. After a local flood, Frank shows up with an armload of flood relief goods from the
Red Cross. When the family asks how badly the flood damaged his home, he laughs that
“Flood never titched me.”

Susan’s sister’s explains later what Frank had done:

She said that Frank had gotten his whole crazy house from the government, that he
had cheated the government to get all those things. Food and clothes were free if your
house was washed away, she said. But Frank’s house wasn’t washed away and he got
them anyway. [She] said that the Democrats were stupid and that the New Deal was
stupid because people like Frank would always be around to take unfair advantage of
things . . . She said Frank would only work so long every day because if he worked
too long he wouldn’t get any relief. (136)

Susan is not scandalized by her sister’s assertions, however; in fact, her opinion of Frank rises
when she becomes aware of his tendency to take “unfair advantage.” Susan knows that the
government “grabbed Daddy’s money and put men in its army, and it was a big thing.” To
take a risk and dare to cheat the government, Frank must be “really brave” (136). Though
working class characters only people the margins of the text, those margins are potentially
subversive, foreshadowing Smith’s later tendency to empathize with those outside the main
currents of power. ²

The Last Day the Dogbushes Bloomed is a slim, elegant book that deals with the
largely homogenous world of upper-middle class childhood. Through its small-town focus
and compassion for those at the edges, the book suggests directions that Smith’s later fiction
takes. The story does not deal significantly with class and status, however, instead focusing
on the contrast between innocence and experience and the relative value of each.

Similarly, 1971’s Something in the Wind concerns the coming of age of teenager
Brooke Kincaid. A bright and privileged Virginia girl, Brooke loses her moorings after the

2 See Dorothy Combs Hill’s discussion of Smith’s anti-elite bias and preference for
“freedom” of the margins of society in her dissertation, The Female Imagination in an Age
of Transition: The Fiction of Lee Smith.
sudden death of her friend Charles, who had “made her mind” (5). Struggling with issues of identity and belonging in an upper middle class, Southern milieu, Brooke attempts find a workable balance between social expectations and self by creating an acceptable public persona and a private, authentic one (Hill 37). As a college freshman, she devises a “life plan” to help with the difficult task of creating a suitable public face. However, because she has a difficult time adhering to the plan, Brooke is threatened by others’ deviations from prescribed forms. She represses her impulses to socialize with a smart but overweight “loser” and tries not to spend too much time with a ditzy but verbally adept coed. When her fashionable roommate mentions that her father is alcoholic, Brooke turns a deaf ear; she cannot handle it if Diane is actually a real person rather than static perfection (38-39).

Eventually, Brooke finds that the “life plan” is too restrictive and abandons it. She moves in with her boyfriend, a troubled young golf jock who was once a child evangelist. Ashamed of his past, the brooding Bentley is an outsider, the other beyond the local social scheme. However, he also may be Brooke’s “authentic other” (Hill 42); Bentley is one of the few people Brooke risks telling something real to, though she does not trust either of them enough to share her heart’s core. The couple break up after a psychic entity seems to invade their apartment. In truth, their relationship fails because both are “haunted” by their pasts and socially imposed definitions.

Something in the Wind is Smith’s only book currently out of print. An apprentice novel, the story focuses primarily on the upper/middle class world of small town Virginia and a college town very like Chapel Hill, where Smith lived. Bentley, Brooke’s lover, brings some of the dark threat of Little Arthur to the center of the text, but he remains largely fixed in middle class life, despite his rebellious stance and rural past. Ladylike taste and social
capital, gained by dating the right people and having the right friends (Wesley 146), are important status markers, but ultimately too personally restrictive to be worth acquiring. With her family connections, education, and wealth, however, Brooke is unlikely to lose her class privilege, even if her non-conformist behavior harms her personal status.

Talmage Stanley has observed that the only people who transgress “dominant social practices” in Smith’s work and have a social future are those with the economic resources to buy a place and a voice (354). While exceptions exist, notably the “ruint” but defiant mountain girl Ivy Rowe in *Fair and Tender Ladies*, Brooke illustrates the connection of limits and opportunities. Arguably, Brooke would not be held to such exacting standards of behavior if she was not from a prominent Southern family that expects her to marry well. However, as Stanley notes, her economic and social resources can help maintain her life chances as she rejects those standards. Brooke rebels socially and thereby loses status, but class privilege cushions her fall.

While Smith’s first two novels focus on individual protagonists, *Fancy Strut* (1973) uses multiple narrators to explore a small, traditionally Southern town in the late 1960s. Set in fictional Speed, Alabama, *Fancy Strut* chronicles events leading up to the Speed Sesquicentennial pageant, a massive patriotic play culminating a week-long celebration of the town’s anniversary. The book’s limited omniscient narrator selects a different character to focus the developing narrative through in each chapter, a technique that Smith refines in her later fiction, most notably her Appalachian novels *Oral History* and *The Devil’s Dream*.

This multiple narrator technique allows Smith to examine characters representing a variety of social classes, ranging from aristocratic spinster Miss Iona Flowers to upper middle class lady Monica Neighbors to the rising middle class CPA Bob Pitt; each suggests a
different social role in the evolving New South (Buchanan 330). However, individuals with working class backgrounds only receive narrative attention if they have advanced into the town’s middle class. As in The Last Day the Dogbushes Bloomed and Something in the Wind, Smith’s traditionally Southern setting does not embrace working class characters as protagonists. Nonetheless, this text features the markers of social class status that recur throughout Smith’s fiction, including family ties, land ownership, occupation, education, and behavior.

Speed, Alabama, is a small, Southern town with indeterminate local industry. Most male characters are either merchants, professionals, or some combination of the two. In typical small town fashion, the El Rondo Motor Hotel coffee shop serves as the informal meeting and networking place for local businessmen. Major players in the town and the book include Mayor Bill Higgins, who owns a hardware store and property around the county; Lloyd Warner, an attorney from a locally prominent family who Higgins despises; Bob Pitt, a rising CPA who Higgins tricks into doing all the work for the Sesquicentennial; and Manly Neighbors, the civic-minded newspaper editor with local family ties and an outside education. The wealthy women in Speed congregate at the local country club or other civic organizations that substitute for formal work. Monica Neighbors, Manly’s wife, has completed decorating their lovely new home at the beginning of the book and is bored silly with her life. Rising middle class women have their own concerns: Frances Pitt, Bob’s wife, is consumed with her pretty daughter’s social success as a majorette and the potential value of the child’s beauty. The Cartwrights, who have made their money in junkyards, have moved into suburbia but made themselves comfortable by turning the backyard into a vegetable garden and the bookcases into liquor cabinets. The most aristocratic member of the community, elderly Miss
Iona Flowers, is also a figure of fun, dressing in out-of-date clothes and writing her newspaper society columns to suggest how she thinks social events should have transpired. Because of her family’s reputation and former wealth, however, her eccentricies are indulged, reflecting Stanley’s observation on the power of economic resources to buy acceptance (354).

As a Southern town in the late 1960s, Speed is experiencing numerous social and economic changes. The Pitts, Cartwrights, and Dubious have, by luck or hard work, moved into the middle class, a transition that is not necessarily smooth. The African-American students at Speed Junior College have recently organized into a student group and filed a housing suit so that one of their members can move into a new complex off-campus. Miss Iona bemoans the “vulgarization” caused by the increasing number of billboards and commercialization. Some disagree with Miss Iona; when Warner warns that hiring an outside organization, the White Company, to manage the Sesquicentennial will “commercialize the whole thing” (25), Higgins responds, “Well, now Lloyd, that’s more or less what I had in mind” (26). These social and economic shifts make mobility possible but also complicate relationships and social patterns.

The frame story is the Sesquicentennial, an exciting and typically small town celebration that includes preliminary events like a downtown sidewalk sale and Kangaroo Court, as well as a highly contested Queen competition. During the preparations, a mysterious “Avenger” begins writing letters threatening to disrupt the event. Some community members erroneously believe that the African-American college students with a pending housing suit are responsible, leading to some local posturing. A fire does destroy the pageant stage during the performance, but is set by a pyromaniac white teenager. Afterwards, the newspaper editor finds letters left by his Miss Iona, who confesses to writing the letters because she felt the
pageant was inelegant. Townspeople assume that she also set the fire and think the mystery is solved.

Despite these exciting events, however, the focus of the novel is not the Sesquicentennial. In a pattern she repeats throughout her career, Smith uses this event to provide a framework for exploring the stories and relationships of her characters. *Fancy Strut* relates the tales of characters at a cross-roads in their lives; though they share residency in Speed, Alabama, and participation in the Sesquicentennial, some meet only casually if at all, divided by class and circumstance.

*Fancy Strut* follows at least a dozen characters, some with overlapping experiences. Rising middle class Bob Pitt suggests the complicated interplay of social and economic elements in fictional Speed, as well as the difficulties of social mobility that thread through Smith’s texts. Born into a working class family, Bob’s mother ran a truck stop. He “had grown up obsessed with the sense of his poverty, something his brothers and sisters didn’t have” (98). Bob worked hard at his schoolwork and after-school jobs, sacrificing his childhood and youth for financial advancement. As a teen, he developed a crush on Sandy McDaniels, but felt he was not worthy of her until he gained social and financial standing by becoming a CPA. Unfortunately, before Bob could complete his degree and work up the nerve to approach Sandy, she married another man.

Bob marries Sandy’s cousin Frances: “by that time Bob was consumed with ambition and needed a wife who would help him get ahead” (101). Frances’ habits of thrift and hard work and her connections make her acceptable to Bob. “Her father was from the county but he owned acres of rich, black land. Bob needed land in his background” (101). Bob realizes that to get ahead, he must accumulate wealth, but he also must develop ties to the historical
source of wealth in the South, land ownership. Without it, his wealth is tainted; even though none of the successful men in town actually work the land, Bob believes a historical connection to property is important for status. Furthermore, the connection to a good family is vital to local credibility. Bob marries Frances to connect himself with land and family reputation because occupational status and money alone will not allow him to continue up the local social ladder.

As Bob becomes successful, however, he questions the price he has paid. Bob begins to actively sabotage himself by having an affair with Sandy, which could ruin his local reputation. Ironically, this attempt at social self-destruction only makes Bob more successful because it causes him to act more seriously, suggesting that he “had a good head on his shoulders” (103).

This turn of events indicates another element in Speed’s social structure: the civic/social aspect. The mark of success in Speed is inclusion in the daily camaraderie in the El Rondo Motor Hotel coffee shop: “no man of real substance in Speed could afford to bypass the El Rondo” (20). Bob is eventually summoned to the Rondo by the Mayor to serve on the Sesquicentennial committee and believes that this “meant that he had finally arrived, socially as well as financially, in Speed” (105). Though Bob was actually chosen for his hard-working nature, Bob is correct that civic-mindedness as an important aspect of status in Speed.

While Bob’s business improves during the Sesquicentennial preparations, he becomes increasingly dissatisfied with his life and decides to leave. When he tells Frances of his affair and plans to leave their marriage, Frances seems somehow “satisfied:”

“Everybody said I was marrying beneath me, all along, and they was all right. I guess blood will tell in the end. Having affairs,” she hissed. “Sneaking around. Doing adultery . . . That’s just like trash,” she said (303).
Despite his financial and social success, Bob’s wife ascribes his behavior to his class origins. While Frances is an unpopular woman in Speed, she is doubtlessly not alone in her judgment.

Smith’s later characters often reject community sanctions on rebellious behavior. Ivy Rowe in *Fair and Tender Ladies* refuses to accept that sexual activity has “ruint” her (R. Smith 150-151, et. al), just as Katie Cocker in *The Devil’s Dream* is hesitant to judge her own sexual behavior, though she realizes it is not socially acceptable (Wesley 288). While characters of all classes violate social mores, including the upper-middle class Monica of *Fancy Strut*, these transgressions are expected or forgiven partly based on a character’s class background. Smith affirms those who chose their own paths, but her fictional communities at times label violations as “trashy,” associating behavior with class status.

Bob’s difficulty finding happiness with his success is reflected in Smith’s Appalachian works, as characters who become emotionally separated from their mountain community find themselves spiritually bereft (Wesley 100; et al.). Smith believes that mountain residents who become financially successful must find ways to hang onto “parts of their pasts. Because I think if they give them [their pasts] up entirely, they can often become very rootless and lost in a certain way” (Appendix 348). However, in this early text, Smith suggests that it is not just separation from mountain culture, but the difficulty in adapting to a new status, the feelings of unworthiness, and the shallowness of such goals, that contribute to despair.

*Fancy Strut* forecasts a number of elements that are integral to Smith’s later fictional approach, such as the use of multiple narrators and the contradictions involved in class mobility. The status markers of family reputation, land ownership, civic/social participation, and personal behavior are all part of the social equation in Speed, Alabama, and all appear, in
varying combinations, in Smith’s later mountain fiction. While the relative value of these markers alters with the year and place of the setting, these elements recur in various permutations in Smith’s work, socially placing her characters and shaping their life chances.

**Transition to Appalachia—Black Mountain Breakdown**

After these first three novels failed to bring a profit, Smith was unable to find a publisher for her next book. Though she published a number of short stories in the interim, it was eight years before Smith was able to publish a novel. In 1980, Smith was introduced to editor Faith Sale and embarked on the second phase of her literary career with Putnam and the publication of *Black Mountain Breakdown*.

*Black Mountain Breakdown* marks Smith’s first serious work with her signature setting of Appalachia and the only novel Smith has written with a conscious theme (Byrd 100). The story of beautiful Crystal Spangler’s descent into emotional and physical paralysis illustrates the danger of passivity (Stanley 346). Crystal allows others to dictate her life, seeing herself only in their reflected praise. Despite her startling beauty, quick mind, and social acumen, Crystal’s life becomes a hungry search for others who will define her (Hill 81). Many men, including her father, high school beau Roger Lee, proselytizing evangelist Jubal Thacker, and bohemian poet Jerold Kukafka, attempt to oblige, but since no provided role can substitute for an authentic self, she remains emotionally fragile. Eventually, the recovered memory of her rape by a mentally challenged uncle focuses Crystal’s sense of victimization, and she retreats into catatonia at the novel’s end. The text states that “Crystal paralyzes herself,” indicating that she makes a willful choice to surrender rather than fight (Byrd 218).
While relating Crystal’s tragic story, *Black Mountain Breakdown* provides the first full-length examination of the Southern Mountain Region in Smith’s work; Smith regards the treatment of the region in this text as more powerful than the main plot following Crystal (R. Smith 71). The exploration of the social and economic dynamics of Black Rock provides a decidedly Appalachian spin on Smith’s previous depictions of small towns. Smith wrote the book partially “with the idea of capturing the flavor of growing up in this certain time and place” (Arnold 346): her hometown, Grundy, Virginia. However, just as *Fancy Strut* focuses primarily on middle and upper class characters, *Black Mountain Breakdown* centers on the life of socially prominent characters (Stanley 316). While the effects of the coal-mining industry pervade the novel, the focus is on the owners, operators, and townspeople, not the miners.

Like Speed, Black Rock in the beginning of the novel is a small Southern town on the cusp of change in the 1960s. The town is primarily composed of small businessmen and professionals; until the coal boom of the 1970s, no rising upper middle class exists. The fading aristocracy of the book are Crystal’s great-aunts, Nora and Grace, who live in a ramshackle mine owner’s house in the nearby hills. The working class has a peripheral but increasingly important presence in the text, with holler character Mack Stiltner offering Crystal a healthier romantic relationship than she finds in her own strata. Since Crystal is first a teenager and later teaches, small town school life often is the focus. Double-dating, football games, dances, 4–H, club events, and church and family gatherings are the main sources of social activity. Crystal’s beauty, sweetness, and family background are her main social resources. As in *Fancy Strut*, “town” characters are merchants or professionals, while “holler” characters are generally working class and socially distinct from those who live in town.
The marriage of Crystal’s parents suggests some of the local class status markers and their fluctuating value. Crystal’s father, Grant Spangler, was the son and heir of a local coal mine owner. Her mother, Lorene Sykes, was the daughter of a junk dealer who became a successful car salesman; though she genuinely loved Grant, Lorene married him partly because he was “a Spangler,” a member of a locally powerful family. Lorene’s father patented a rivet that provides dividends for his descendants, which is fortunate since the Spanglers’ mining operation failed. Coupled with Grant’s depression and genteel alcoholism, this makes Lorene’s marriage less financially and socially rewarding than anticipated. Lorene’s rising middle class hustle, primarily manifested in her business acumen and social plans for Crystal, contrasts noticeably with her husband’s aristocratic lassitude, and the two grow apart as Grant slowly drinks himself to death.

Grant’s family came to local prominence through the efforts and luck of his father, Iradell Spangler. Grant’s father had made a fortune with the Little Emma Mining Company, named for his Baltimore-born wife; however, he “wouldn’t let the union in and wouldn’t modernize his mine” (27), leading to the company’s ruin after his death. Only a few empty shacks and the owner’s house, now occupied by Crystal’s unmarried great-aunts and mentally challenged uncle, stand as reminders of the company town that once was. Iradell’s illegitimate son Odell has “sold the machinery and scrapped the company store and most of the houses for lumber” (27). The narrative never indicates what happened to the miners.

Crystal’s great-aunts Nora and Grace and Uncle Devere have descended financially since the mine closed. Born in Baltimore, Nora and Grace were orphans trained as schoolteachers. When their sister Emma came to the mountains as a missionary/teacher and married Iradell, they joined the couple and never left, raising Emma’s children after she died.
in childbirth. After Emma’s death, much to Nora’s fury, Iradell cohabitated with Mae Peacock, a rural woman he never married despite their three children. Iradell honored his dead wife by importing a Greek columned temple to mark her grave; after Mae Peacock died, however, he sent her body back to her kin, refusing to place her near Emma. Though his Baltimore wife was a poor orphan, Iradell clearly regarded the cultured, educated outsider as superior to his rural mistress, illustrating the longevity of the local insider/outsider class division.

During one visit to Grace and Nora’s in the mountains, fourteen-year-old Crystal is raped by her mentally challenged Uncle Devere and represses the memory of the attack. Returning home the next day, Crystal finds Grant dead. The combination of these events and Crystal’s innate passivity shape her character, creating complimentary inclinations towards rebellion and acquiescence, flight and paralysis.

A startling beautiful girl, teenage Crystal is the picture of high school social success, becoming a cheerleader, dating the football quarterback, and even winning the Miss Black Rock High pageant; she fulfills her mother’s hopes that she will use her beauty to gain status (Wesley 153). However, her mother senses that something is amiss when Crystal calmly breaks up with quarterback Roger Lee for no discernible reason. Crystal begins dating indiscriminately and becomes promiscuous, though her “sweet” behavior makes people discredit doubts about her chastity. Crystal breaks the local taboo against “town kids” dating those from the “holler” by becoming involved with Mack Stiltner, an orphan with a bad reputation who lives in a cement block house with his uncle. Mack is actually a sensitive musician who cares for Crystal, though she cannot decide if she is “slumming” or not. When Mack confronts her about their future, the exchange is revealing:
“Whether you know it or whether you don’t, we’re two of a kind, baby, we’re just alike, you and me,” Mack’s voice is flat and nasal, country.

Crystal draws back from it. “We are not,” she says. (102-103)

Crystal balks not just at Mack’s words but at his tone and accent, which indicate his holler status. The relationship fails because Crystal cannot move beyond her class-based view of Mack (Stanley 338), and he leaves town for Nashville.

Eventually, at Lorene’s instigation, Crystal attends college; instead of joining a sorority and marrying a doctor, however, Crystal majors in English and begins looking like “some kind of beatnik” (152). One Thanksgiving, she berates her veteran brother for his military service in front of his Vietnamese wife. Crystal’s brief alignment with the bohemian culture in the late sixties is not surprising for a college student; in fact, it suggests that she is accumulating the cultural capital available to her on campus at that time, though she neglects the social capital Lorene had hoped she would acquire.

Unfortunately, Crystal does not absorb the culture of the intellectual elite; she simply copies the taste and social practices of the people—specifically the men—around her, a habit that she has carried throughout life (Wesley 157). After college, she pursues a Master’s Degree and lives with Jerold Kukafa, a brooding bohemian who eventually commits suicide. Of indeterminate ethnic ancestry, Jerold is a cultural other whose artistic and educational capital place him firmly in the counter-culture of the sixties. Jerold’s intensity and wildness draw Crystal to him, just as Mack Stilner’s difference attracted her, though Jerold is ultimately a poorer artist than the successful country music singer, both literally and figuratively. His short story, “The Puppy,” is repeatedly rejected because editors want two conventions Jerold feels he has outgrown: plot and narrative. Crystal reflects on Jerold’s art with amusement but is haunted by his prophesy that she is as doomed as he. Though Jerold
sees himself as an original, the text suggests that his attempt to fashion himself into the beat poet stereotype is as false and ultimately as destructive as Crystal’s attempts to mold herself into ill-fitting roles. The counter-cultural artistic elite is not presented as freeing but as yet another status-based role that stifles individuality and wholeness.

After her lover’s death, Crystal is briefly hospitalized and then returns to Black Rock, finding it changed by the 1970s coal boom: “the new prosperity has touched everyone” (175). Some have bought Cadillacs, others purchased islands, a new country club is opening, and one local man has even been profiled by Charles Kuralt. Lorene and Odell Peacock have profited by cagily managing their inherited Spangler property, largely thanks to Odell’s anticipation of the energy shortage. Impressed with his business skill, Lorene has re-evaluated working class Odell and embarked on a romantic relationship with him, quietly changing his wardrobe and manner to fit into town/middle class culture.

However, working class Odell only has benefitted from the boom because he inherited property as Iradell’s son; no one named as profiting from the boom works in the mines. Crystal later acknowledges that “some people she knew are not successful: Pearl Deskins [a holler friend from high school] was arrested recently for shoplifting at the Ben Franklin” (196). The observation about Pearl immediately follows Crystal’s discovery that Mack Stiltner has become a country music star. Pearl and Mack, the only working class characters to receive significant attention in the book, are silenced; the only working class characters who remain, like Odell, have grown wealthy in the coal boom (Stanley 341-2).

While family reputation and land ownership are important resources in this text, social participation also matters, as it did for Bob Pitt in Fancy Strut. When Crystal returns to Black Rock after her lover’s suicide, she becomes a teacher, a job she thoroughly enjoys. However,
when Crystal’s now wealthy and mature ex-beau Roger Lee craftily manipulates her fears and bullies her about becoming an old maid, she agrees to marry him. Roger Lee leaves his wife and twin daughters for Crystal, giving his wife the biggest alimony settlement anyone in town ever heard of. After this scandal, Roger Lee and Crystal re-establish their reputations through their civic/social participation. The two disappear from the local social radar until local gossip dies down. They marry and, after a year, begin appearing almost weekly in a nearby town’s society column. Details of their trips to Jamaica, of Crystal hosting intimate luncheons, even of her heading “the Heart Fund,” stress the couple’s tasteful extravagance, social connections, and charitable benevolence, all desirable characteristics of the rising elite. Crystal and Roger Lee’s social success soothes Black Rock’s outrage over their affair and elopement (Stanley 307-8).

In Black Rock, money, family reputation, social participation, and behavior indicate social status. However, these markers are not absolute and can be circumvented by the substitution of other kinds of capital. While working class characters could earn their reputations back after moral lapses with good deeds, Crystal and Roger Lee simply buy theirs. Like other Smith characters who transgress, they purchase their social survival (Stanley 351).

In the final section of the novel, Crystal periodically reads from a journal written by her Baltimore grandmother as a child. Like Mack, the journal offers Crystal a potential healing connection. However, the excerpts depict scenes suggestive of an antebellum plantation rather than mountain past. Stanley points out that these brief scenes link social class attitudes in the mountains and the larger South (318). Though Emma becomes a poor orphan, the connection of her early life to plantation scenes and the implication that this provides a nourishing past for Crystal hints at continuities between the Appalachian and
Southern class system. While Cynthia Howells perceptively argues that the cavalier attitude is less pronounced in the mountains than in the rest of the South (115), Crystal’s affinity with the journal indicates that Smith is depicting the South and Appalachia not as opposites but as complementary structures.

Status does not buy happiness, however. Crystal is pampered by her life with Roger Lee but feels emotionally displaced and refuses to have children because life seems precarious. During a political campaign tour of a psychiatric facility, an encounter with a mentally disturbed man causes her to recall her rape and begin to disengage from the world. Crystal leaves Roger Lee, returns to Black Rock, and becomes catatonic herself, existing as a vegetable in her childhood room. Unable to assert herself, she becomes immobile, though she retains her beauty.

_The Last Day the Dogbushes Bloomed_ and _Something in the Wind_ focus on the lives of upper middle class girls and _Fancy Strut_ deals primarily with the prominent characters in a small town. In _Black Mountain Breakdown_, Stanley argues that Smith’s lack of narrative attention and complexity in depicting working class individuals amounts to an “ornamental” appropriation of them (316). The novel does marginalize working class characters, just as Smith’s town protagonists do; their attention in the novel replicates their position in the mountain social hierarchy. However, Smith also posits rural culture, which is invariably working class, as a valuable source of insight personified in the tough and perceptive Mack Stiltner (“The Female Imagination” 61). Her later texts give working class/rural characters progressively more central roles, especially as Smith becomes more intent on rural or holler settings.
Significantly, this shift parallels Smith’s growing interest in the mountains as a setting. Anne Goodwyn Jones observes that Smith began with the mountains as a fringe in *The Last Day the Dogbushes Bloomed*, banished them for *Something in the Wind* and *Fancy Strut*, and then began focusing increasingly on the mountains as a setting with *Black Mountain Breakdown* (266). Smith is consistently interested “in the rough edges at the margins of society where individual freedom is possible” (Hill 18). Smith’s increased use of working class characters as she focuses on a mountain setting indicates both her recognition of the lower social and economic status these characters hold, and a gradually emerging rural bias in her work.

**Varieties of Mountain Towns**

Black Rock resembles Speed in its social structure, particularly in its attention to money, land (or mine) ownership, family status, and social participation. However, the additional stress of the town/holler division and the status of coal as the primary industry shift the focus towards a more distinctly mountain aesthetic. Additionally, in *Fancy Strut*, the social classes are relatively equally valuable in eyes of the narrative, each with their own foibles and advantages; Monica Neighbors is not inherently superior or inferior to any of her neighbors. In *Black Mountain Breakdown*, however, the text hints that working class Mack Stiltner has the wisdom and perceptiveness to help Crystal deal with life more effectively. While he is not the only potential source of empowerment for her (teaching is another promising source of escape from passivity), Smith begins suggesting here that the rural perspective may have something meaningful to offer her more economically privileged and sophisticated characters.
Black Rock is one of Smith’s non-company mining towns. Though mining is the primary local industry, the Black Rock of the novel is not owned by one company and seems to have developed independently, though the nearby Little Emma Mine company town may have influenced local class structure. Much has been written about company coal towns or coal camps, created to provide a labor force for remote coal mines, and with good reason; at the height of the coal boom in the early twentieth century, over seventy-five percent of West Virginia’s miners and two-thirds of those in eastern Kentucky and southwest Virginia lived in company towns. According to Eller, “At that time, there were almost five hundred company towns in the southern Appalachian coal fields, but less than one hundred independent incorporated towns” (162-163); Shifflett agrees that there were five hundred company towns in 1925 (35). Because the companies not only owned the mines but the houses and often communal buildings like the post office, store, and schools, they could wield extensive power over local stratification.

While Smith’s fiction includes coal company towns, it also features other town structures of the Southern Mountain Region. In non-company towns and county seats, though mine owners had more power than miners and often controlled any coal camps, company power was less pervasive and social life was less rigidly stratified. Smith’s fiction devotes more time to relatively independent coal and lumber towns in Appalachia than to the company towns, perhaps because the Grundy of her 1950s childhood was a non-company town. Smith elaborates on this point in a 2000 interview conducted for this dissertation:

Colley: So Grundy was a coal-mining town but it wasn’t a company town?

Smith: That’s right. It wasn’t just owned by one company. In the company towns, there’s only one store, that’s the company store. And miners would get paid in script and spend it, and oftentimes they would spend more than they would make. It’s like the Johnny Cash song, “owed my soul to the company store.” But in a[n independent]
town, there would be independent merchants and so forth, with many of the coal company towns around it, and then also independent mines, people mining on a very small scale. The independent miners were often doing what they called truck mining and strip mining, where instead of going down you just strip off. That can be done less expensively than deep shaft mining. There were all kinds of mining going on around the town; most all the jobs were from mining except for people like teachers and doctors.

Colley: It sounds like people in towns like Grundy might have a little more control over things than people in the company towns.

Smith: That’s right. And there’s also a real fatalism that attaches to mining towns because people die so often. They’re hurt so often; there’s something about it that’s a somber underpinning. And I think that’s certainly true in the real company towns, but that’s also true in towns that derive all their business from that clientele. (Appendix 344-345)

This interview suggests both the prevalence and the range of coal-mining operations in Smith’s Appalachia. In addition to the coal company towns or coal camps, less-structured independent towns exist separately as well as near coal camps, both active and mined-out. Some of Smith’s independent towns preceded the coal camps, their growth coinciding with industrialization; others evolved alongside lumber or mining operations or quietly grew after company towns were abandoned. A continuity of status markers exists between these towns, though the power of those markers fluctuates with the different economic and social relationships.

The contrast between an independent and a coal company town can be demonstrated by briefly comparing two towns in Smith’s 1988 novel, *Fair and Tender Ladies*. The epistolatory novel tells the story of Ivy Rowe, a young girl raised in a holler in southwest Virginia in the early twentieth century. Though she adores her family’s mountain farm and eventually returns there to raise her own children, teenage Ivy moves with her family to the nearby boomtown of Majestic after her father and brother’s deaths make it impossible to scratch a living from the farm. Majestic’s economy includes both lumber and coal operations,
and outsiders and mountaineers pour into the community, searching for investment and job opportunities. For a time, Ivy delights in becoming a “town girl”; working in a family friend’s boarding house, she meets travelers from other areas of the country, has leisure to attend the local Methodist school, and has her first romance with a young lumber mill worker. In the growing town, with a variety of economic opportunities, people travel in and out of the mountains with relative ease, and, while life is not easy, it is exciting and promising.

Within a couple of years, however, Ivy’s mother dies. Ivy has discovered that she is pregnant by her beau, who is fighting overseas in World War I, and family friends encourage the unmarried girl to move out of town. Ivy goes to live with her sister in Diamond, Virginia, a company coal town set farther back in the mountains. Her brother-in-law is a clerk in the company store, an easier and more prestigious job than mining. Since his job is moderately important, the family has a nice house on Company Hill; mining officials live in spacious homes near the top, while unskilled workers have smaller houses at the base. Though Ivy at first enjoys the amenities and services provided, she quickly discovers the drawbacks of a company town. When the mining industry slumps, the entire community suffers, with miners laid off and the company cutting back on services. Ivy becomes uneasy as desperate men loiter, having no employment options because of the single company’s dominance. Drinking, gambling, and other “trashy” behavior become common. “I thought I was coming over here to raise my baby on this mountain like we were raised,” Ivy writes, “but it is not so” (156).

Majestic and Diamond are extreme examples of the county seat boomtown and the company town; as a boomtown, Majestic has perhaps the loosest possible social structure, while the carefully organized Diamond illustrates tightly controlled paternalism. Majestic’s economic diversification and rapid growth initially allow local residents of all classes more
play within the volatile social system. The town is not immune from the same economic
downturns as Diamond; in fact, a mature Ivy later laments that in the 1960s “you can walk the
streets of Majestic now on a Saturday and not find hardly a one between high school age and
old, unless they are out of work” (297). The dependence of the entire region on coal mining
means that both company and independent towns share similar fates when product demand
changes. Over time, independent towns develop internal social structures, such as the
town/holler division, that can be just as restrictive as those imposed by the company towns;
similarly, most mining companies phased out paternalistic company towns and their overtly
enforced stratification by the 1950s, though the structuring patterns linger. However, on a
continuum of strict versus loose stratification, in Smith’s work, independent towns like
Majestic typically have more employment options and more opportunities for social mobility
and informal mixing than the true company towns. Independent and county seat towns are the
norm in Smith’s work, offering a counterpoint to the limiting world of the well-known
company town.

**The Growth of an Independent Town.**

Just as Black Rock in Smith’s fourth novel, *Black Mountain Breakdown*, is a non-
company coal town, her fifth novel, *Oral History* also features a similar town, named not
coincidentally, Black Rock (A. Jones 256). Though the latter book focuses primarily on a
holler family, the Cantrells, the novel provides glimpses into the evolution of Black Rock
from frontier days to the mid-twentieth century.

*Oral History*’s descriptions of town development resonate with Mary Beth Pudup’s
study of settlement patterns in Appalachian Kentucky, a coal-mining region adjoining Smith’s
identifies the county seat town as a common, though less prevalent, settlement pattern than the subsistence farm or company coal town. During pre-industrial times, county seat towns bustled on court days but were otherwise sparsely populated; rural Kentuckians had little need for developed towns, instead relying on individual community stores for mail and trade (283). When industrialization came to the mountains, county seats attracted investors partly because of their access to the legal mechanisms for land transactions (289-290). Local elites, descended from early settlers and frequently major landowners, often lived in county seat towns, putting them in a position to benefit from industrialization (Eller 11-12). The growing populations in these towns required newer and better services, making diverse occupations possible. By “[e]arly in the twentieth century, mountain county seats assumed most of the internal geography that remains intact today” (Pudup 291): a business district near the courthouse and residential areas distinguished by social class. While not all county seats flourished, their growth, spurred by the coal-mining industry, helped create a residential elite in Appalachian Kentucky.

While there are differences between coal-mining Kentucky and Smith’s Virginia, the similarities in Pudup’s description and town growth in *Oral History* are instructive. *Oral History* tells the multi-generational story of the Cantrells, residents of Hoot Owl Holler in southwestern Virginia. The family is haunted by a supposed curse placed on the beautiful women in the family after patriarch Almarine spurns his alleged witch/lover, Red Emmy, and marries young Pricey Jane. Smith uses the vehicle of this family saga to chronicle the changes that the mountain community experiences through a hundred years of settlement, industrialization, and modernization, and the loss of land and culture that this process caused (Hill 102). Over the years, class and status distinctions between rural, town, and outsider
characters, particularly in the nearby county seat of Black Rock, become more pronounced and cause what were once ordinary practices to indicate social position and stratification.

The rural community is comprised of three mountains—Hoot Owl, Hurricane and Snowman. When the story begins in the late nineteenth century, each mountain has a different number of settlers. Hoot Owl is the most isolated and forbidding; Hurricane is fairly well populated; and Snowman even includes “foreigners come in with the lumber trade,” most likely connected with the lumber company in Roseann on the other side of the mountain. The county seat of Black Rock, which local folk healer and storyteller Granny Younger designates as “town,” is on the far side of nearby Black Mountain. Included in the mountain community is Joe Johnson’s store at Tug, where residents can find “store-bought” items, get mail, and socialize without having to travel to “town.”

The novel begins in the late nineteenth century with handsome Almarine Cantrell, the only surviving son in his family, inheriting the beautiful but forbidding Hoot Owl Holler. Local healer Granny Younger advises the young man to find a bride, and Almarine tries to follow her suggestion. First he courts Nancy Wiley, a pretty girl from Hurricane; when he learns that her family expects to live with them, Almarine reconsiders and avoids this heavy kinship responsibility. Next, he courts “a town girl” from Black Rock who he followed home from the five-and-dime in town. Her family “put on airs,” but Almarine likes her; “For all his size and his land, remember, Almarine was nought but a country boy, come to town to court” (31), says Granny Younger. Difficulties caused by a jealous sister lead him to abandon the romance. There is no indication that the town girl saw Almarine as an unacceptable marriage partner, but narrator Granny Younger is careful to acknowledge an already existent division between holler and town.
Eventually, Almarine has a passionate affair with Red Emmy, the suspected witch, whom he abandons under community pressure. He makes a more socially acceptable match with a pretty orphan girl passing through Black Rock with her extended family. Almarine trades a mule to Pricey Jane’s uncle for the teenager, an action that amuses the rural community but which scandalizes Lucille Aston, the local judge’s sister from Richmond. According to Granny Younger, in addition to caring for her ill brother, Miss Aston “puts on airs all over Black Rock, and she would up and die rathern set one foot in the hollers” (53). Financially secure, she hires local women to help her clean and wears feathered hats around town. Though the community sees her as a figure of fun, Miss Aston has some power because she convinces Almarine to marry Pricey Jane. While the mountain community generally accepts unions that are formalized whenever the circuit rider comes (“It’s nothing but words, what I say,” says Granny Younger), Miss Aston cannot. Almarine acquiesces to Miss Aston’s request to humor her and because it suits him, but he does submit to her direction. While the town perspective is here given little significant power, this incident reveals a town/outsider attitude that disapproves of rural practices and will gain strength as the town grows more powerful locally.

When Richmonder Richard Burlage comes to the community to teach school in the mid-1920s, Black Rock has grown and assumed a more influential role. Through Burlage’s upper class eyes, Black Rock appears as “an idealized kind of town” (108), with a main street, two churches, a courthouse, and a river full of logs, indicating a burgeoning local timber industry. However, though the timber industry is evident both in Burlage’s description and in Granny Younger’s story from two decades earlier, in neither instance does the industry dominate the community. Johnson’s store in Tug still exists and Burlage’s elementary school
is a short walk from it into the hills, but the presence of the courthouse and local high school in Black Rock make it still “town.”

When in town, Burlage resides in the Smith Hotel, run by Justine Poole. Burlage regards this boarding house as sub par but uses it as a weekend retreat from his rustic life in the hills. During the week, Burlage lives in his schoolhouse rather than boarding with his students’ parents, as is the local custom, because he finds the food and accommodations provided unappealing. Though Burlage has come to the mountains seeking faith and a simpler life, this Richmond aristocrat has predictable difficulty adapting to life in the hills. While town life is clearly inferior to the outside in terms of the standard of living, it is far superior to that of the holler.

During one stay in Black Rock, Burlage joins several other hotel residents at “the new movie house.” The party includes “three drummers from out of town, an unscrupulous land speculator who goes about the country buying up mineral rights with something he calls a ‘broadform’ deed, a lawyer from Claypool Hill [the next town down the railroad] here to settle a will, and yours truly. We were a disparate crew” (147). All of these individuals are “foreigners” or people born outside the county, as are a number of town residents. The growing county seat is gaining a more complex population than the nearby mountains, even if the visitors do not stay for extended periods. The connections of many town residents to life outside the mountains, as well as improved access to the outside, undoubtedly contribute to the distanced attitude town residents often adopt towards their rural neighbors.

When Burlage becomes enamored of a young mountain girl, the beautiful and bright Dory Cantrell of Hoot Owl Holler, as the teacher of her brother and a representative of the privileged outside culture (Hobson 32), Burlage “understood my position and my
responsibility” (128); as privileged outside teacher, he cannot in good conscience become romantically involved with her. Despite or perhaps partially because of this “understanding,” Burlage is attracted to the young woman and struggles with his feelings. Tellingly, when he lists reasons not to pursue Dory, his first item is, “She is not of the same social class” (134).

Inevitably, Burlage and Dory embark on a short-lived but intensely passionate relationship that breaks local taboos and marks both for life. Burlage initially came to the mountains seeking meaning and patronizingly regards “the hinterland” as desperately in need of service from wealthy, educated men such as himself. While Dory does not regard Burlage as her superior, she sees him as a way out of the mountains (A. Jones 16) and repeatedly asks him to describe how they will leave together on the train. Unfortunately for her, Burlage never fully commits to the relationship. During their tryst in the schoolhouse over Christmas break, Burlage reflects that he knows “of course it cannot last. A knowledge rendered more poignant still by her ignorance of it” (157). For all his feelings for Dory, Burlage never sees her as a potential wife nor tries to communicate this fact to her. As an outsider, he views the poorer, less educated, rural mountaineers, even his darling Dory, as lower class; therefore, he does not take Dory seriously and “slums” a bit, though he does not admit to himself that is what he is doing. Burlage is eventually spirited out of the mountains by the town characters who feel that this ending is “better at least for the boy” (184). Dory is left in the mountains, pining for Burlage and the larger world, pregnant with his twin daughters.

When Burlage revisits Black Rock during the Depression, the area has not fared well. Smith Hotel proprietor Justine Poole parrots the conventional wisdom that those in the mountains are not aware of the Depression because they were already poor, but acknowledges that Black Rock has faced difficulties since the banks closed and income has dwindled. At
Tug, the store remains but is still an isolated rural mercantile; Black Rock has boomed and busted. Burlage notes in Black Rock the presence of hungry-looking women and children, and men at loose ends. The Blakely Coal Camp, built in Granny Younger’s nearby holler, is enduring tough times; a local miner, thinking Burlage is with the WPA, tells of union agitation and foraging for wild greens. Living in the coal camp, or company town, though potentially a source of greater income during flush times than life in the mountains, seems to be less socially and economically advantageous than living in Black Rock. However, all suffer because the entire community’s economic welfare has become connected to coal mining. While Black Rock has more freedom and wealth than the company town, its financial health is affected by the economic success of local mining operations. Taking a picture of Dory’s house in the coal camp, Burlage unknowingly photographs his daughters in the front yard, then speeds out of town, trying to escape the memories he knows will trail him.

For her part, Dory Cantrell never gets over her dreams of Burlage and a larger world. Though she marries a local boy and has several more children, Dory eventually commits suicide by laying her head on the train tracks she once hoped would take her away. Because tourists continually drive through the coal camp looking for the house of the woman who put her head under a train, Dory’s family eventually must move into the Cantrell home place with Dory’s cousin, Ora Mae. The escape to the mountains is spurred by tragic circumstances, but the family is fortunate to have kin and land to return to, thus sparing them the worst effects of the coal bust. Therefore, while the family farm provides a psychic base and local identity for the Cantrells, it also offers an economic bailout when the company town’s economy fails.

Land ownership has been considered an integral part of the Appalachian myth since Mary Noailles Murfree created her first homey cabin in the hills. Cratis Williams argues that
the poorer mountaineer’s ownership of land, as well as his distance from plantation slavery, shielded him from many of the supposed failings of the Southern poor white (193).

Campbell’s third and less honorable class of mountain residents, the branchwater mountaineers, are primarily distinguished by their lack of land ownership (87); he suggests that this group is actually much smaller than the second, propertied group (86). However, according to Wilma Dunaway, absentee ownership has characterized Appalachia since its settlement; by 1860, half of the population of the southern Appalachians remained landless, while absentee speculators and local elites accumulated huge tracts, often holding out for higher prices than most farmers could afford. “Consequently,” she states, “land provided the economic basis for the structuring of a polarized Appalachian society” (67-68).

In the late nineteenth century, outside capitalists began focusing on Appalachia as a source of timber and mineral wealth. Assisted by local elites and a favorable legal climate (Eller 12; Shifflett 5; Duncan 12; Lewis 87), timber and coal companies acquired extensive property through a variety of methods, including direct purchase and “creative” acquisitions. Local elites both profited from their own land deals (Lewis 87) and assisted outside industry (Eller 234-235). Company towns, created to provide labor for isolated mines, were owned by the companies, at first out of practicality but later to help control workers and discourage unionism (Banks 338; 340). Though company towns were discontinued by the 1950s, many coal companies maintain extensive holdings in the region and may use control of local property to limit dissent (Gaventa 215). The ownership of key local resources by outsiders with little stake in the community besides profit has contributed significantly to the region’s economic difficulties.
The Appalachian Regional Commission’s 1980 *Appalachian Land Ownership Study, Volume VI: Virginia* confirms what Appalachian scholars had known for years: “The major coal-producing counties [in Virginia] (Buchanan, Dickenson, and Wise) are characterized by extensive absentee corporate ownership of surface land and mineral wealth with relatively little private local ownership” (77). Because Virginia minerals and mineral lands also are under-assessed, major corporate property owners pay only a fraction of total county revenues, though they own 45 percent of the county surface area and 65 percent of the privately held mineral lands. The result is a lack of local funding for schools, infrastructure, and services, with state and federal government subsidizing the coal company’s share (“Land Ownership and Coal Productivity” 115). High percentages of absentee ownership correspond with low county socio-economic indicators, decreasing farmland, and housing shortages; the coal-producing counties in Virginia reportedly had the state’s highest percentage of absentee ownership.

A variety of influential scholars have argued that outsider companies’ appropriation of timber and mineral resources and denigration of mountain culture amounts to colonialism.³ Beginning in the 1970s, proponents of the internal colonialism theory suggested that poverty in Appalachia stemmed not from its relative isolation or unique culture but from its exploitation by the larger nation. Furthermore, the systematic denigration of Appalachian culture by outsiders is identified as a way of legitimizing economic domination, and the persistence of mountain cultural patterns as a form of resistance (Billings, Pudup and Waller 6). Internal colonialism provides a perceptive framework to discuss the real oppression and

³ See Helen Lewis, Linda Johnson, and Don Askins’s classic text, *Colonialism in Modern America: the Appalachian Case*, for the most widely recognized discussion of the internal colonialism theory of Appalachia.
hardship caused by absentee ownership and economic exploitation in the mountains. Many far-reaching studies favor this approach, including Henry Caudill’s *Night Comes to the Cumberlands*, Gaventa’s *Power and Powerlessness*, Ronald Eller’s *Miners, Millhands and Mountaineers*, and the report *Who Owns Appalachia?*

Despite its insightful premise, the internal colonialism model needs qualification. In his discussion of West Virginia, Ronald Lewis observes that the stereotypical colonial model of outsiders stealing land from mountaineers forgets that most mountaineers did not have land in the first place (85). Lewis favors a world systems approach, which regards the transition to capitalism as gradual, mingling and incorporating old and new practices as the system expands from a metropolitan core through semi-peripheral “staging areas” to peripheral sources of raw materials (47-50). Crandall Shifflett suggests that internal colonialism does not sufficiently acknowledge the role of local elites; without lenient laws and intermediaries, outsider-controlled companies could not have gained power (5). Dwight Billings and Kathleen Blee agree that internal colonialism neglects the importance of politics and native development patterns in creating Appalachian poverty (319). If used imprecisely, the model can erroneously blame all Appalachian poverty on coal-mining and absentee ownership, despite the fact that coal-mining regions such as Illinois had *higher* levels of absentee ownership than Appalachia and less economic struggle. These areas also had a more equitable local tax system and diversified economies. Additionally, some of the most oppressive and dangerous mines in the Southern Mountain Region were internally owned (13-14). ⁴ Though absentee land ownership has shaped the region’s economy, these patterns of land ownership

⁴Like Ronald Lewis, Billings and Blee favor a world systems approach in *The Road to Poverty: The Making of Wealth and Hardship in Appalachia* (2000).
began early in Appalachia’s history and reflect consistent local social tensions, as well as outside exploitation.

Smith’s work underscores the importance of land ownership in the myth of Appalachia while she acknowledges increasing outsider ownership. Land ownership is an almost universal characteristic of Smith’s protagonists, especially in text portions set in the late nineteenth/early twentieth centuries. A family home place appears in each of Smith’s Appalachian novels. Two cabins (*The Devil’s Dream’s* Cold Spring Holler cabin and *Oral History’s* Cantrell cabin) are literally haunted by family members that continue to possess them after death. Only in *Saving Grace* does the family not own the property the protagonist identifies as “home.” However, *Saving Grace’s* house on Scrabble Creek is abandoned by the true owner, a woman whose husband died there, and the family pays no rent; they are the de facto owners. Despite the fact that many mountain residents were actually squatters or tenants, Smith chooses to portray most of her mountain families as possessing beautiful home places. Therefore, her characters are more typically prosperous rural folk, or mountain middle class, rather than the landless branchwater mountaineers.

However, because farm ownership is so common in Smith’s work, simply having land does not automatically confer class or status. It is the utilization of property that creates social and economic standing. In *Black Mountain Breakdown*, the characters that benefit from the “coal boom” in the 1970s are town residents whose families retained coal-rich property, like Lorene Spangler and Odell Peacock. Many real mountaineers were robbed of the potential economic benefits of land ownership by the purchase of their mineral rights during the early twentieth century, a practice depicted in *Fair and Tender Ladies*. Coal companies secured the legal ownership and right to recover any ore on the property in question, but left the land title
(and responsibility for the taxes) in the hands of the mountaineers. Local landholders such as Ivy Rowe’s mother sold their mineral rights for paltry sums because the scheme allowed them to still own the land, because the price offered seemed high to rural farmers, and because they did not realize the damage mining would cause (Eller 54-55).

Given the difficulty of hanging onto property in the mountains, Dory Cantrell’s husband and children are indeed fortunate that the Cantrells have retained their property and can return to the farm. In the last section of *Oral History*, Smith brings the town/holler/outsider division to the late twentieth century. Pearl, one of Dory’s twins, combines her mother’s nameless longing with the pretentious ways of her father, Richard Burlage. Pearl wants life to be “pretty” and to be “in love,” to escape her childhood home just as her mother hoped. Pearl attempts to accomplish this goal by improving her class status; she gains a college education, marries a wealthy upholsterer, moves away from the mountains, and severs kinship ties, seldom contacting family members (Wesley 216). She carefully assembles her cultural, economic, and social capital in accord with town and outsider values. However, Pearl unknowingly falls into her father’s patterns (Cunningham 49); dissatisfied with her upper middle class life, she has an affair with one of her high school students, losing her job and marriage as a result. Pearl dies soon after of an eptopic pregnancy. Pearl rises socially but, like many upwardly mobile Smith characters, cannot buy peace or contentment.

Pearl is not the only contemporary character in *Oral History* to struggle with class and status issues, however. Al Cantrell, the grandson and namesake of patriarch Almarine, is an enthusiastic AmWay distributor who participates in civic organization such as the Toastmasters. When his niece Jennifer (Pearl’s daughter) comes to find her long lost family and learn about her “roots,” Al is clearly insulted that Jennifer regards him as a folk character
(S. Jones 106). Al becomes an investor/capitalist himself, using his AmWay profits to buy land, investing first in a ski run on Black Rock Mountain and later turning Hoot Owl Holler into Ghostland, a phenomenally successful Appalachian-themed amusement park. Al gains economic capital and local status through his wealth and his civic participation. However, the narrative clearly censures his sell-out of his inheritance by caricaturing Hoot Owl Holler as an amusement park. In some ways, this action only shows how successful Al truly is; he has adopted the outsider and middle class attitude towards mountain folklore (Wallace 372).

Al’s half-sister, Sally, avoids this middle class route. Sally struggled after her mother’s suicide, attending school in town but aware of her separateness as a “holler” kid. Sally briefly escapes to Florida, where she becomes pregnant, then returns home and marries a middle class man who tries to “save” her. Sally strains for respectability by attending church and civic organizations like the Home Extension Club, which she hates, but the marriage is stagnant for years. Sally eventually meets Roy, a telephone lineman, and divorces. Roy is comfortable with the working class life, turning down a promotion that would put him behind a desk for half his workday. The two relax into an existence devoid of social climbing: “We don’t want the moon” (238), she says.

The Cantrell children indicate a recurring issue in Smith’s work: the price of social mobility. Town and outsider character routinely class mountain culture in Smith’s work, as Richard Burlage and Jennifer Bingham’s actions indicate. For characters who have grown up in the hollers and therefore are associated with mountain culture in the eyes of town and outsider characters, there are several possible reactions, as critics have noted. Pearl tries to elevate herself by denying her background; Al profits by commercializing an outsiders’ “folk” approach; and Sally first adopts then forgoes the town “strain” for respectability,
preferring a working class existence that does not consciously employ mountain culture in a “folk” fashion. As chapter five of this dissertation will detail, juggling these options is difficult but possible for Smith’s characters and is crucial to their comfort with themselves and their social worlds.

Black Rock does not dominate the landscape in *Oral History*. This novel is the story of the Cantrells, who are first and foremost mountaineers. However, this summary illustrates the social divisions that recur throughout Smith’s work. While the rural community frequently retains a sense of connectedness, the town community, with stronger ties to the outside world, gradually comes to see itself as superior—a view Smith does not endorse but recognizes. This division increases as outsider mining and lumber companies begin to dominate local economies. The division is not absolute; many rural characters attempt to assume town or outsider status and many town residents maintain ties to their rural neighbors and extended families. However, an individual’s identity as an outsider, town, or holler resident typically indicates their connection to outside culture as well as their likely social class and occupation.

This connection depends in some part on the time period and social setting, however. In the early 1900s, Almarine Cantrell’s mountain farm, with its clear streams and lush acres, makes him a desirable catch, even for a town girl. However, his namesake is assumed to be working class folk by outsider Jennifer because he lives in the mountains. Rural identity gradually takes a backseat to urban within the town, even when class status markers such as land ownership are present, while outsiders regard insiders as rural, regardless of occupation, income, and lifestyle.
Boomtown

Black Rock is not the only example of a non-company town in Smith’s work. Majestic, Virginia, in *Fair and Tender Ladies* provides an intriguing snapshot of a boomtown in early in the twentieth century. Majestic reveals the fluctuating nature of class and status markers in a multiple industry town that is quickly growing and therefore socially unstable.

Majestic is the local county seat, just like Black Rock is in both *Black Mountain Breakdown* and *Oral History*. As such, Majestic serves as a busy center for trading and socializing on Court Days. When protagonist Ivy Rowe and her family move to Majestic just before World War I, the town is bustling with the influx of both lumber and coal businesses. Escaping their increasingly tough life on the mountain farm, Ivy Rowe and her family move into family friend Geneva Hunt’s boardinghouse, which fairly hums with outsiders and mountaineers searching for profits and jobs in the thriving town. The standard of living for Ivy’s family in the boomtown is superior to life on the hardscrabble farm; Ivy has her own room, which is a precious novelty for her, and the family has plenty to eat. Ivy also can attend school, both because her work in the boardinghouse provides her sufficient leisure and because access to the school is easier than on the mountain. Before long, Ivy enthusiastically identifies herself as a “town girl” (87). While the town characters likely do not see her as an equal, her options for improving her life chances have significantly increased by her residency in town. Not only does town residency confer status, it can give real opportunities for accumulating economic, social, and cultural capital.

Majestic includes merchants, a doctor, a Methodist school, churches, and a railroad that carries away the coal; lumber is transported on the nearby river. Visitors to Geneva’s boardinghouse include lawyers, ministers, and “drummers.” Officials from both the lumber
and coal industries stay at Geneva’s; “when we firstest got here we had two big shots from Detroit who own one of the coal companys I forget wich” [sic] (84), Ivy writes, indicating that no company has an exclusive hold on the town. In addition to these outsiders, mountain residents like the Rowes have come to work in the industries as both skilled and unskilled labor. Because they generally have less education and fewer financial resources, the mountain residents have less leverage in the community than town or outsider characters. However, the influence of outsiders is always unpredictable, and mountaineers and working class characters maintain a relative amount of freedom.

Though Smith’s work focuses primarily on the coal-mining industry, her fiction also includes towns like Majestic that rely on lumbering for part or all of their income. In pre-industrial times, mountaineers sporadically harvested their own trees or worked as irregular mill employees; in the late nineteenth century, northern companies acquired vast tracts of mountain timberland, which they harvested in the early twentieth century, stripping the forests of their oldest growth (Lewis 4-5; 9). Some towns experienced timber booms before (Eller 95) or instead of coal mining (98); several companies combined operations (98). Sawmills generally had a life of twenty years, after which companies relocated to more profitable sites (Lewis 4); by World War I, the best timber had been taken from the region, and the boom ended (Eller 110).

Lumber towns, or towns that include lumber mills, are generally less stratified than coal-company towns in Smith’s work, despite the fact that both industries created “company towns.” Lumber towns seem to have been less permanent than coal-company towns and have evaded the condemnation of coal towns, perhaps because the coal industry became profitable as timbering began to fail; mill employees could find work in coal mines (Eller 126). In *Fair*
and Tender Ladies, Ivy’s brother-in-law Curtis Brostick foresees the coming economic shift, telling Ivy’s mother that he will soon switch from the lumber to the coal business: “he thinks as these mountains is dam near timbered out” [sic] (85). Instances of lumbering fill Smith’s work: the logging operation near Black Rock in Oral History, the Holly Grove lumber camp and Cana lumberyard in The Devil’s Dream, the turn-of-the-century family-owned lumber mill in Family Linen, and the 1950s lumber mill where Grace’s older brother bunks in Saving Grace. Often, timbering is a useful sideline for farmers or one of the first jobs available for boys who wish to leave the farm. Towns that focus on lumbering or milling as one of their main industries are seldom one-company towns in Smith’s work, providing a greater degree of economic opportunity and fluidity than is available in a company town.

**Company Towns**

While elements of stratification are present in all of Smith’s texts, status and class markers become more divisive in her company-controlled coal towns. Coal companies began building these villages in the 1880s; construction peaked in the 1920s when over five hundred company towns were present in the Southern Appalachians. According to the U.S. Coal Commission, in 1925, 80 percent of West Virginia coal miners and two-thirds of similarly employed miners in the region lived in company towns. By the Depression, however, almost no new coal towns were being built, as waning demand and mechanization lowered the number of miners needed (Shifflett 33-35). Some miners began living outside the company towns and commuting by car. By the 1950s, most company towns had closed (9-10) and either demolished or sold. However, companies often retained the mineral rights to the property (Seltzer 18). Though coal companies continue to maintain large tracts of land in the
mountains, and some still use the ownership of local housing and property to control workers, the paternalism of the early days and the extensive company-owned towns have vanished.

Smith’s work includes depictions of the growth, boom, and decline of company coal towns. *Fair and Tender Ladies*’ Diamond, Virginia, is the most extensive description of a company town in Smith’s work. However, briefer descriptions of waning company towns recur in her fiction, suggesting the lingering effects of these operations. The protagonist in “Saint Paul” lives her entire life in and around a company town. The daughter of a miner killed on the job, Billie Jean never works for the mine; her life story hints at the changes that occurred as company towns ceased to be the norm. Additionally, “Life on the Moon” suggests the lasting stratification effects that the tight structure of a company town may have through its comparison of a former company town and a small independent town in the 1960s.

Created by coal companies in the late 1800s to provide miners for coal veins far from established settlements, early coal towns were rustic, pioneer outposts that attracted mostly single men. To help maintain a stable labor force, companies began adding amenities to entice families to move to the company towns (Shifflett 48-49). Most towns included houses rented to the miners, a company store, and a post office, and in many cases schools, churches, and recreational facilities (Shifflett 162-163).

Company towns are popularly regarded as oppressive, and there is evidence to support these negative perceptions. In “Class Formation in the Kentucky Coalfields,” Alan Banks argues that company towns evolved into an effective technique for preventing unionism. He affirms the 1925 *Report of the United States Coal Commission*, which found that company towns denied workers’ civil rights, included vague anti-union clauses in contracts, made housing leases dependent on employment and compliance, and used arbitrary wage
deductions and scrip to wring profits from the miners. Government reports on the quality of
life in company towns, such as the 1925 Report and the 1946 Boone Report, found conditions
substandard (Eller 183-4).

In *Coal Towns: Life, Work, and Culture in Company Towns of Southern Appalachia, 1880–1960*, Crandall Shifflett, while not denying that abuses occurred, suggests that this
picture may be incomplete. Conditions varied in company towns, depending on the attitudes
of the owners and operators, as well as the financial health of the company. For example,
some company towns permitted independent merchants that competed with the famed
“company store” (188), while others strictly forbade them. Shifflett argues that the criteria
applied by studies such as the Boone Report were inappropriately based on northern, middle
class standards; for instance, though the study expected indoor toilets to be standard, few rural
homes in the South had such facilities in 1925, and residents may not have felt the lack.
While standards of living deteriorated significantly during and after the Depression,
mountaineers accustomed to “hardscrabble” farms may have agreed with Smith’s Ivy Rowe
that conditions in some company towns were initially “very good” (Shifflett 146-160).

Nonetheless, company coal towns offered limited employment options because the
local economy was so closely tied to a single industry and corporation (Eller 228-230). While
some mountain residents retained their farms and only mined for ready cash, others sold their
property when they moved to company towns. Families gradually lost their agricultural skills
in town and could not return to farming when the coal market declined after the Depression.

Smith’s work tends to portray coal company towns negatively. Because of the
personal limitations and lack of economic options during bust times, company towns are
depicted as restrictive, dead-end towns that fail to live up to their early promise. Furthermore,
the stratification enforced in these towns inevitably leads to unhealthy differences and a loss of control over life chances for her working class characters.

The most extensive depiction of a company coal town in Smith’s work is Diamond, Virginia, in *Fair and Tender Ladies*. Tanya Bennett’s perceptive analysis of Diamond finds that it offers “a tiny microcosm of the oppressive class system of capitalistic society” (89). When Ivy Rowe first moves from the independent town of Majestic to Diamond, she finds that conditions during flush times are comfortable. The town includes a school, a community building, a movie house, a company store, barracks for men without their families, and houses for families, most painted the same “modern” shade of yellow. “The whole town was built by the company, that is the Diamond Mining Company, they own everything here lock stock and barrel” (131). The houses provided are not identical; as is typical of company towns, they are constructed in rows on the sides of the holler nearest the mine, beginning with smaller, closely spaced houses at the bottom and becoming progressively larger and more luxurious as the rows ascend up the ridge. Near the top is Silk Stocking Row, where doctors, engineers, and company men live. The less important the head of the house’s job in the company, the farther down the mountain the families live and the smaller their homes become. Unskilled or newly hired miners live in the smallest houses at the bottom, which Ivy admits are too close for comfort, “[b]ut no one cares of course for the money is so good. A man can make $7, $8, $10 a day in the mines if you can imagine this! And to think of how hard we used to live, just hand to mouth and never hardly laid eyes on cash money” [sic] (132). Because women are not allowed to work in the mines, the occupation of the man determines the majority of

---

5The description of Diamond here, while not identical to Bennett’s, owes much to her perceptive analysis and of necessity reiterates parts of her discussion.
the family’s income as well as their place on the hill. Some women may work in stores or as cleaning ladies, but their income does not factor into the status marker of house location. In Diamond, a separate holler provides housing for African-Americans; recruitment of immigrants and African-Americans, as well as native mountaineers, to fill the labor shortage was a standard practice for many companies, and some enforced segregated housing.

At the very top of the ridge is the opulent superintendent’s house, which features a ballroom. Originally built by the company’s owner, “one of the richest men in the world” for his new bride, the house is now occupied by the superintendent’s family because the owner’s wife found that “it was too depressing” (133). While few of Smith’s own neighbors in Grundy were conscious of the outside world (Appendix 341), residents of outsider-owned company towns may have been aware at some level of the unseen but powerful absentee owner, as Ivy Rowe is. In this text, the stratum with the greatest amount of power, the owner class, has moved not just up but also over the hills and into the world beyond. Perhaps even more clearly than in other settings, place indicates occupational, economic, and social status in Smith’s company towns.

In addition to the markers of male occupational status and place on the hill, sociability can play a role in the status of an individual. Ivy’s brother-in-law Curtis is a clerk in the company store in Diamond, a position that pays relatively well but also allows him to meet almost everyone in town when they buy supplies. While Curtis displays the overt class and status symbols of succeeding in a non-mining occupation and having a house in a place of prestige, he also gathers local social status by maintaining good relationships with the miners. Ivy notes that Curtis is “the kind of man that most men like,” and that this helps him do well
with both the company and his customers (131). Sociability provides Curtis with acceptance in working and elite classes, and helps him improve his business as well.

Life in company coal towns is dependent on the fortunes of the coal company. Fluctuations in the demand for coal or in the company’s financial health can have severe repercussions for miners. In *Fair and Tender Ladies*, when the coal bust occurs after World War I, many men are laid off; morale and “conditions” deteriorate rapidly. Ivy observes that men drink and gamble regularly and that violence is constantly a threat. Within a few months, a mine caves in, Ivy and childhood sweetheart Oakley marry, and she returns, gratefully, to her family farm in the mountains.

Like Dory’s family in *Oral History*, Ivy is fortunate that she has a farm to return to; while her mother sold the mineral rights, she would not part with her late husband’s beloved farm. Most of the miners in Diamond are not as fortunate: “They have given up their land, those hardscrabble places we all came from, and they have no place to go back to” (155). Because land ownership provides a measure of control not available in the rented homes in company towns, retaining possession of the family farm offers some economic independence. Few mountaineers actually owned much property, and Smith’s book clearly indicates that Ivy is one of the lucky few. While a family home represents more than just an economic resource in Smith’s texts, often providing a sense of pride and identity as it does for Ivy (*Landscape* 292), Smith strategically uses this symbolic resource to rescue her characters from the company towns and provide them with additional life chances.6

6The battered and sometimes beloved home place recurs throughout Smith’s Appalachian and Southern settings; Miss Iona’s decaying mansion in *Fancy Strut* reveals as much about her character as Almarine Cantrell’s sturdy but distant cabin in the holler tells about him in *Oral History*. However, the connection between characters and their homes is particularly strong—and affirmed—in her mountain fiction.
A somewhat less negative view of a company coal town appears in Smith’s short story “Saint Paul.” Protagonist Billie Jean’s father is a miner for Consolidated Coal, which is owned by Mr. Honeycutt; “he owned our house too because we rented it from the company” (165), though as a child Billie Jean was unaware of this fact. The Honeycutts own a house different from the others in the community; set back from the road, the large home has a stone wall and “porches that stuck right out where you never thought a porch ought to be” (165). Despite that family’s wealth and status, Mrs. Honeycutt allows her two children to play with the miners’ children, perhaps because the small size of the community precludes a long-term, physical distinction between classes. The children do not manifest any class resentment; Billie Jean is the best friend of the owner’s daughter, Marlene, and the owner’s odd son, Paul, never tells when a miner’s kid bloodies his nose. While economic divisions are apparent, they are not divisive for the children.

When Billie Jean’s father is injured in a mine accident, however, her mother refuses to allow the family to eat a Christmas ham sent by Mrs. Honeycutt, suggesting that tensions are deeper than they appear. When the father dies, Billie Jean’s mother worries that she will lose her company-owned home, despite the common practice of allowing widows to remain in company houses if their spouses die in a mining accident. The mother has both the company’s reassurance and the union insurance money payments, a more contemporary economic resource for miners, but she still worries.

Billie Jean and Marlene remain friends through high school, until Mrs. Honeycutt discovers them smoking and banishes Billie Jean as a bad influence. After Marlene leaves for college, she becomes “stuck up” around Billie Jean, an attitude that she seems to learn more from the outside world than from her parents. Billie Jean remains in the coal camp, though
she is not isolated; Ajax, apparently a nearby independent town, provides shops such as a hardware store and even a movie house. Though the coal camp seems to be company owned, the miners have never been truly isolated from other towns.

Marlene’s childhood egalitarianism does not suggest that class divisions are inactive locally, however; romance across the class lines is more problematic than friendship. Teenage Marlene is not allowed to date boys from the “bottom;” Billie Jean supposes the family thinks that “she was too good” for them. As a teen, Billie Jean falls in love with a doctor’s son, Johnny Bell—the text never says whether he is the company doctor’s son or lives in Ajax. Billie Jean hopes she will become pregnant so they can marry. When she does, however, Johnny balks at marriage, saying that “somebody like me will not force him into anything” (171). Largely because of her social class status, the doctor’s son has classified her as a woman “good enough for sex” but not marriage (R. Smith 189). Years later, when Billie Jean realizes that Marlene’s brother Paul, now a philosophy professor, has loved her from afar, she suggests they date. Paul reacts violently, stating that he adored the idea of her, not her as a person, reflecting the romanticized view of the educated elite. Perhaps because she is a member of the supposedly freer lower class, Paul believes he can use her as a symbol irrespective of her real identity (R. Smith 188). Neither of these men’s refusals harm Billie Jean; she raises her child, becomes a restaurant manager, marries a man who respects her, and is generally successful (A. Jones 249). Perhaps because class divisions work against her, Billie Jean ignores them (Wesley 228). While both of these men clearly “place” Billie Jean through class-based casting—one seeing her as a gold-digger, the other objectifying her in the manner of the intellectual elite—she ignores their definitions and makes a successful life with men and family who accept her on her own terms.
The time line of “Saint Paul” suggests that during Billie Jean’s life, the coal company probably divested itself of the company town; Billie Jean and her first husband live in a house outside but near the camp. By the end of the story, the Honeycutt parents have died, Marlene is divorced and childless, and Paul lives alone in the big house, becoming stranger by the year. The company itself seems to continue to mine coal; however, it is the miner’s child, not the owners’ children, who adapts best to life and survives. This result is typical of Smith’s stories; though tragedies frequently befall her miners and mountain residents, those who are able to survive and succeed are her most resilient, adaptable, and admirable characters. Billie Jean achieves relative financial success by becoming the manager of a diner in Ajax and, later, by earning her CPA degree from the community college. Though stratification is not absent from Billie Jean’s contemporary world, she has more options in her life than her mother did when her father died, partly because of the changing roles of women, but also because physical mobility and alternative employment expand her possibilities.

While “Saint Paul” profiles an active company town that changes with the decades, “Life on the Moon” occurs partially in a mined-out company town. When protagonist June’s father, a traveling salesman, dies in a car accident, she and her mother move to Welch, West Virginia, to be near her aunt’s family. June and her mother live in an old company house; the nearby mine is exhausted and the company has moved its operations to the other side of the mountain. The five-room house has a porch and a pot-bellied stove, and is often sprinkled with coal dust from the mine over the mountain. Tired of the frequent moves her father’s profession required, June loves the permanence of the encircling mountains.

In the valley below stands the quite different house of June’s cousin, Lucie. The placement and construction of Lucie’s nice, air-conditioned brick house suggest that it was
not originally part of the old company town and represents more recently acquired wealth. Stratification has changed; now, simply being in the company town holler, rather than position within on the hill, confers status.

Lucie’s jovial father runs the local Rexall drugstore; her mother has “pretensions” and experiments with meals such as chicken cacciatore or pizza, unusual fare in the mountains. June’s mother, who lived for years outside the community, always chooses a more standard mountain menu: “meat and potatoes, green beans in summer, and big red slices of the tomatoes that Mama grew in her garden right by the back door” (59). These dishes connect the mother more closely to traditional mountain culture associated with holler life. They also may reflect the more limited financial means of the widowed family. Economics and culture compliment each other in this case; as Bourdieu says, the working class must have “a virtue made of necessity” (372). The aunt’s modest display of conspicuous consumption, while appropriate for a merchant’s wife and piano teacher, makes less privileged June uneasy, creating a sense of distance between her and her relatives.

The division between town and holler is clearly shown as an economic distinction in this text. Lucie’s parents try to help June’s widowed mother out, providing such things as free piano lessons and material to make June a dress for the piano recital. “I didn’t know that then,” June says about the piano lessons. “Ever since I found out, though, it has made a difference” (60). The family’s class backgrounds in many ways determine the choices the girls make as teenagers. Lucie, from the economically stable home, becomes wild and elopes with a disc jockey; June cares for her increasingly ill mother while working part-time at the dime store and attending school. Lucie eventually goes to college, teaches school, and lives as a “gay divorcee” in Richmond; June, who had been Miss Welch High, marries the local
quarterback, then works two jobs to put him through community college. Even when her husband has the chance to leave town for a better job, June insists on staying because she does not want to move her mother and appreciates the permanence of the community. The division of town/holler becomes outsider/insider for the young women.

While June and Lucie are comfortable in their life in Welch, the community as a whole must be struggling because they are regularly visited by VISTAs, young volunteers with the Federal Poverty Program in the 1960s. In fact, Lucie has the inevitable insider/outsider romance with a young VISTA and becomes pregnant. Choosing not to marry the young man, she leaves her child with her mother while she finishes a degree and then marries a professor. Lucie’s choices indicates that her relative economic privilege, education, and changing social mores provide more options for single mothers in the mid-twentieth century than the tragic Dory had in *Oral History* or even the working class Billie Jean in “Saint Paul.” However, the presence of the VISTAs in the community indicates that while narrator June sees Lucie as privileged, that designation is likely not shared by many outside the community. Smith’s holler/town/outsider division again shapes her characters perceptions of themselves and others.

“Life on the Moon” is the story of June’s acceptance of the failure of her marriage. However, this process includes her acceptance of her cousin Lucie, whose good fortune, talent, and socially rebellious behavior she has resented. The split between the two women was caused partially by class differences that are intertwined with cultural issues and by Lucie’s privilege, but also by her lack of understanding of the difficulty and rawness of June’s life. The two women are ultimately unified by their common maternity. Both were pregnant during the 1969 moon launch; visiting the Air and Space Museum and seeing the lunar
module reminds them of their connections and their common journey. Ties of family and acceptance of imperfections draw them back together, overriding the class and experiential differences of the cousins. While the women’s tale begins in the coal towns of Appalachia, the short story begins and ends at the Air and Space Museum in Washington, D.C., placing both women together in the larger world.

Coal company towns recur throughout Smith’s work, and their stratifying effects are consistently depicted as unnecessarily restrictive and ultimately destructive. However, these towns are not her only coal towns, nor are they identical. Coal company towns often interact with nearby independent towns in her work, as in the case of Welch, West Virginia, in “Life on the Moon.” By depicting the variety of towns in the region and the evolution of company towns, Smith suggests the impact these towns had on mountain social relationships without giving them absolute power over social structure in her work.

**Class, Status, and Time in Family Linen**

While *Oral History’s* Black Rock follows on the evolution of a mountain town and *Fair and Tender Ladies* offers a glimpse of the boomtown of Majestic and the company coal town of Diamond, *Family Linen* examines a family that matured along with the late twentieth century in the Virginia mountains near the North Carolina border. The novel focuses on the Bird-Hess family and the attempts of contemporary descendants to unravel a decades-old murder mystery. Forty years earlier, Elizabeth Bird Hess’s first husband vanished. Most assumed the playboy simply abandoned the family. When oldest daughter Sybill is hypnotized to cure her migraines, however, she recovers a memory of her father being axed to death. Elizabeth, who has a stroke early in the text and never regains consciousness, becomes
as much of a mystery as the fate of her husband. Each child wracks his/her brain, trying to decide if their mother could have killed their father.

However, the novel does not focus on this mystery. Smith uses the frame to examine the relationship of the characters to matriarch Elizabeth (Buchanan 340) and to their own histories. As in *Fancy Strut*, the multiple narrator technique allows Smith to survey characters occupying a variety of social class statuses. Because her characters reflect on their pasts in Booker Creek, North Carolina, and the routes they take to their contemporary selves, the novel reveals changes in class status markers through time. Kinship and family reputation bind these characters in their small town, but their stories indicate the reality of social mobility and its impact on family ties.

The Bird/Hess family of *Family Linen* was founded with the type of cross-class parental marriage that fills Smith’s work. In the late nineteenth century, Lemuel Bird, an orphaned, relatively uneducated North Carolina mountain boy, accidentally meets the cultured Mary Davenport, daughter of a prosperous Virginia oyster man, at a religious camp that he has transported a minister to. Smitten with the lovely Mary but told by her father to return only “when he had some Prospects” (169), Lemuel leases land and begins a lumber business with his brothers; he also claims to give up gambling and drink. After a year and a half, his business thriving, Lemuel visits Mary in Accomac, Virginia, and the two become engaged, with the condition that Lemuel must build a “proper Home for his bride” (169)

While Talmage Stanley is correct in observing that cross-class romances often fail in Smith’s texts, it is also true that the parent generation in her books often feature insider/outsider or cross-class relationship that Smith’s own parents experienced (Hill 21). These pairings include Iradell and Emma Spangler of *Black Mountain Breakdown* and Maude and John Arthur Rowe of *Fair and Tender Ladies*. Other parental couples suggest contrasting, if not class-based perspectives, such as the spiritual Isaiah Bailey and earthy Kate Malone in *The Devil’s Dream*. 

158
before the wedding. When he purchases land and provides a “home fit for a Lady” (170), the couple are married.

Lemuel and Mary’s story is told through eldest daughter Elizabeth’s diary and is romanticized by her affection. Yet, even her version suggests that a steady income, land ownership, and sober behavior are the requirements for a mountain boy to become a suitable suitor for a wealthy outsider’s daughter. Though vouched for by a local minister, Lemuel has only three wild brothers to call family and no significant education; his accumulation of economic capital is sufficient, however, to make his class status acceptable.

Lemuel’s behavior also is important, probably because a drinker or gambler might be an abusive spouse. Though Lemuel is described by his daughter as gentle with “his ladies,” life in the mountains is not the genteel existence of Accomac. Lemuel carries a pearl-handled revolver each day to his lumber mill, where “rough men worked, and terrible things might happen at any time. Fights and dismemberments were rumored” (167). When eleven-year-old Elizabeth goes to the mill to surprise her father, she finds him deep in conversation with “money men”–the business is struggling, partially from her father’s leniency with his partners/brothers. Soon after, Mary dies and Lemuel’s habits become intemperate.

The debt the family sinks into shapes the lives of Mary and Lemuel’s three daughters, Elizabeth, Nettie, and Fay, who is mentally challenged. Elizabeth postpones her education because she feels duty-bound to help her widower father manage the home; finances worsen and she never goes. When Lemuel dies, his debt is more than the girls anticipated. Tomboy Nettie wants to sell the house and use the funds to salvage the lumber business; Elizabeth refuses, finding the plan risky and managing a lumberyard unsuitable for a woman. An angry Nettie leaves the home and quickly marries Marvin Sizemore, whose simple farm in Long
Valley and slow ways appeal to her. Though Elizabeth laments that her sister is “determined to live beneath [her] class” (194), she comforts herself that at least the farmer is a land owner. Fay stays with Elizabeth, having no prospects for marriage or other income.

Perhaps because of her family’s struggles and her awareness that her local contemporaries are becoming educated or marrying suitable men, Elizabeth aches for social status and acceptance. Jilted by a fiancée who forgets about her while at college, Elizabeth nonetheless converts from her mother’s Methodist to her former beau’s Episcopalian church, partly because “all the Leading families in the town attended the Episcopalian church” (189). In her narration, Nettie says that everyone in town “knew [Elizabeth],” because of their father, Elizabeth’s heavy involvement in church and club activities, and her consistent overdressing. Though she has lost much in the way of economic capital, Elizabeth seems determined to maximize her social capital in the small town her father helped develop.

During the Depression, the town of Booker Creek struggles. The Bird mill has closed, then the Wilson mill does as well, followed by the nearby quarry. The independent town is filled with drifters, searching for non-existent work. One such man, the handsome Jewell Rife, accompanies the local hardware store owner to fix the Bird heater. In Nettie’s narration, she imagines that penniless Jewell likes the stately house, its lovely furnishings, the surrounding land—and Elizabeth. Just as Nettie partially chose her first husband because she approved of his little farm, she asserts that Jewell did the same with Elizabeth and her lovely home. Elizabeth gullibly falls for the charming man; Nettie claims that having seldom been outside the town, and not knowing Jewell’s family, Elizabeth had no way to socially place him, could not judge his true character, and would not accept it when she learned too late what his nature was. After the couple marries, rather than go into business, Jewell lives on the
girls’ small income. While some in the town thought Elizabeth was foolish to pursue Jewell, others initially approved of the courtship, feeling Elizabeth needs a man to care for her; Jewell’s sloth and womanizing eventually prove them wrong.

Rife fathers Elizabeth’s two oldest children, Sybill and Arthur. Several months following his sudden disappearance, the almost inarticulate Fay also has his child, Candy; Elizabeth, who leaves town with her sister and children until the baby is born, passes Candy off as her own daughter. Later, Elizabeth marries Vernon Hess, a dime store owner whom she regards as below her station but who adores her; they have two children, Myrtle and Lacy.

These children, with Nettie and Fay, are the family members alive during the novel. The back story of Elizabeth and her childhood is told only at the end of the text, through her diary and Nettie’s memory. Each of Elizabeth’s children is shaped by their relationship to her, which influences their choices in life and, indirectly, their social mobility. Because Elizabeth styles herself so intently as a “lady,” it could be argued that these relationships are also shaped by the children’s reactions to the class-based image of the lady (Wesley 74). Critics have noted that each child represents a different aspect of their parents’ personalities and a perspective shaped by the class status they assume. Just as Nettie and Elizabeth assumed different class status positions based on their behavior and decisions to marry up or down, the children respond variously to the social environments they encounter, demonstrating the possibilities and limits of contemporary social mobility.

Sybill, the eldest child, is head of Language Arts at a community college in Roanoke, some distance from Booker Creek. She emphasizes the practical skills rather than the artistry of literature, teaching business writing, high school equivalency courses, and similar skill sets. Also manager of a condominium complex, Sybill is the picture of organized, capable,
and controlled middle class respectability. Heartily disapproving of her siblings’ “messy” lives, Sybill represses her natural urges and eventually suffers from migraines, which lead her to a hypnotist (cheaper than therapy) and the recovered memory of her father’s murder. Like many of Smith’s town characters, Sybill focuses on correct behavior—including work ethic, etiquette, style, morals, and thrift—as the markers of personal “class,” as well as social standing, copying her mother’s emphasis on ladylike behavior (Wesley 140).

While Sybill tries to elevate herself with appropriate behavior, her brother Arthur descends socially through his actions. Never interested in school, teenage Arthur joined a band that became modestly successful locally and offered him a “rock-n-roll” lifestyle with groupies and macho wildness but also a real creative outlet. Arthur’s love for a beautiful young “born-again” settles him down as a husband and father, but he cannot give up drinking and womanizing. Arthur considers himself a jack of all trades; with no specific occupation (he works as a housesitter during the novel) and questionable behavior, Arthur’s only claims are his charm, squandered talent, and family connections.

Yet, Arthur questions whether his mother’s belief in his family’s elevated status is correct:

This is one thing Arthur never could understand about Mother. Where she got those ideas. Why she thought she was better than everybody else in town, when you’ve got the Harrisons who send their sons to Yale, been doing it for a couple of generations. Or the Bentons who have owned Long Valley for two hundred years, not to mention all these young married in Argonne Hills. (92)

Furthermore, Arthur is hesitant to follow his step-father, Vernon Hess, into the dime store business because of their more distant kinship tie. Though Hess is always kind to him and offers him the chance to inherit the dime store business, he “was not his own daddy . . . Arthur wishes he was. But he was not, and somehow that had made some difference in his
life, he’d be hard put to say just how” (101). While Arthur admires and appreciates his step-father, he is uncomfortable asserting a kinship right he finds inauthentic. Furthermore, he perhaps rightly estimates that his family’s social capital is not, and perhaps never was, as extensive as his mother assumed. Because of these facts, Arthur, has a tenuous connection to the few real resources that family ties give him.

Arthur eventually does go to work with Hess and displays a knack for retail. However, an affair with an employee causes him to lose his wife and kids, and he finally enrolls in substance abuse treatment. Once released, Arthur follows his ex-wife to Florida in a vain attempt to win her back. While he is gone, Hess dies and the extended family sells the business. Arthur uses his share to buy a tanning booth at the mall; the business fails and an employee/lover takes what is left of his cash. Arthur is therefore bereft of money, education, and moral reputation, and also discounts the status power of his family connections, though he continues to draw emotional support from them.

Affable but ambitionless, with little money and few prospects, Arthur has socially descended. Yet, he is not hopeless or helpless at the end of the text. He decides to manage his aunt’s country store; since he was successful at Hess’s store before the affair, the narrative seems to be hinting that he is returning to his place. Even more promising, Arthur begins dating a nurse with a kid who appeals to him. A nurturer who stayed home with his infant daughters while his first wife worked, this new relationship implies that Arthur may gain some stability and the woman and her child some affection from the arrangement. Ironically for a man who pines to know his real father, Arthur finds his niche filling as a stand-in father for another boy.
In reflecting on his family, Arthur thinks that he and his half-sister Candy “were the two who refused to amount to a hill of beans” (107). Like Arthur, Candy would not go to college and eloped with a man who died in Vietnam; a later illegitimate child caused her mother to give up on reforming her. Working as a hairdresser, taking little care with her appearance, Candy does not “amount to a hill of beans” by her mother’s standards. However, with a successful business, one child in law school, another an art teacher, and a creative job that gives her an integral role in the community, Candy is arguably a productive and higher-status individual than Arthur. Candy’s role as hairdresser places her in the center of all community events: weddings, funerals, showers, and dances (Wesley 92-93). Her position as a small-business owner and her children’s success indicate that while Candy may have failed to meet traditional standards for women’s social standards in the town, she has accumulated economic and even social capital in the community, though through a different route than her mother hoped (Howell 134).

Sister Myrtle has chosen a different route than these siblings. Pretty and popular as a teen, Myrtle was a cheerleader and homecoming Queen. As a college sophomore, she married her childhood sweetheart, put her husband through medical school while working as a secretary and then gladly stayed home to raise their three children. Myrtle’s life has followed a traditional path for a small town wife and mother, though this role has been updated for the second half of the twentieth century. Wesley identifies Myrtle as a contemporary version of the Southern lady, who defines herself by a man and focuses on appearances, despite alterations in lifestyle such as the growing employment of women (141). While her mother infuriated Nettie in the late 1920s by “not wanting me to take any job because whatever I took it in mind to do, she said it was beneath me and would violate our parents’ memory” (220),
homemaker Myrtle, finds herself stigmatized for not working in the 1980s: “Myrtle is tired of going to parties where people ask, ‘What do you do?’ . . . Nobody used to ask that” (46). Like many of Smith’s characters, Myrtle finds that she has been prepared to succeed in a world that has changed (Buchana 344), and she must find a way to adapt.

Frustrated with her life and feeling isolated, Myrtle responds by having an affair. Her impersonal trysts with a working class youth from the county smack of Crystal Spangler’s affair with Mack Stiltner, but without any redeeming emotional connection. Ironically, her husband Don, an orphan like her grandfather Lemuel, has found an extra-martial connection with her sister Candy for years. Despite their clear struggles and rifts, however, Don and Myrtle have a strong bond and appreciate the value of family. Myrtle is the one her mother leaves the prized ancestral home to, knowing that this couple has the funds and sensibility to restore the aging structure. At the end of the novel, Myrtle’s oldest daughter, lovely and pregnant, marries in a dress made from family linen, of one grandmother’s prized tablecloths. Myrtle approves the choice but tells her daughter not to broadcast what she has done. Myrtle herself has restored her mother’s home, which everyone agrees looks marvelous, and decided to go into real estate, because she knows what women want in a home. Still a dermatologist’s wife, careful about her appearance and able to “talk to anybody” (266), Myrtle has shifted the social capital of a wife of leisure to a job of status that will allow her to use the same skills she cultivated for a different purpose. While critic Darlene Hill finds this choice a negative sidestep into a “feminine” career that does not challenge men (574-575), given Smith’s affirmation of Candy as a hairdresser, Myrtle’s choice of a career that suits her talents and connects her with the community seems affirming in context. Faced with an environment in
which her personal status has changed, she actively alters her capital to create a comfortable and productive role for herself.

Lastly, youngest daughter Lacey was pretty but never socially adept like Myrtle during her adolescence in Booker Creek. Instead, she focused on acquiring education that would enrich her personally and professionally. A graduate student in English at the time of the story, Lacey has unfortunately defined herself by her spouse, who is leaving her. Feeling dislocated after her mother’s death and with a divorce looming, she finds solace in her mother’s journal, connecting with her parent’s intellectual and artistic side (Hill 239).

Never comfortable in her hometown, Lacey lives in Chapel Hill where her intellectual accomplishments have value, despite her own belief that Chapel Hill “is not the real world, in Lacey’s opinion. Not that there’s much advantage in the real world, either” (75). As a graduate student, she occupies an apprenticeship position at the college, while in Booker Creek, her credentials are impressive but incomprehensible. Ultimately, Lacey’s connection with her mother through the journal allows her to join the two worlds and become psychically freed to complete her dissertation.

*Family Linen* reveals a complicated blend of small-town status markers that shift in importance through time. As in *Black Mountain Breakdown*, though other places are mentioned, especially in flashbacks, the present action occurs in Booker Creek for the remainder of the text. Early in the twentieth century, land ownership, income, and behavior are the most important markers. When her income shrinks, Elizabeth uses family connections, behavior, and social participation to compensate for her diminishing economic standing, even preferring behavioral markers for women when she refuses to let Nettie operate the lumber mill. In the contemporary generation, Sybill models appropriate behavioral standards (Hill
221), Myrtle social behavior (231), and Lacey intellectual capital (239); each daughter adopts one of their mother’s expressions of non-economic capital to improve their own life chances. While Elizabeth’s two other children descend socially, they are arguably successful in their lives: Candy becomes a business owner with educated children, and Arthur, intent on macho conquest, ironically finds a nurturing role. Each child occupies a different social status, partly based on personal tendencies, but also determined by the kind of capital each chose or was able to accumulate.

Family connections are not obliterated by these divisions, as the affirmative epithalamium at Myrtle’s daughter’s wedding indicates, but it does cause splits. Lacey and Sybill have left town, and Myrtle seldom socializes with her local relatives. While the family name retains value in Booker Creek, the differing status positions of the individual characters indicate that family and class status are not necessarily equivalent. As times and status markers change, so does the social place of the members of even a somewhat elite town family.

**Denominational Divisions**

The stratification elements in Smith’s communities vary with the local economy and community makeup. Throughout her work, however, one element reliably marks for class status: religious affiliation. While Smith’s portrayals of mountain denominations reflect her understanding and research of the region, they should not be taken as literal depictions of local practice. “Smith’s fictional depictions of Appalachian religion relies heavily on generalization and stereotypes,” (99-100) according to Conrad Ostwalt. While her portrayals of Appalachian religious communities recognize differences between sects, they also present a consistent picture of a fundamentalist faith characterized by restrictive thinking, a powerful
conversion experience, a belief in the afterlife, and individualism. Ostwalt’s analysis reinforces the position that Smith is not creating a literal ethnography but is instead playing with the social tensions that pervade her imagination.

Respected Appalachian scholar and native Loyal Jones offers a useful caution in critiquing religion in Appalachia. Author of *Faith and Meaning in the Southern Uplands*, Jones warns those who chronicle the elements and implications of religious practice not to ignore its primary purpose: worship. To refuse to accept believers’ own interpretations of their activities as authoritative is presumptuous and breaks faith with the individuals being studied.

Religion and spirituality are often an integral part of the search for meaning by Smith’s characters, regardless of their view of formal religion. Anne Goodwyn Jones has observed the connection of orality, sexuality, and prophesy as life forces *Oral History* (19). Frequently, characters such as the semi-autobiographical Karen in “Tongues of Fire” pursue religion, reading, and romance to feel “wild and trembly” (81), to feel alive. Ivy Rowe of *Fair and Tender Ladies* and Richard Burlage of *Oral History* do not wrestle with spiritual issues because they are trying to advance socially; they are searching for meaning and direction. Smith’s respect and interest in a vibrant spirituality is one of the strengths of her work. In the popular imagination, Appalachian religion is often associated with the marginal, with snake-handlers, speaking in tongues, and “Holy Rollers.” Dorothy McCauley suggests in *Appalachian Mountain Religion* that Southern Mountain Region residents who attend church typically belong to either mainstream Protestant churches or “mountain” churches. The latter are characterized as autonomous, orally-based churches, grounded in the geography of Appalachia and continuing a historic emphasis on grace, predestination, and emotional
experience over rationality in worship (6-7). In the *Encyclopedia of Religion in the South*, Loyal Jones states that “[t]here are fundamental differences between middle-class church people and the more fundamentalistic church people in the region [Appalachia] as well as between mainline church-mission-oriented workers and many of the local church members” (41), further observing that mountain churches can be “havens from, or strongholds against, a troubled world and an economic system that has often exploited mountain people” (42). While not disagreeing with Jones, scholars such as McCauley warn against positing mountain faith as “the religion of the poor,” noting the presence of educated and middle class church members. The very frequency of this caution, however, reveals how pervasive that stereotype is. McCauley argues that the low status marking of mountain religion corresponds with the classing of Appalachian culture by outsiders and reflects self-serving agenda of Protestant reformers (9-10).

Smith has repeatedly referred to religious denominationalism as one of the few institutions that supports class differences in the mountains.

If a class structure existed in that town, it mostly had to do with where you went to church (and believe me, we all went to church). My mother had explained the social ranking of the churches: Methodist at the top, attended by doctors and lawyers and other “nice” families; Presbyterians slightly down the scale, attended by store owners; then the vigorous Baptists; then the Church of Christ, who thought they were the only real church in town and said so. They had hundreds of members.

And then, of course, at the bottom of the church scale were those little churches out in the country where people were reputed to yell out, fall down in fits and throw their babies. (I didn’t know what this meant, exactly, but I knew I’d love to see it, for it promised drama far beyond the dull responsive readings of the Methodists and their rote mumbling of the Nicene Creed.) We also had a few Jews, a few Catholics, and no Episcopalians at all.

That tells you something, doesn’t it? A town too poor for Episcopalians. (White Columns)
This quote, taken from an article on Smith’s web site, is remarkably similar to the much-critiqued social ranking of religions in “Tongues of Fire.” It also indicates that Smith’s more “Appalachian” churches are less prestigious than mainstream denominations (Ostwalt 101).

In a more recent interview, Smith discussed class mobility in terms of church attendance:

It’s real complicated. A lot of times people would change churches, like if they got a better job, say. Somebody who had grown up in a Freewill Baptist church or something might then come back to town having gone to school and get a better job and change to be a Methodist or a Presbyterian or whatever. Particularly if they had grown up in one of those hollering churches. (Appendix 343)

As these comments suggest, the wealthiest citizens in Smith’s texts attend the churches with the most formal services and the fewest opportunities for personal expression during worship. Episcopalians, for example, are routinely professionals, company officials or those with “pretensions.” The lower the status a church has in the eyes of the professional class or town classes, the more likely that church is to allow yelling, dancing, or speaking in tongues. The “hollering” churches often were literally the churches of the “hollers.” Again, Smith addresses this issue directly:

Colley: If you go to a church that hollers, do you tend to be more expressive in other parts of your life, too?

Smith: No, that was one thing those churches were good for. A lot of times the people that went to . . . those kinds of churches where people are speaking in tongues and hollering and falling down and dancing around—a lot of time those are the people whose jobs are just the most boring. And those might be miners or just people who drive a truck or whatever and women who live often in isolated situations, say, up the holler, don’t drive. The church is their one kind of community and their one chance to be expressive. And I think a lot of pent up frustrations and stuff come out in that, too. Sexual, all kinds of emotional relief; they don’t have a place to release it anywhere else. (Appendix 343)

The more an individual deviates from town standards in Smith, the more expressive the church they attend. “[T]he more traditionally Appalachian the religion, the wilder and more
inhibited it appears and the greater sense of otherness accompanies it” (Ostwalt 100). In *Black Mountain Breakdown*, Crystal Spangler’s religious conversion at a Church of God revival is as indicative of her struggle with middle class norms as her later sexual promiscuity (Stanley 344). Some characters, such as Ivy Rowe of *Fair and Tender Ladies*, move further from community controls and adopt an elemental spirituality that emphasizes a connection with nature, myth, and the body (Ostwalt 113). Throughout Smith’s work, spirituality provides drama and an excitement not readily available elsewhere for her working class characters.

Smith considers mountain religion a compensating mechanism for the working class. McCauley argues, however, that mountain religions often cut across class lines and are “creative, not compensatory” (209), allowing individuals to create new personal and social identities akin to Weber’s lifestyle-based, non-economic status groups. J. Stephen Kroll-Smith observes that the Baptist revival in colonial Virginia was an overt challenge to the elite status order emphasizing gentle birth; those converted in revivals gaining spiritual power that trumped aristocratic birth. Today, mountain religion serves a similar function, allowing adherents to create alternative identities and affirm community values that conflict with the prevailing status order rather than economic class (206-212).

The churches favored by Smith’s rural characters often provide a measure of freedom from the dominant class. Wealthy and professional individuals, comfortable with the way the economic and social system treats them, join mainline denominations with centralized controls. Rural or working class characters often choose churches with a minimum of external controls, favoring the nondenominational, autonomous churches McCauley finds typical of mountain religion (241). Even if the beliefs of the church are restrictive, the congregation often has tenuous or non-existent connections to authority beyond the local congregation.
Town or outsider characters, with the possible exception of underpaid circuit riders, almost never have leadership positions in Smith’s rural or working class congregations.

Many independent churches in Smith feature pastors with little or no theological education; the reasons may vary from lack of time and money for study to a belief that such training is unnecessary and frivolous. In *Giving Glory to God in Appalachia: Worship Practices in Six Baptist Subdivisions*, Howard Dorgan observes that seminary-educated ministers are contrary to the beliefs of the mountain churches he studied. Believing that God equips those He calls to minister, these churches employ a kind of apprenticeship program, with the newly called formally designated as non-ordained preachers for a sort of on-the-job training (82-84). McCauley’s examination of mountain faiths such as Holiness and Old Regular Baptists reveal similar routes to ministry, involving a “call” and an apprenticeship of varying formality, depending on the denomination (61-63). The ministers receive practical training, but outside the control of mainstream Protestant and educational systems. Some churches insist on non-paid ministers, a practice that promotes egalitarianism in the church (61). These churches create an alternative route to status and power for their ministers outside the dominant educational system.

However, the attitude towards the local economic system perpetuated by these faith communities varies in Smith’s work. Her 1995 novel, *Saving Grace*, focuses primarily on two religious communities. The first is the Holiness community of Grace Shepherd’s childhood. Her father, Virgil Shepherd, is a charismatic Holiness minister who handles snakes, drinks poison, and is credited in the text with both bringing people back to life and with engaging in adultery. The second is the Holiness congregation that Grace marries into. This second community seldom handles snakes and focuses more on good works than on emotional
expression. While Grace’s father is too free and full of crazy energy, her husband is nonetheless too repressed and guilt-ridden. Just as Grace’s father seems to have manic tendencies, her husband is prone to depression. Her final conversion, in which she identifies with her mother, allows Grace to find a balance between the extremes.

Both churches depicted are comprised of working class or rural individuals. However, the approach towards money in each pastor’s family is surprisingly different. Grace’s father sees money as a trivial matter that is beneath him. He devotes his energy to his ministry and prayer rather than working a regular job; however, he also refuses to take a regular offering at church, in keeping with the practice of unpaid ministers. As a result, his family struggles financially. In the opening scene, his children are hungry and are only fed out of the kindness of passing strangers, the Dutys, who eventually become family friends. Unconcerned, their father explains, “These children may not have new clothes on their back nor new shoes on their feet, but they are going to Heaven with me” (9). When oldest son, Joe Allen, begins working in a nearby sawmill, he sneaks money to his mother so that she will have a stash for emergencies, something the mother feels somewhat guilty for. In this family, religion is not only a compensation but also a substitution for participating in the local economy.

The family survives primarily through the unsolicited kindness of the members of their congregation. Ruth and Carlton Duty (whose names are as symbolic as the protagonist’s) become trusted friends, helping support the congregation and the family. After the dramatic meeting in the first scene, the Dutys guide the family to an abandoned house that Grace comes to regard as her childhood home. Carlton and Ruth live on land that his family has owned for over one hundred years and run a store called Duty’s Grocery, where Ruth sells pies and cakes. Though clearly differentiated from the modernized town residents that Grace
meets in school, the Dutys’ income and resources suggest they are mountain middle class rather than branchwater mountaineers. Carlton, who is massively depressed when he meets the Shepherds, soon returns to emotional health and pays back the Shepherds with work; Ruth, who never had children of her own, takes a personal interest in the Shepherd children and their mother, who all need her stabilizing presence and the food she periodically provides. Grace’s mother is noticeably pluckier around Ruth and eventually takes a job at the Duty’s store. The relationship between the jolly Ruth and the increasingly thin Fannie Shepherd in many ways resembles the relationship between Geneva Hunt and Maude Rowe in *Fair and Tender Ladies*, with the bonds of unofficial kinship supplying emotional and economic support for the less privileged woman.

Grace’s mother eventually commits suicide, overwhelmed with guilt after a seduction. Grace leaves with her father to find another church; the Dutys take care of Grace’s mentally challenged sister, Billie, who turns out to be pregnant. Ruth and Carlton take the healthy child to raise and become more modernized, buying a television, allowing little Fannie to take dance classes, and eventually placing Grace’s sister in a group home where she is reportedly quite happy. Though the Dutys were always economically lower middle class, they adopted the more austere aesthetic of the Holiness Church before Fannie’s died and they became disillusioned with Grace’s father. At the end of the text, they have joined the Church of Christ, still a “country” but more mainstream church, and have shifted into a way of life that allows for the wider employment of their financial resources.

While Grace’s father focused all his time on ministry, Grace’s husband believes that “God loves a working man.” Ultimately abandoned by her father, Grace is taken in by a minister of a small, independent church, the Hi-Way Tabernacle, and his older sisters. After
her tough childhood, life on the road with her father, and a stint as a waitress in a diner, Grace luxuriates in the chenille bedspread, the indoor bathroom, the delicious food, and the attention she receives in the minister’s house: “I ate as though my life depended upon it, and decided to stay there as long as I could” (161). Eventually she convinces the much-older minister, Travis Word, a good man haunted by his past, to marry her.

Word’s family practices thrift, reflecting a sense of stewardship that pervades their entire lives; for example, Travis questions whether it is God’s will for them to redecorate the house. Travis’s day job as a carpenter makes the family technically skilled working class, if their status is based on his occupation. However, Grace notes that the family quietly collects rent checks each month from property they inherited around the county. While her father disdained money, supposedly to focus on spirituality while others provided for him, her husband’s family incorporates middle class thrift and entrepreneurial activities into their religious perspectives. Their lifestyle of respectability resembles the middle rather than the working class. Furthermore, the church that Travis leads had not practiced the “signs” of handling serpents or fire for a number of years before Grace’s father takes his revival show there, and Grace never alludes to any such “signs” when she discusses her years as pastor’s wife. The improved economic and social status of the family corresponds with less reliance on emotional worship—in Smith’s words, the church is less of a “hollering” church.

The Shepherds, Dutys, and Words all differ in their world view, though they attend churches with similar religious practices: Virgil Shepherd stresses grace over morality, the Dutys manifest a loving, generous spirit, and Travis Word focuses on good works. As McCauley suggests, the religious commitment of each provides them with status that goes against the larger power structure; as a preacher’s child and then wife, Grace attains a certain
non-economic status in the community. However, as this discussion suggests, the economic status of each family is intertwined with their religious convictions in a complex way, with beliefs influencing their attitude towards and handling of money, but with more expressive practices reliably suggesting for a lower economic and social status. As Lee Smith says, “It’s real complicated.”

As the institution that most consistently marks for social class, religious affiliation provides a gradational scale of status much like the ascending houses in the coal-town hollers. However, just as religious denomination socially places an individual, it also offers compensation for that placement. Rural and working class characters may not gain social prestige from church attendance, but they acquire a space to release their frustrations, a social community that can help sustain them through difficult times, and an identity that is more important than social class status. Rather than merely compensating for a low class status, religious status places an individual in a different social field, where their identity as a “saved” individual is worth more than any other prestige marker could be.

Conclusion

Lee Smith’s small towns offer a variety of perspectives on the social life in Appalachia and the South. The much-maligned company coal towns, though they appear in her work, are not the dominant social structure; the county seat or independent town is actually more prevalent in her work. However, these structures are not polar opposites; independent towns were often heavily influenced by the financial health of nearby coal camps and company towns become less rigid in Smith’s work as the years pass. Smith’s work suggests a continuum of less to more strictly stratified communities that shape the life
chances of their residents through the opportunities granted based on social class status and capital acquisition.

Despite the variations in communities depicted, Smith’s work features several recurring markers of social class and status. The resources that accompany class and social status—land ownership, family reputation, occupational status, and, at times, personal reputation—may vary in importance, depending on the time and settings. Other stratification elements, such as kinship, religious affiliation, and place of residence, also may influence local status. Some elements reinforce class status; others, such as kinship, cut across but are still influenced by class. While economics do not control social class and status, many non-economic activities, such as church and club attendance, are ultimately influenced by the possession of economic or social capital. Furthermore, the markers of class and status may alter the perceptions characters have of each other, creating further openings or limits. “Holler” characters not only have limited funds and occupational opportunities; they also are often assumed by town or outsider characters to be less moral and sophisticated, further limiting their access to local sources of power.

And yet, Smith’s major interest is not in whether her characters scale the social ladder. Her focus is on relationships in community and what social forces contribute to the success or failure of her characters to live integrated lives. Social class both enables characters to take advantage of resources and power in the community, but also may make relating to that community difficult. In some cases, such as “Life on the Moon,” working class characters may feel separated from others by status; in others, characters find that experimenting with working class practices can be empowering (Teem 72). Though Smith wants to affirm
egalitarianism, class and status persistently shape the interactions of her characters, increasing tensions and limiting possibilities.
CHAPTER FOUR
“RAISED TO LEAVE”: EDUCATION IN LEE SMITH COUNTRY

Like a lot of people around Black Rock who never had one, Lorene has great faith in the power of what she calls a “good education,” not realizing that the children you work so hard to send out will probably never come back, or will come back all changed and ashamed of you, with new ideas of their own. (Black Mountain Breakdown 25)

In his posthumous Economy and Society (1968), Max Weber defines class more broadly than Marx does, identifying an individual’s “class situation” not as the relationship to the means of production, but as the combination of the amount and type of property and monopolizable “marketable skills,” including educational credentials, an individual possesses. Classes may improve or safeguard their position by controlling competition and monopolizing educational opportunities, thereby limiting the distribution of social power and wealth (Hogan 254). Weber also states that education, along with lifestyle, typically forms the basis for social status groups, which claim “a special social esteem” and “status monopolies” distinct from but at times in conjunction with class (304). Because education is therefore connected to class and status considerations, education and credentials provide a valuable resource that can dramatically alter an individual’s social status and perhaps even class position.

However, it should be acknowledged at the outset of this discussion that economic class and education are not synonymous. In the United States, many well-educated individuals, including most artists and educators, struggle to make ends meet in obscurity, while uneducated entertainers and entrepreneurs earn huge salaries and command large staffs. Connections between parental class origins and educational attainment, as well as between education and occupational status, are significant but loose in the late twentieth century
United States (Kingston 35). Nonetheless, educational credentials provide access to further study and to professions not available without them, such as the legal and medical fields. Furthermore, educational degrees imply not only the ownership of knowledge that is valuable in the marketplace, but also the acquisition of a “general culture” (Bourdieu 25) that allows an individual to attain the status of “educated.” While education may not guarantee a particular status or class, it provides a resource that can enhance individuals’ professional and/or personal lives.

Though education can alter an individual’s value in the marketplace, Smith’s fiction focuses on education primarily as personally, rather than economically, enriching. Characters from all social classes and conditions have an affinity for academics in her texts. Most do not acquire academic knowledge to claw their way up the social ladder and into Harvard; instead, they yearn for academic insight to enhance their lives. In Smith’s critically acclaimed text *Fair and Tender Ladies*, outsider teacher Mrs. Brown introduces her young mountain student, Ivy Rowe, to letter writing, a practice that literally changes the girl’s life. The novel itself is epistolary, comprised of letters that Ivy writes to family, friends, and as a kind of journal to an absent sister. While Ivy believes that she “never became a writer at all” (316), the reader perceives that because her letters are integral to her sense of identity, Ivy is a writer in the most profound sense (Robbins 140-141). Literacy and learning literally transform her life.

Despite this attention to the private rather than public value of education, Smith’s work is a social fiction, concerned with relationships and social negotiations. The varied and contradictory attitudes towards education that her characters display often logically reflect their individual experiences of social and economic life. In Smith’s fiction, educational access
is closely connected to social class; attitudes towards education are shaped but not defined by
social class; and education, once acquired, becomes a possession with the ambiguously
valued potential, but not the guarantee, of altering status and class.

**Approaches to Education**

In *Education Still Under Siege* (1993), the second edition of Stanley Aronowitz and
Henry Giroux’s classic, *Education Under Siege: The Conservative, Liberal, and Radical
Debate Over Schooling* (1985), the authors discuss a variety of class-based approaches to
education. Historically, liberal theorists have promoted education as a potential economic and
social leveler. According to this view, schooling offers a route to social mobility, individual
development, and access to political power (65). Social activists in the 1960s, for example,
believed that credentialing women, minorities, and the working class would enable these
groups to join the professional and managerial classes (14). Radical and reproduction
theorists argue that schools replicate the social relations of capitalism, reinforcing
occupational and class structures and domination. Rather than serving as the vehicles of
mobility, schools channel students towards specific social and economic destinations through
curriculum, culture, and practices (Aronowitz and Giroux 65-67). Socialists Samuel Bowles
and Herbert Gintis argue in *Schooling in Capitalist America* (1976) that American public
schools, created by the late nineteenth century elite for social control of the working class and
immigrants, reproduce the economic structure through content and by teaching socially
desirable values and practices to working class students, such as punctuality, neatness, and
obedience. Similarly, Pierre Bourdieu, who defines education as having a “relative
autonomy” from the economy, nonetheless argues that schools reproduce social inequality by
legitimizing and disseminating the culture of the dominant class. Students familiar with the
dominant culture from their privileged homes are more likely to succeed in school, Bourdieu
argues, thereby translating “privilege” into “merit” (Jenkins 111). In the eyes of
reproductionists, therefore, schools reinforce and reinscribe the social relationships of the
larger culture.

In another approach, resistance theorists argue that while schools can reinforce
oppressive cultural and class relationships, power and meaning are not predetermined.
Teachers and students may resist oppressive practices, at times in ways that are liberating and
at times in ways that consign them to a subordinate class position (Aronowitz and Giroux 92).
For example, the father of a mountain student who is a “push out” from a town school in the
late 1980s explained his family’s alienation from the town and school in this way:

Now I don’t care who you are or how much you want to go to school, if someone
treats you like a dog you aren’t going to put up with it. You’ll either fight or walk
away. It doesn’t do any good to fight. So it’s better just to come on back here (the area
of the county) where people accept you for who you are. (Reck, Keefe, and Reck 20)

The “push out” and her family have maintained some self-respect and control by opting out of
the school system, but have also lost the power that educational credentials might have
provided. The key insight that resistance theory adds to reproduction theory is that teachers
and students are not passive in the creation of meaning or in the activities that may
nonetheless leave them socially and economically sidelined. Their activity provides a
potential source of liberation, as well as marginalization (Aronowitz and Giroux 65-69).

In Education and Power (1982), Michael Apple extends reproduction theory to
incorporate resistance. Apple argues that schools are sites for class struggle, producing and
reproducing knowledge, culture, and economic structures (22), often through contradictions
and resistance (24). For example, Paul Willis’s ethnographic study *Learning to Labor: How Working Class Kids Get Working Class Jobs* (1981) illustrates the complicated economic, cultural, and political tensions that manifest themselves in schools (96). The English working class “lads” that Willis studied reject mental labor, finding it too feminine and associating it with undesirable submission to school authorities. By doing so, however, they destroy their chances of becoming anything but manual laborers or factory workers—which were admittedly small. Though the students as a group grasp the social structure, their actions negate the possibility of positive political action, reinforcing both the mental/manual labor split and sexism (99-102). All resistances do not have negative consequences; nonetheless, according to this approach, class and education are connected through a complicated web of economics and culture, instruction and rebellion, production and reproduction.

While Lee Smith’s fiction is neither revolutionary nor didactic (A. Jones 271), the social worlds of her fiction at times reflect elements of the liberal, reproduction, and resistance approaches. Much of her work suggests that educational capital can serve as a social and economic leveler, giving students the ability to access academic institutions and professional careers, as well as valuable skills for the market place. However, her rural and mountain students have more difficulty accessing education and typically remain on the social and cultural periphery of school. Apple and Willis’ discussions of the cultural aspects of education indicate why the lack of institutional access at times results in not just separation from but also a fraught relationship with education for some of Smith’s characters.
Education in Appalachia

Historically, Southern Mountain Region residents who occupied the less fertile ridges and hollers lived there not because they loved the pioneer lifestyle but because wealthier settlers and land speculators had claimed the rich bottomland. Despite the myth that Appalachia was a classless society, Wilma Dunaway argues in *The First American Frontier* that Pre-Civil War Appalachia was divided into readily discernable categories of elites, “respectable” groups, and “poor white trash”; the latter comprised three-fifths of the region’s households and were seven times less likely than landowners to receive a basic education (260).

During the antebellum period, the controversy over free public schools caused recurring dissension in state legislatures. Because lowland planters could afford to educate their children in private academies, the planter-controlled legislatures consistently voted against funding public primary schools; Appalachian elites often voted with the planters. With the exception of Maryland, no state in the Southern Mountain Region provided its mountain students free public school during the antebellum period. As a result, white adults from the region were 2.2 times more likely to be illiterate than other Americans and 1.5 times more likely to be illiterate than other Southerners (Dunaway 292-293).

After Reconstruction, schooling became primarily a local responsibility reflecting the values and needs of rural communities, according to William Link in *A Hard Country and a Lonely Place: Schooling, Society, and Reform in Rural Virginia, 1870-1920*. In most rural areas of the state, children attended school on a part-time basis at most (70). Mountain children generally gained necessary skills and socialization from the family, the primary
institution of mountain social life. Any formal education came from community schools, which were often taught by kin. Higher education was available outside the mountains, but only the wealthiest could afford it (Eller 29-30).

However, beginning in the mid-1870s, mainstream Protestant churches began targeting the Southern Mountain Region for missionary outreach. During that decade, these churches started to include schools as part of their work with “exceptional” populations that were thought to be unreceptive to traditional evangelism, such as the freedmen and Mexicans. The churches reasoned that training the children might lead to the eventual religious conversion of these people groups. Because of this approach, educational work was at first considered a temporary expedient, dependent on the missionary status of the populations served. Southern mountaineers, who had been popularized as the “other” through local color fiction, were especially appealing for such projects because they were needy and nearby Southerners not associated with the Confederacy. By 1886, every major Protestant church had evangelical and educational initiatives designed to serve the “mountain white” (Shapiro 51-52). Several hundred denominational schools and several dozen independent schools were eventually established in the mountains as a result (42).

At the beginning of the twentieth century, a different sort of missionary brought the settlement school concept to the Southern Mountain Region. Based on the urban settlement houses that served immigrant neighborhoods, these projects allowed educated, middle class benevolence workers to “uplift” less privileged populations through friendship, example, education, and service programs (Whisnant 21). The success of Kentucky’s Hindman Settlement School, begun in 1902, sparked interest both in creating new schools and in
writing fiction to support and promote those institutions (Williams 1122-1124). Though few independent “log-cabin” settlement schools actually existed in the mountains, by the end of the 1910s most private and denominational day schools had begun some kind of settlement work, such as vocational, agricultural, or domestic arts programs (Shapiro 148-149). The impact that missionary and settlement schools had on the mountain population was substantial; some, such as Hindman and Berea College, still exist in different forms. However, many failed by the end of the Depression or were absorbed into the public school systems by the 1930s.

The majority of the benevolence workers and missionaries to the region were women, educated in the North but limited in their occupational options by the social mores of the day. According to the Kentucky Educational Television web site materials on Appalachian settlement schools, work in the mountains allowed these women to utilize their educations while remaining firmly in the feminine sphere (Minton and Hinkle). Katherine Petit, one of the founders of the Hindman Settlement School, was originally sponsored by Kentucky Federation of Women’s Clubs (KFWC), an organization of prominent women committed to benevolence and reform. The KFWC’s campaign for educational reform during the early 1900s was integral to the provision of public schools throughout the state (Forderhase 21; 30-31). In Virginia, the Richmond Education Association, a similar organization of elite women, promoted and helped secure rural educational reform in that state (Link 81).

Virginia’s reformers succeeded in many ways, establishing centralized systems and permanent buildings, increasing teacher professionalism, and expanding the curriculum (Link 127-131). Many rural students have access to better education as a result of their efforts,
which led to the 1922 compulsory education law (196). However, there were some unexpected repercussions. Improving teacher status and credentials raised the expectations of teachers, making many unwilling to accept assignments in more remote and isolated areas. Though educational reform improved education for the vast majority of Virginia’s rural children, “modernization widened educational inequities as much as narrowed it” (135).

The educators who targeted the Southern Mountain Region were confronting real deficiencies in local education. John C. Campbell’s *The Southern Highlander and His Homeland* reported that the 1910 United States Census Bureau found that illiteracy, defined as the inability to write, was more prevalent in the Southern Mountain Region than in the nation as a whole. Additionally, illiteracy was most severe in the mountainous areas of states in the region. At that time, 12.2 percent of those in the mountainous areas were illiterate; 10.9 percent of the total population of the Appalachian states was illiterate; and 3.5 percent of the national population was illiterate. Campbell notes, however, that these percentages are not evenly distributed throughout those states or even their mountainous regions. Buchanan County, Virginia, Smith’s home county, had an illiteracy rate of 34.8 percent in 1910 (262-3).

In 1962, *The Southern Appalachian Region: A Survey*, created primarily through a grant from the Ford Foundation, was compiled to facilitate denominational work by providing current information on the mountains. The study found that the region’s educational opportunities and attitudes lagged behind the rest of the nation. While the survey, conducted by a group of Appalachian colleges, universities, and regional agencies, showed that education was improving in Appalachia, dropout rates, non-promotion, a lack of funds, and generally inadequate educational programs continued to cause problems. Local “satisfaction
with an obviously inferior educational program is in large part reflective of an educational level lower than the national average” (Graff 189). The study also suggested that the low level of education in the region “is associated with and perhaps in part responsible for the low level of the economy” (188).

Social scientists have used a variety of theories to account for the low educational attainment in the Southern Mountain Region, ranging from genetic and cultural inferiority on the part of the mountaineers, to low economic growth, to the internal colonial theory, which suggests that local industries requiring manual labor, such as coal-mining, may benefit from populations not credentialed for professional work (DeYoung 52-53). Under-taxation of industry, especially those owned by absentee landlords and corporations, is often persuasively blamed for the schools’ difficulties in securing sufficient funds (Sher 42). In some areas, the schools were one of the few employers, with appointments made on criteria other than merit. In the early 1900s, John C. Campbell observed that “cousining,” employing relatives of officials or individuals with local support, diminished the quality of the mountain teachers (265-6); half a century later, Peter Schrag complained that the hiring practices of elected local officials often served political needs (221-224). Johnson Stallmann reports that numerous studies suggest that local job opportunities often determine whether students regard education as valuable, perhaps indicating that a lack of economic diversity may encourage lower educational goals (481-482). The only fact scholars have agreed on is that educational attainment in the Southern Mountain Region has been consistently lower than the rest of the nation (DeYoung 52).
Appalachian school systems continued to experience difficulties in the late twentieth century; several school districts filed suit against their state governments for perceived funding inequities (Stallmann 469). In 1982, Judge Arthur Recht ruled that the West Virginia Public Schools did not meet the state’s constitutional requirement that they be “thorough and efficient” (Eric/Cress Bulletin 11.35). In 1989, the Kentucky Supreme Court similarly found that their state public school system was unconstitutional and ordered the legislature to create a new system, which it did under the 1990 Kentucky Education Reform Act (KERA) (Eric/Cress Bulletin 12.25).

Despite these problems, Appalachian states outperformed the rest of the nation between 1970 and 1990 in educational improvement. In An American Challenge: A Report on Economic Trends and Social Issues in Appalachia (1994), Richard Couto observes that though the Southern Mountain Region still lags behind the rest of the country in educational attainment, rural Central Appalachian counties increased the percentage of local adult high school graduates by 100 percent during those decades (177), while the region as a whole doubled its proportion of college graduates. Metropolitan areas with high economic growth reported greater increases in college graduates. Couto further observes that while some metropolitan areas experienced growth in both educational attainment and the local economy, other areas had increases in educational attainment with economic declines. He concludes that “improving education in rural counties, especially in Central Appalachia, may be necessary for economic improvement but so far it has not been sufficient” (181).
“Raised to Leave”: Smith’s Experiences with Education

Smith’s own relationship to academics colors her depictions of education. Both of Smith’s parents placed a great deal of importance on the education of their only child. Her mother, a college graduate, was a high school home economics teacher; her father had briefly attended college and acquired some “notions.” Though Smith initially attended public school in her hometown, where she was a cheerleader and Miss Grundy High School, she was sent to an elite girl’s preparatory school, Saint Catherine’s in Richmond, Virginia, for her final two years of high school. At the exclusive boarding school, Smith encountered a class system more rigid than the town/holler division of Grundy; most of her peers were significantly richer and more sophisticated than the middle class mountain girl (Parrish 171).

After graduating from preparatory school, Smith attended Hollins College, a private women’s liberal arts school in Roanoke, Virginia, “because of its writing program, and because it was close to home” (Arnold 240). The extraordinary Hollins writing program, directed by Louis Rubin, Jr., proved to be a powerful shaping force for many young women writers. Smith’s graduating class of 1967 included essayist and novelist Annie Dillard, poet Rosanne Coggeshall, and critics Anne Goodwyn Jones and Lucinda Hardwick MacKethan.

Hollins offered a rigorous academic program but also attempted to inculcate traditional Southern social graces in its students, as detailed in Nancy Parrish’s book, *Lee Smith, Annie Dillard, and the Hollins Group: A Genesis of Writers*. Visits from Eudora Welty and a campus paper called *The Spinster* coexisted with early curfews and etiquette classes. Smith frequently ran afoul of the university rules and was expelled for a semester; during a semester abroad in Paris she had stayed out all night talking with a young man. Rubin, who
often shielded his students from administrative excesses, found Smith a journalism internship during the interim (Parrish 171; 178).

Despite disciplinary issues, Smith encountered a writing community at Hollins that was challenging and encouraging, with a spirit of creative play (Parrish 175). Furthermore, Smith’s teachers encouraged her to “write what you know” instead of depicting the exotic settings subjects she favored as a young writer. Though Smith was unsure how to follow this advice for some time (172), the instruction eventually guided her towards the small Southern towns and mountain communities of her later fiction.

While at Hollins, Smith encountered James Still’s book, The River of Earth. Reading on her own in the Hollins library, Smith found this “Appalachian Grapes of Wrath” that ends with the impoverished coal-mining family heading for a new mine opening—in Grundy, Smith’s hometown. Though it would be several years before she began writing about specifically mountain communities, Still’s work suggested to Smith that the mountains she had escaped from might be a rich setting for fiction (Appendix 339).

Smith’s senior thesis at Hollins was published as her first novel, The Last Day the Dogbushes Bloomed. The slim volume had won a 1968 Book-of-the-Month Club College English Writing Contest Prize and was published with the year’s eleven other winners in an anthology. An editor, impressed with Smith’s work, asked for the manuscript, which led to the book’s publication (Walsh 253). In 1977, Smith returned to Hollins as Writer in Residence; while there, she wrote a short story that became the basis for her first mountain novel, Black Mountain Breakdown (Parrish 205).
Upon graduation from Hollins, Smith married the poet James Seay, whom she accompanied to various academic jobs, working briefly as a reporter before teaching a series of high school and college-level English courses; the couple divorced in 1981. When she was having difficulty getting published during the 1970s, Smith considered abandoning writing for a career in special education, but an introduction to a new agent re-energized her literary career in 1981. As her writing career gained momentum, Smith continued to rely on teaching for her livelihood, serving as a professor of creative writing at North Carolina State from 1982 until retirement in the summer of 2000.

Smith’s education is atypical for Appalachian women who came of age in the mid-twentieth century. However, as Donna Summerlin observed in her dissertation, “A Portrait of the Woman as Artist: Woman’s Struggle for Artistic Expression in the Fiction of Six Appalachian Women Writes,” Smith’s educationally privileged status is actually the norm for Appalachian women writers of her generation (77; 80-83). The tendency for writers to hail from the best-educated segment of the population is not surprising; however, this pattern suggests that the frequency with which Smith and other Appalachian women writers foreground female protagonists with an affinity for education (87) may be inspired by personal experience rather than by a reflection of cultural and social sources.

Smith’s experiences with education are not limited to her roles as student, teacher, and professor. She also has been involved with a number of literacy and community writing projects. During a three-year sabbatical provided by a Lila Wallace/Reader’s Digest Award, Smith chose to be associated with the Hindman Settlement School, an institution best known from David Whisnant’s All That is Native and Fine. During her tenure there from 1995 to
1997, Smith taught writing at Hindman’s Adult Learning Center, as well as other Kentucky schools. Smith’s most recent publication, *Sitting on the Courthouse Bench*, is a set of oral histories collected in collaboration with a high school class in her hometown; Smith supplied editing, instruction, and a thirty-page introduction for the project.

Smith’s many creative writing students have included Jill McCorkle (*Ferris Beach, Tending to Virginia, The Cheerleader*) and Lou Crabtree. The latter had been writing for over fifty years before she attended an adult education class that Smith taught through the University of Virginia; LSU Press subsequently published Crabtree’s book, *Sweet Holler Stories*. In a Kentucky Educational Television Signature Video about Smith, Crabtree states that her author/friend says Crabtree “resembles” Ivy Rowe of *Fair and Tender Ladies*, though she never went up on a mountain to make love with a stranger, as Ivy did.

As these examples indicate, Smith’s experiences with education encompass a wide variety of social settings and classes. From her childhood in the mountain town school, to the elite prep school of Saint Catherine’s, to the challenging but restrictive atmosphere of Hollins, and finally to her own experiences as a teacher, Smith has observed both the importance and impact of academic knowledge in contrasting milieus. It is therefore not surprising that while her fiction consistently emphasizes the importance of formal learning, the reactions of her characters vary considerably. Because of her experience occupying a variety of positions in the educational system, Smith is uniquely qualified to depict the complex and conflicting ways that individuals and social classes respond to this resource.
Class Complexes

The connection between social class status and education in Lee Smith’s fiction is both clear and complex. In Lee Smith’s 1992 novel, *The Devil’s Dream*, mountain farmer Claude Hulett allows his pretty and lively daughter, Nonnie, to continue attending school well past the age when most girls in their community quit. When the local preacher asks Claude to explain, reminding him of the Bible’s warning against excessive study, Claude replies, “Nonnie is a soft girl, like her mother. I do not want her to get all wore out by hard work like her mother done. I feel real bad about her mother,” (56) who died in childbirth. Though Nonnie’s older sister, Zinnia, claims she did not care for school because “it seemed like a waste of time,” she suspects that Claude wants “Nonnie to make a teacher” (55) in the hopes that she will have a less difficult life.

This example hints at the conflicting attitudes towards education that co-exist in Smith’s work, particularly in her Appalachian fiction. The early twentieth century, rural community/mountain town of the Huletts discounts the value of education, partly because its children are needed to work at home, partly because there are few local occupations that require more than basic literacy, and partly because the attitudes encouraged by school will separate the children from community mores. Similar to the English “lads” in Paul Willis’ study, they examine the personal costs and small economic benefits of education and find the exchange undesirable (Hogan 59-60). Sister Zinnia, who is not given the option to continue her schooling, rationalizes that she did not want to anyway. Each of these attitudes suggests a devaluing of academic education based on the characters’ experiences of their social and economic world.
However, Claude Hulett has a different perspective. He wants his “soft” daughter to have an easier life than her mother, and sees schooling as the most promising route for her. He rightly intuits that gaining an education is one of the few ways a woman in Nonnie’s time and place can improve her quality of life. Unfortunately, Nonnie tries another time-tested route—finding a wealthy man—and becomes pregnant by a prosperous-looking traveler who disappears quickly, leaving debts all over town. Nonnie is quietly married off to a man in a distant mountain community and never “makes a teacher.”

Smith’s novel, *Fancy Strut* (1973), is set a world away from *The Devil’s Dream*, in Alabama in the late 1960s. Nonetheless, the community’s attitudes towards education are similarly complex. As the fictional town of Speed, Alabama, is poised to celebrate its Sesquicentennial, an event that reveals the economic and social tensions in this small town, its residents represent a variety of social classes and educational backgrounds, including the fading aristocracy of Miss Iona Flowers and the rising middle class of Frances Pitt (Buchanan 329). Both have a similar view of education, however, that privilege its social and status elements over academics.

Miss Iona, the last surviving member of a once prominent local family, is devoted to a romantic concept of art, beauty, and truth. While her love of the Romantic poets and her passion for classical art suggest an appreciation for education, Miss Iona actually has a rather limited vision. She uses her aristocratic knowledge to separate herself from those who do not live up to her standards—which means everyone in Speed. She regards herself as a superior and separate Southern lady (Wesley 65) and uses her static image of Art for status and distance (62).
Miss Iona’s distaste for the physical and the “vulgar” were evident in her refusal of a suitor. When Miss Iona was in her forties, a local biology teacher repeatedly asked her for “dinner dates.” She did not pursue a relationship, partially because the man in question was from out of town and she did not know his family’s social status. However, Miss Iona also “doubted very much that she could have forced herself to sortir with a man who daily dissected small green frogs” (165). Scientific knowledge is repugnant to Miss Iona if it has an overt connection to the physical world; only bloodless, idealistic art, fit for a perfect lady, interests her.

Frances Pitt contrasts with Miss Iona in many ways. A member of the rising middle class, her pudginess, polyester pantsuits, and gracelessness embody all that Miss Iona hates in contemporary Speed. While the elderly lady strives for aristocratic refinement, Frances enthusiastically pushes her pretty daughter, Theresa, to win majorette competitions and to run for Sesquicentennial Queen. Frances wants Theresa to succeed socially and believes that the girl’s beauty is her way to an easy life, just as Claude Hulett believed an education would be Nonnie’s route.

However, when Theresa announces that she is quitting the Queen competition, Frances is confused at her daughter’s indifference. Frances is further upset when Theresa suggests that quitting the contest may give her more time to study. Frances “didn’t associate studying with Theresa. Studying was something Frances had had to do, and now here was Theresa taking it up! Theresa’s face would probably break out next, and then she’d start getting fat” (156). Studying was Frances’ punishment for not being born beautiful, she believes, and she cannot imagine why Theresa would study voluntarily.
When Theresa later announces that she may become a biology teacher, the same profession that Miss Iona found repulsive, Frances is aghast. Like a number of mothers in Smith’s work who actively discourage their daughters from seeming “too smart” because it will hurt their chances of snagging a rich husband, Frances believes that Theresa is developing the wrong resource. Frances wants Theresa follow the route of the traditional Southern belle and use beauty and charm, not intellect, to succeed socially and catch a desirable mate (Wesley 3; 136-137).

Frances is not the only mother in Smith’s work with this perspective. For example, in *Something in the Wind*, Brooke Kincaid’s mother encourages her to avoid appearing “too smart” at college, in order to become popular (Wesley 146). Given the social climate in the early to middle twentieth century, this attitude is not illogical, but Smith always depicts it as misguided. Attempts to live up to the image of the Southern belle or lady in Smith’s work routinely lead to a separation of the individual from the community (Wesley 57). Nonetheless, many of Smith’s town characters regard academic education as a resource a woman should consider secondary to physical beauty and popularity. Because too much education can diminish a woman’s chances to “marry up,” it can limit, rather than facilitate, social mobility.

Though Frances and Miss Iona have radically different world views, both stress the social aspect of school, in its knowledge and activities, respectively. Miss Iona uses her love of poetry and art to separate herself from the uneducated Philistines in town; Frances does not value the content of school, but rather the extra-curricular activities that can spotlight her daughter’s beauty and improve her social connections. While schooling supplies marketable
credentials and skills, it also can provide opportunities to gain status markers and compete for power in non-academic areas.

Though *Fancy Strut* is set in the non-Appalachian South, the attitudes depicted in it are consistent with those in Smith’s mountain towns. In *Black Mountain Breakdown*, for example, Crystal Spangler’s mother, Lorene, focuses on the social benefits of an education. Like Frances, Lorene encourages Crystal to become a New South version of the lady, to participate in extra-curricular activities that can provide social power by attracting young men (Wesley 153). Crystal makes cheerleader her freshman year, wins the local beauty pageant, and dates frequently. When Crystal is gone at college, paid for with Lorene’s inheritance, neighbors inquire, asking “if Crystal is in a sorority where she was” (152). Because Lorene and her neighbors have not acquired a college education themselves, they view school and college primarily in terms of its social advantages.

Smith’s texts suggest a perceptual difference in her characters who become more educated. She addressed the question in a 1983 interview with Edward Arnold; at the time, *Oral History* was her most recent publication:

> Several people . . . have said that anytime I have a fairly well-read character in my work, he’s always weak and doomed. I really don’t know what to say about that. In terms of *Oral History*, I’m much more like Jennifer who comes with the tape recorder, or like Richard Burlage than I am like anybody else in the book. But people who are not what we think of as intellectuals are often stronger. They may be terrible and wrongheaded, but they are able to be stronger in their opinions, more decisive in their actions, because they don’t know the alternatives. Maybe, to some extent, I’m romanticizing them. And maybe I’m not giving them credit for complexity. But it does seem that, a lot of times, when people do “get culture” or “get learning,” it does tend to water them down. (349)

This lengthy quotation suggests Smith’s own identification with “intellectuals” as well as her sense that education can be a mixed blessing. While Smith does not slight the value of
education, she recognizes that in addition to social and personal advantages, it may have drawbacks.

As these examples indicate, the social position of Smith’s characters and their personal experience with education shape their responses to education and school. The relationship of education and class in Smith is even further complicated, however, by the acknowledged orality/literacy theme in Smith’s work. Many of her texts overtly contrast the mountain world view and its connection with orality to an educated or outsider perspective based on literacy; repeatedly, Smith’s texts privilege the former, but not without ambiguity. The orality/literacy or spoken/written language dichotomy has received significant critical attention in the secondary literature on Smith, though many discussions focus only on *Oral History*. As Anne Goodwyn Jones observes in “The World of Lee Smith,” the author “likes words in people’s mouths better than on a page” (251), a colloquial but fair summary of the critical consensus. Throughout Smith’s work, characters that trust written rather than spoken language, such as Richard Burlage of *Oral History*, are the most alienated from their communities and their true selves (Dale 21). So, while education may provide a useful resource, it can also imprison characters through its formalization of language.

Yet, to suggest a simplistic “speaking good/writing bad” approach denies the subtlety and cultural tension inherent in Smith’s fiction, a fact recognized by thoughtful critics. Dorothy Robbins argues perceptively in “Personal and Cultural Transformation: Letter Writing in Lee Smith’s *Fair and Tender Ladies*” that the novel suggests a cultural transition between oral and literary narratives. The elderly Cline sisters’ stories become Ivy Rowe’s letters, which are the forerunners of her daughter Joli’s novels (144). In “The Orality of *Oral
History,” Anne Goodwyn Jones observes that Smith’s book “celebrates writing, not over against orality, but as a way of preserving orality” (19). Furthermore, Dale demonstrates that the mountain vernacular in Oral History can be just as restrictive as academic speech (26-27). While Smith’s texts often privilege spoken over written culture, to suggest that Smith depicts an absolute opposition between spoken/written language or folk/educated perspectives oversimplifies her work.

In Smith’s fiction, social class influences individual access to all aspects of education. Holler and rural characters have restricted physical access to schooling; furthermore, their family and cultural backgrounds often make it more difficult for them to connect with the culture and content of school. Smith’s protagonists may value education, as Summerlin observed (x), but they are often unusual in their families or communities. Town students are more likely to have the access, time, finances, and understanding necessary to secure educational resources, though they often view schooling in terms of social rather than academic advancement. Wealthier students with better access are more likely to gain education and related social connections.

Whether acquired education alters class standing is debatable. In Smith’s more contemporary work, individuals with little or no education are generally marked as working class, which limits social status. However, in most situations in Smith’s fiction, educational credentials prepare students for further study or professional jobs that exist primarily outside the local community. The social structure does not readily provide spaces for them to fill, so to utilize their education fully, graduates must travel to a market that values their educational resources. Their social class may change when they leave, but their local status and the
economic usefulness of their education is often murky. Though Smith’s work often affirms the personal value of education, professional, social, and economic benefits are less assured and may require leaving the mountain community for a new market to maximize returns.

**Education and Culture**

The purpose of education for the mountaineers has been a topic of discussion since missionaries began targeting the region in the late nineteenth century. Early missionary/teachers focused on educating the mountaineers in “Christian and American values, and in the ways of modern life” (Shapiro 41). Many educators and settlement workers in the early twentieth century founded schools that provided instruction while attempting to preserve what they saw as valuable in mountain culture (Whisnant 7-8). Smith’s fiction indicates that she is similarly interested in the relationship of her mountain students to the culture of the school and the community, but her conclusions are quite different from those arrived at by early mountain educators.

Theodore Roosevelt’s Country Life Commission faulted rural schools for teaching the values of urban America, thereby supposedly encouraging unwanted migration to the cities (Shapiro 230). This concern about rural schools in general has been reiterated through the years by educators in institutes serving Appalachia. Many mountain schools, such as the John C. Campbell folk school, specifically focused on educating the students “back to the community” rather than equipping them for competition in urban labor markets.

Efforts to provide an education for mountains students that discouraged them from leaving the rural community have taken a variety of forms. The State of Virginia added a vocational agricultural program to selected rural high schools in the early twentieth century to
overcome local resistance to extended schooling and to encourage modern techniques and progressive attitudes among farmers (Link 160). These programs were often weak, and agricultural education was never truly accessible to or popular among rural public school students (163-164). Folk schools attempted to create “a viable rural community in the mountains” by teaching mountaineers elements of the own culture, such as carving and weaving, as well as basic literacy and agricultural methods. Based on the Danish folk school model, the John C. Campbell Folk School in Brasstown, North Carolina, is the best example (Shapiro 241) of this well-intentioned but culturally dubious project. Campbell’s school also helped found the Southern Highland Handicraft Guild, which promoted mountain crafts and craftsmanship; the organization still maintains its headquarters on the Blue Ridge Parkway Folk Art Center. In an industrializing nation, handicrafts are not technically vocational products, but handicap training supposedly encouraged students to remain on the farm by teaching them “practical” and enjoyable skills that blended with local culture (Shapiro 227-8).

More recent efforts have focused on the curriculum of mountain schools, which is often described as irrelevant to its students. Numerous attempts, both helpful and ineffectual, have been made to connect the life of the mountain community to school. Perhaps the best-known contemporary example is Eliot Wigginton’s excellent Foxfire projects that make the students’ community an extended classroom and use potential publication in the students’ own Foxfire magazine as a motivating factor. The Appalachian Studies Movement, begun in the 1970s, provides critically sophisticated methods for both insider and outsider students to use in studying the region; while not necessarily intended to promote residency in the Southern Mountain Region, the varied programs based on this educational approach
encourage regional pride, understanding, and, at times, activism. Though educators have approached Appalachia with a variety of goals and projects, the connection of schooling to the mountain culture has been a recurring topic of discussion.

Smith’s fiction is notable for the absence of educational projects that focus on cultural preservation. While Smith’s texts acknowledge the relationship between education and culture, teachers routinely bring outsider culture in rather than attempt to preserve “the best” in mountain culture. Some outsiders appreciate and record mountain culture in their own writings, drawings, and photographers, but these projects almost never become part of their educational programming. The most notable exception is the unsuccessful project which frames the novel, *Oral History*; college student Jennifer Bingham manages to completely muddle her assignment and compound her misunderstanding of her family through the project. Outsider orchestrated cultural projects are seldom affirmed in Smith’s narratives.

Smith’s work never depicts folk schools based on the Danish model, though *Fair and Tender Ladies* includes a settlement school with vocational and community services components. Since Smith’s work presumes the presence of a vital folk community, a unifying folk school is unnecessary. Smith’s work also does not promote handicrafts as a viable economic alternative, though practical artistry is applauded. In *Fair and Tender Ladies*, Oakley Fox may whittle wooden animals for his amusement, but the novel never hints that he should make them for profit, as the handicraft schools might.

True vocational education that provides marketable skills is included in Smith’s contemporary texts; characters who prefer to work with their hands are not slighted in favor of academic scholars. For example, in *Family Linen*, beautician Candy hopes that her
assistant will attend beauty school and “move up in the world,” indicating that a vocational course would give her extra power and options. Despite this fact, Smith’s work never suggests that mountain characters as a group should be restricted to vocational or handicraft training to encourage their continued residency on the farm, a situation that would virtually guarantee them working class status and limit future options.

Instead, Smith’s work portrays learning situations that reflect traditional academic structures, thereby providing some continuity between schools inside and outside the mountains. Throughout Smith’s fiction, “school” may mean a mountain one-room building, a town consolidated school, a small college, or even a mentor relationship, but it refers to an academic setting that reflects those outside the mountains. Additionally, the content of academic courses is typically consistent with a more national curriculum (Adams 147-148). Smith exhaustively researches her books and certainly knew the role that settlement schools and handicrafts played in the mountain schools; furthermore, her texts display ambivalence toward characters who leave the mountains when they gain education. Nonetheless, Smith’s fiction continually represents school relationships that, while they may be tailored for the needs of specific local students, are not watered down or altered for the rural communities.

The Role of Teachers

Teachers, whether traditional, radical, or in between, have been part of the mountain literary tradition almost since its inception. Educators helped shape the region’s image by soliciting support through letters, essays, and short stories written for local color publications and novels. The campaigns were well intended but often stressed the ignorance and poverty in the mountains, publicly obliterating the real social and economic distinctions in the mountains
(Williams 247-250). As the settlement schools began to fade in power, novels began to feature individual patrons who sponsored deserving rural youngsters (Williams 258-9), a pattern suggested in Smith’s work by mentor characters such as Miss Torrington in *Fair and Tender Ladies* and Miss Covington in *The Devil’s Dream*.

A roll call of mountain fiction writers would find that many, including Lucy Furman, Harriette Arnow, and James Still, served as teachers or librarians in the hills. The access to authorship provided by local color fiction in the late nineteenth century partially explains this phenomenon. According to Richard Brodhead, this genre gave those with basic literary skills and knowledge of a folk culture the credibility needed to publish (151). Teachers easily met these criteria; early twentieth century writers such as Lucy Furman, who had worked at the Hindman School, utilized their own experiences as teachers as fodder for their stories. The tendency of teachers to use their personal experience in their writing continued well into the twentieth century, as exemplified by Harriette Arnow, best known for the Appalachian classic *The Dollmaker*, who fictionalized her experiences as a teacher in rural Kentucky in *The Mountain Path*, and by Catherine Marshall’s popular *Christy* (1967), which was transformed into a charming but stereotype-ridden television series in the 1990s.

With the possible exception of her first novel, *The Last Day the Dogbushes Bloomed*, every Smith novel features educators; many of her short stories, whether set in the mountains or in the larger South, include teachers as well. Notable examples include Crystal Spangler in *Black Mountain Breakdown*; Richard Burlage and Pearl Cantrell Bingham in *Oral History*; Sybil Bird and Lacey Bird in *Family Linen*; Mrs. Brown, Miss Maynard, and Miss Torrington in *Fair and Tender Ladies*; Miss Covington in *The Devil’s Dream*; and Alice Scully of “The
Happy Memories Club.” Additionally, a number of texts include “smart” or book loving individuals such as Grant Spangler of Black Mountain Breakdown, Jink Cantrell in Oral History, Ivy Rowe in Fair and Tender Ladies, Grace Shepherd in Saving Grace, Nonnie and Lizzie Bailey in The Devil’s Dream, the grandmother and granddaughter in “Artists,” and the father and mistress in “Live Bottomless.”

Many of these teachers are missionaries or benevolence workers who travel to the mountains, bringing with them academic and cultural knowledge from the larger world. This “outsider” perspective provides a useful alternative for her isolated and insulated characters. Teachers “were likely to say things that you wouldn’t hear at home” (Appendix 350), providing a mental breath of fresh air to both rural and “town” students. In “A Post-Colonial Assessment of Rural Teacher Characters in Australian, Canadian, and American Novels,” Mary Adams affirms that knowledge of a wider world is one of the primary gifts that Crystal Spangler of Black Mountain Breakdown and Richard Burlage of Oral History give to their students. She suggests that teachers often are associated with metropolitan centers, allowing them to provide their students information about a more cosmopolitan world and the skills needed to succeed in it (4).

These benevolent teachers are generally of a more privileged social class than those they instruct. The Browns in Fair and Tender Ladies astonish Ivy by paying someone to cut wood for them, and Mrs. Brown repeatedly offers Ivy’s family financial assistance and whatever educational encouragement she can. Her visiting niece, Molly, who eventually returns to work with a local settlement school, unintentionally impresses Ivy with her wealth of “17 Hair Ribands, 5 Dresses, 3 Skirts, 4 Camisoles, 3 Shirtwaists, Pink Stationary, A White
Bible, Ballay Shoes! A Bathing Costume!” [sic] (46), her convent school education, and a father who takes her shopping in New York.

The association of academic knowledge with privileged outsiders does not necessarily increase its value for the rural or mountain character, however. Most regard education as either useless in their current context or simply unattainable. Some characters, often the protagonists, long for an education because formal learning personally enriches them. Nonetheless, the connection of academics with wealthy outsiders does not make it desirable in the eyes of many rural characters; in fact, it may seem less real because of its association with another social world.

For some, however, this connection to a larger world can make education—and teachers—more appealing. *Oral History* features the troubled romance of mountain girl Dory Cantrell and outsider teacher Richard Burlage; both are attracted to the difference the other represents (A. Jones 16). Smith’s tragic love story incorporates the local color motif of an ill-fated romance between a sophisticated outsider and a mountain girl; Rodger Cunningham observes that *Oral History* is the John Fox, Jr., classic “the *Trail of the Lonesome Pine* minus the sublimation and the wishful ending” (49). However, in Fox’s text, the male outsider is an engineer who comes to the mountains to exploit its mineral resources and simultaneously “develops” the mountain girl, June, by helping finance her education (Batteau 71). In Smith’s text, the outsider is a male teacher. While male teachers appear in local color mountain texts—such as Chad’s schoolmaster, Caleb Hazel, in *The Little Shepherd of Kingdom Come*—most outsider women are depicted as teachers or nurses, reflecting the reality that
many mountain benevolence workers at the turn of the twentieth century were educated women searching for meaningful work (Whisnant 12-13; 33).

Some of the best known mountain texts featuring outsider teachers, such as Lucy Furman’s *Quare Women*, based on her experiences at Kentucky’s Hindman Settlement School, and Harriette Arnow’s *Mountain Path*, a fictionalized account of her teaching in the Kentucky hills, feature potential romances and inevitably unsuccessful relationships between female teachers and male mountaineers. Smith’s work alters the pattern by creating an outsider male teacher who romances and abandons the older sister of a mountain student.

This device makes *Oral History’s* schoolteacher, Richard Burlage, somewhat unusual, both in Appalachian fiction and in Smith’s work. Besides making this teacher male, Smith gives him more space in this multiple-narrator text than any other character. In fact, Burlage receives the longest narrative Smith ever put into the mouth of a male character. Furthermore, Burlage is the only character in *Oral History* who writes rather than speaks his story, distancing him from the book’s supposedly “oral” narratives and emphasizing his status as an “outsider.” Finally, and most surprisingly for readers accustomed to her frank, no-nonsense characters, Smith states that:

LS: Richard Burlage is one of my favorite characters. I just love Richard Burlage.

RS: I had read that you said he was one of your favorites, and I wondered why, since he is so pretentious.

LS: It’s just the alter ego thing. I think that’s one reason we write, that there are sides of us that don’t have a chance to come out, and there is a sort of prissy Hamlet part of me. It’s sort of timid and pretentious. [Laughter] There is some way that I do identify with Richard Burlage. (R. Smith 22)
Smith’s choice to make the outsider teacher a man allows her to suggest the impact of the invading outside world in greater complexity than if gender identity was reversed. The convention of the male industrialist who “develops” both the mountains and its lovely women can easily be transformed into a tale of symbolic plundering of the region’s resources and its women, much like the metaphoric “rape” of the South in the Civil War. Though a teacher, Burlage is loosely associated with industrialization; when he revisits the mountains during the Depression, he realizes that the destruction of the area by lumber and coal-mining industries began while he was first teaching, though he was unaware of it. Furthermore, like outside capitalists, Burlage leaves destruction in his wake; his affair with Dory leaves her pregnant and pining for a life outside of the mountains. Ultimately, she commits suicide by laying her head on the railroad tracks, run over by the train Burlage promised to take her away on. By making Burlage a male teacher, Smith creates an image of violation that would not have worked as well had Burlage been female.¹

Furthermore, Burlage’s status as a teacher allows the narrative to suggest ambivalence about resources from outside the mountains in a way not be possible if Burlage were an industrialist or engineer. Burlage’s academic identity is reflected in his tendency to abstraction and self-absorption, as his entry on the train ride back to Richmond suggests:

I am a sinner, bound for hell; I am a saint, purified by love; I am only a fool . . . I will come back here and marry her . . . I shall never marry, I shall become an artist, I will transform all of this into a novel. (167)

¹In *Fair and Tender Ladies*, teacher Mrs. Brown must leave because she is pregnant by a local man. Additionally, teacher Miss Torrington kisses student Ivy Rowe on the neck, shocking the girl and sending her into the arms of a boyfriend, by whom she is soon pregnant. While violations occur in each situation, neither is paired with the industrial invasion of the mountains.
Burlage’s perspective is connected to his aesthetic sense (S. Jones 110), not the real people and events in his life. Outsider minister Aldous Rife identifies Burlage as “not a fool . . . . He was something much more dangerous to my mind, a total innocent” (185). As Fred Hobson notes, this is the same language used to describe Sutpen in Faulkner’s Absalom, Absalom, a different sort of innocent associated with the mountains (31), whose single-mindedness also destroys his dreams and family.

Burlage’s teaching is not unfruitful, however. Dory’s younger brother, Jink, learns from Burlage a less violent, more sensitive model of masculinity than the one offered by feudists and moonshiners in his family (S. Jones 111). When Jink disappears from the mountains to seek his fortune, his prospects seem bright. Though Burlage fails in his behavior with Dory, he has had an affirmative impact on Jink.

That impact is not unambiguously positive, however. As a result of Jink’s education, he leaves the mountains and disappears from the novel. Smith’s work often suggests that though education gives individuals insights and options, it separates them from the mountain community by providing alternative and at times contrasting modes of perception (R. Smith 163; Eckerd 126; Jennings 11-14). By making the blundering yet well-meaning Burlage a male teacher rather than industrialist, Smith suggests the danger and mixed blessings that both industrialization and education provide her mountain characters.

Burlage, a Richmonder of genteel birth, specifically comes to Black Rock and Hoot Owl Holler because he wants to serve “in the hinterlands”; a number of Smith’s wealthy, outsider teachers indicate a similar sense of mission, along with varying degrees of sympathy and paternalism. In Fair and Tender Ladies, Miss Torrington of Boston informs Ivy, “I feel
that God has sent me here to save you Ivy, to offer you a life which will enable you to use your gifts to his glory” (100). In the same novel, teacher Mrs. Brown and her husband, who is “a forren preacher from the North but does not preach,” suggest the ethnographers and missionary women who flocked to the hills at the beginning of the twentieth century; in fact, they superficially resemble John C. Campbell, who had a seminary degree, and his wife, Olive Dame Campbell, who founded the John C. Campbell Folk School.

Smith’s more contemporary texts also include benevolent “cultural” workers; she has suggested that in contemporary times the VISTAs and Peace Corp workers who flocked to the region as part of the 1960s “War on Poverty” represent the outsider in the same way that teachers once did. In “Bob, a Dog,” the story of Cheryl and David’s divorce, the husband originally came to the community as a Peace Corp worker. In “Life on the Moon,” VISTAs with the federal Poverty Program are frequently assigned to the once-prosperous coal town. When the protagonist’s cousin moves in with a VISTA worker without marrying him, her parents do not protest because the young man had gone to Princeton. While these contemporary cultural workers are generally less patronizing than the earlier teachers in their relationships with the communities, perceived differences of class and culture complicate the workers’ interactions with local residents.

Benevolent individuals do not have to travel to the backwoods to manifest a patronizing attitude. In Saving Grace, Mrs. Thoroughgood (an obviously ironic name) takes Grace in when her father is jailed in Chattanooga in the early 1960s; the woman is apparently a social worker of sorts, though Grace is never sure of her role. Mrs. Thoroughgood asks Grace probing questions seemingly designed to help her “share” her feelings and purchases
new clothes for her. As Grace starts to feel more confident, however, she realizes that “people such as her [Mrs. Thoroughgood] think they want to help you, but then they don’t know what to do with you when you start to get up on your own . . . They like you better when you’re down-and-out” (134). Benevolent motives, while often genuine, can be a hindrance if not coupled with sincere respect and understanding for the human being on the receiving end of the “kindness.” The perception of difference, frequently seen by outsiders in terms of class, education, and culture, can add hierarchical elements to the relationship and mar the best intentions.

Richard Burlage, Mrs. Brown, Miss Torrington, and the contemporary cultural workers all come to the mountains with the intention of serving the community. However, all become involved, romantically and disastrously, with Appalachian residents. Burlage romances Dory Cantrell and leaves her pregnant with twins; Mrs. Brown becomes pregnant by Ivy’s Uncle Revel; Miss Torrington makes a romantic advance towards Ivy that scares the girl into a premature sexual relationship with Lonnie Dash; and both the Peace Corp and VISTA volunteers ultimately fail in their relationships with local women. Anne Goodwyn Jones observes that difference often draws Smith’s lovers together, but the illusion of merging and thus submerging the very differences that created the attraction dooms the relationships (16). Stanley argues that Smith’s work contains repeating images of cross-class romance that inevitably silence the working class character (339). Smith’s teacher/community member relationships often include an element of “slumming,” as in the case of Richard Burlage, whose diary reveals that he never intended to commit to Dory Cantrell. Smith typically pairs outside teachers with community members who are not their students, making the ethical
violation less overt. However, the negative effects of cross-class relationships are more severe when educators or cultural workers are involved because the formalized relationship implies that a trust that is broken with the affair. Inevitably, the romances end badly and the degree of betrayal is greater because the initial responsibility assumed was greater.

Though a number of teacher/community member romances end badly, relationships between teachers and the mountain community are not inevitably exploitive in Smith’s work. In *Fair and Tender Ladies*, Molly Bainbridge, the niece of Mrs. Brown, forms a fast friendship with Ivy Rowe during Molly’s summer vacation in the mountains. While the girls hail from radically different social classes, Molly and Ivy are not irrevocably separated by economic and social differences. Ivy writes her family that “[w]hen we pull our hair the same way and put Molly’s ribbons in it, when we put our faces together then staring into Mrs. Browns glass, why then it is hard to tell who is who, and who has got freckles and dark hair, and who aint” (46). The implication is that underneath the trapping of wealth, the girls are not very different—a fact that Ivy recognizes.

Perhaps Molly sees the connection as well, because she returns to the region as an educator in the 1960s and proves an adaptable community worker at the “Majestic Mission School.” Molly seeks Ivy’s advice about who to hire for a proposed college and listens to Ivy’s suggestion to “go slow” (295). In one instance, Molly goes against Ivy’s advice by taking an unemployed father to court for keeping his children out of school. When the man testifies that he lacks money for school clothes and shoes for his children, Molly buys them

---

2 Molly’s work in Majestic builds on previous settlement schoolwork and attempts to serve the whole community through health and educational projects, as many contemporary “missionaries” to Appalachia in the 1960s did.
shoes and starts a foundation to help other children. Though Molly occupies a more prosperous class than those she works with, tends to be quick to judge, and would never be mistaken for a mountain woman, she learns from the community and finds a space for herself. Ivy eventually stops helping her at the settlement school because Molly knows the community well enough to work on her own. Her respect for Ivy as an equal tempers her approach to the community and helps make her work successful.

Molly is not the only teacher whose attitude positively shapes the response of the community. Miss Covington in The Devil’s Dream is a public health nurse serving the area where the Bailey family lives. She succeeds because she approaches her duties as “a job of work,” not as charity or with condescension. Lizzie observes that Miss Covington’s successor manages to undo all her good works by acting bossy (100). As in the case of Molly, the stress is placed on the best way to approach proud mountaineers. Miss Covington is the perfect mentor because she respects Lizzie’s talents and community while offering needed guidance.

Educational Access

Despite the efforts of these dedicated teachers, many rural residents in Smith’s texts are not able to secure a complete education because of uneven educational access. Harriette Arnow states in her introduction of The Mountain Path that in the 1920s the difference between the quality of education available to the county-seat dweller and the rural family in Appalachian Kentucky was perceptible and growing. Children who lived near town might have access to a graded school; backwoods children had one-room schoolhouses and little state funding, and those who wanted to go beyond eighth grade “had to come from a family affluent enough to pay the expenses of studying away from home” (vii).
This situation recurs throughout Smith’s texts. Students who live in mountain towns often can attend a small, local school, have access to roads, and, since town residents are more likely to be merchants or professionals, may have the financial means to go away for education if necessary. Holler or rural characters, in contrast, often only have sporadic access to teachers who are not permanent residents, often leave school to help on the family farm, and are less likely to have the funds to travel for a high school education. Rural children often must live away from home to complete their programs of study, a practice that contradicts the communal values of staying close to kin. In *Oral History*, teacher Richard Burlage notes in his diary that the mountain children he teaches at the turn of the century must board in the town of Black Rock for high school; only those considered “smart” do so.

The brightest students are rewarded with access to and success in the outside world; in Smith’s work, when students leave the community for study, they seldom return to live. In *Fair and Tender Ladies*, Ivy sends her daughter Joli to live with her aunt in town for high school, and then further away for college despite the girl’s hesitation. Joli never moves back; when she briefly considers relocating after a divorce, Ivy counsels her that “you have got past the point where you could ever come back here and live. I know it and you know it” (281). Ivy’s son, Danny Ray, also moves away; he becomes an attorney, marries a psychologist and runs for office as a “fat cat Republican.” His education and choices have prepared him for a world beyond the mountains, and he finds a home there.

Many of these children leave the mountains because of economics. As mines and mills close, as they do in Smith’s texts such as *Family Linen*, *Oral History*, and *Fair and Tender Ladies*, people are forced to go elsewhere for work. Tanya Bennett observes that the forces of
capitalism harvest the children from the mountains, just as they did they timber and coal (89).

However, Smith’s work also suggests that the small town milieu does not always welcome its wayward children home. In *Family Linen*, a novel set in the contemporary North Carolina, soccer mom Myrtle is content to stay in the resurgent lumber mill town where she grew up, but Lacey and Sybill, the college educated family members, cannot. While these women have valid personal reasons for moving away, the text suggests that their educational credentials and the alternative perspectives they have gained are not appropriate for the small town setting. To get the appropriate return on their educational investment and to find an intellectual environment that accommodates them, they must leave.

In Smith’s work, town and outsider characters not only have greater physical access to educational facilities, they also have stronger connections to the social world of school. Lower class and mountain characters remain on the periphery of school social life. In *Black Mountain Breakdown*, town girl Crystal Spangler keeps her working class lover from the holler a secret because she cannot be seen with him and maintain her status. While she is nice to the kids from the hollers, she does not regard them or her teenage lover as social equals (Stanley 333-334).

The connections working class students forge with the dominant class in schools are difficult and tenuous. In *Saving Grace*, protagonist Grace Shepherd is the daughter of a Holiness preacher who handles snakes as part of his religious services. Grace never has friends at school, makes bad grades because of her frequent absences due to family and church obligations, and is often taunted by students who put garden snakes in her desk. When she begins a new school in the seventh grade, however, a young girl who shares her love of
drawing and horses befriends Grace. Marie Royal (note the aristocratic connotations), the adopted daughter of an artist and a professor, shares her lunches with Grace, who frequently has none. Though Marie’s parents take a benevolent interest in Grace for a time, a violent Shepherd family quarrel, witnessed by Marie and her mother, ends the friendship. Ivy graduates from eighth grade but never returns to formal schooling because she “has too much to contend with” at home and because she is now truly an outsider in the school. The social connections and expectations that keep town students connected to the local school may be missing for rural students.

As these examples indicate, schools convey not only academic information and skills but also knowledge of school culture. The school environment routinely affirms those who best meet the town standards, which are typically set by its wealthiest contingent. However, Smith’s work also suggests that academically smart and socially savvy students can learn to negotiate through the terrain of school—if they choose to do so.

This point is most clear in News of the Spirit’s “The Bubba Stories,” a college tale reminiscent of Smith’s own university experience at Hollins College. Protagonist Charlene Christian grew up in non-mountainous peanut farm country as the daughter of the community store proprietor. A thoroughly middle class girl, she experiences mild culture shock when she attends a Virginian women’s college where she has a scholarship, thanks to the intervention of a local judge’s wife. While her dormitory suite mates welcome and befriend her, most are much wealthier than Charlene: roommate Dixie Claiborne was a Memphis debutante, Melissa from Charleston has a boyfriend who will inherit a house on the Battery, and Donnie’s mother buys her a cabin near the college so she and her friends can “relax.”
Charlene quickly copies the coeds’ “strangely uniform appearance” by spending almost a semester’s worth of pocket money on A-line skirts, McMullen blouses, and a pair of red Pappagallo shoes; her roommate allows her to borrow cable-knit sweaters. Though Charlene is not poor (her parents reward her for good work in college with a used but mint condition baby-blue convertible), what she learns first in school is how to look rich. The school subtly teaches how to create a privileged image, a skill that apparently can be learned, before it teaches more academic skills. Charlene learns to fit in, thereby easing her transition to school. If her family were less affluent, however, this transition would be problematic. Connections and financial support help make her social education possible.

Finally, in additional to greater physical and social connections to education, town and outsider characters also have a greater affinity with the knowledge taught there than rural and holler students. Because of this, the children of town professionals have greater ease in assimilating and utilizing educational capital. Town children are not necessarily good students, nor do their families focus on education for its own sake. In *Black Mountain Breakdown*, middle class Crystal Spangler’s mother focuses on her daughter’s social success in high school, valuing beauty pageants, dating, and cheerleading over the honor roll (Wesley 153). However, Crystal is a bright student who especially enjoys English, partly because her

---

3 In Smith’s *Something in the Wind* (1971), Brooke Kincaid notes that the girls at her boarding school wear the same brands of clothes Charlene lists. However, Brooke responds by trying to conform to a restrictive social image (Wesley 144-145). Charlene invents a wild brother, Bubba, whose adventures give her identity until she can claim her own experiences. She creates a past and a self, something that Brooke cannot do without breaking free of the restrictive environment. The later story has more hope for young women’s ability to deal with social expectations.
father has read her poems throughout her childhood. Crystal’s access to education in the home translates into comfort and success in the classroom.

In “Education and Class Formation: the Peculiarities of the Americas,” David Hogan offers evidence suggesting that working class parents often harbor ambivalent attitudes towards schooling. While these parents recognize the advantages education provides in terms of mobility, occupational choice, and personal benefits, they also dislike the values, style, and behavior their children learn at school. Some remain suspicious of learning in general and suspect that mental labor does not constitute “‘real’ work” (51-52).

This suspicion appears in some of Lee Smith’s characters, such as Cheryl in the short story “Bob, a Dog.” Cheryl’s husband, who came to her rural hometown as a Peace Corp worker, has left her. As Cheryl reflects on her marriage, she recalls how David “taught at the college all those years instead of getting a real job” (14). In the novel Saving Grace, the title character discovers that Marie Royal’s father “wasn’t a real doctor, he just worked over at the college in Cullowhee. It must not be much of a job, I thought, for him to be home in the afternoon” (45-46). When asked in a recent interview if these comments are indicative of the general attitude towards education in the mountains, Smith replied:

Oh, yes. I think people do realize that if you want get a better job, to get out of the holler, then you have to get an education. On the other hand, people are scared of it. Like this woman [the mother of a student in an oral history project Smith helped organize] who cried because her daughter was going off to college. She knew absolutely, and she was right, that she would lose her, that she would not be the same when she came home, and she won’t be. So it’s a very fraught situation. (Appendix 350)

This ambivalent reaction to education therefore suggests both a fear of its tendency to distance students from their families and a recognition of its power. Smith’s rural characters
may be indifferent to or respect education, but because of lack of personal experience, they often do not know its applications and value. Fear that education will take children physically or emotionally away from their homes and confusion about the real value of academic knowledge contribute to a consistent perceptual distance between Smith’s rural communities and formal schooling.

Furthermore, the difference between the culture of school and home is more radical for Smith’s rural characters than for her town characters. In the case of Crystal in Black Mountain Breakdown, English class is an extension of what her father teaches her about poetry at home, and she excels. Her holler boyfriend, Mack Stiltner, whose gift for writing songs indicates a similar poetic talent, drops out of school; presumably he was not making excellent grades beforehand. Smith’s texts never suggest that rural characters are incapable of understanding academic knowledge; for example, Ivy Rowe of Fair and Tender Ladies is an adept student with a gift for language. However, because the contrast between home and school culture is more overt for holler and rural characters, as a group they have a more difficulty assimilating such knowledge. Significantly, though, holler children also have more to gain from school because they acquire a new world view from their academic education rather than simply an expansion of the one they already have.

Once education is acquired, its distancing effect can be detrimental. Critics have noted that characters such as Paul in “Saint Paul,” Grace Harrison in Family Linen, and notably Richard Burlage in Oral History are not well-served by their education and miss elements of life not encompassed by their worldview. As Anne Goodwyn Jones states, intellectuals do not fare well in Smith’s world (270). Critics such as Dorothy Hill, Katherine Kearns, and Corinne
Dale have observed that academic language is highly suspect in Smith’s fiction and distances characters from lived experience. Kearns suggests that characters such as English graduate student Lacey of *Family Linen* find themselves unable to think directly, mired in metaphor and symbolism (178).

As these critics indicate, characters trusting written rather than spoken language often become alienated from their communities and even from their true selves. Nonetheless, this separation from the community can be intentional on the part of the individual. In *The Devil’s Dream*, Lizzie Bailey leaves her community and family to become a nurse, after mentoring from a local public health nurse, Miss Covington. Lizzie had worked too hard as a teenager, trying to take the place of the mother who abandoned the family. Uncomfortable with the messy aspects of family life, Lizzie is pleased to find a profession that lets her help others without becoming too enmeshed in their lives. For characters like Lizzie who need structure in their lives, as well as distance from difficult mountain family life, education is one of the best routes of escape.

While education can separate some individuals in Smith’s work from their families and communities, other characters may subconsciously sacrifice educational goals for the sake of family ties. Middle class Paula in “News of the Spirit” cannot finish college because she feels guilty for succeeding when her brother is mentally ill; Agnes of *Black Mountain Breakdown* comes home from college to take over the family business when her father is diagnosed with cancer; Ivy Rowe cannot go to school in Boston because of an unplanned pregnancy; and in *Family Linen*, Lacey suddenly feels like writing her dissertation when a
family mystery is cleared up. Even in families that promote education, kinship bonds can make the relationship to education complex and problematic.

Varieties of Cultural Capital

Smith’s characters from all classes tend to recognize the social element in their education. Outsider schoolteacher Richard Burlage in *Oral History* states that his university education consisted of:

>a passing acquaintance with the classics, I suppose, a haphazard knowledge of Latin and French; some sense of history; a love of literature; and last but by no means least, how to hold my liquor, look a man in the eye, and play—I confess it!—the ukulele! (97)

Burlage’s academic background is actually quite sound; however, even he is aware that school does not only teach basic skills—it provides knowledge intended for social rather than professional purposes.

Over a century ago, Thostein Veblen’s *The Theory of the Leisure Class* suggested the role of social and economic status in valuing some forms of education. Veblen argues that at the end of the nineteenth century the American leisure class publicly demonstrated their status through conspicuous consumption and conspicuous leisure. The leisure class indicated their wealth and status by indulging in non-essential consumption of goods, as well as by refraining from manual labor. This abstention from manual labor did not imply inactivity, however. On the contrary, members of the leisure class spent many hours acquiring “immaterial” goods such as knowledge or manners. Some forms of knowledge which do not directly contribute “to the furtherance of human life” but suggest status include “the knowledge of dead languages and the occult sciences; of correct spelling; of syntax and prosody; of the various forms of domestic music and other household art; of the latest
proprieties of dress, furniture, and equipage . . .” (45), the very types of information that Burlage mentions in his list. While consumption studies have expanded and become more diversified in the intervening years, objects and ideas can still reflect strategies of conspicuous consumption and conspicuous leisure, suggesting wealth and status in specific contexts.

Smith’s working class and middle class characters are aware both of the socialization schools provide and of the status connections of some academic subjects. Smith’s characters with interrupted educations are often especially adept at intuiting the elements of conspicuous leisure in education. Lacking an understanding of the use of academic content, these characters have grasped the leisure class’s social view of “cultured” (i.e., useless) knowledge. Frequently, these characters are women whose education has been abbreviated for social or economic reasons. To compensate, they demonstrate their acquisition of “culture,” an activity that requires leisure and funds. Deborah Wesley suggests that women who model themselves after the “cultured” Southern lady do so to improve their status by separating themselves from “lowers” in the community (42-43). Knowledge becomes primarily social power for these characters.

The knowledge transmitted in Smith’s mountain schools, while often empowering, at times serves a gatekeeping function. In *Oral History*, Richard Burlage offers to teach Jink Cantrell and other bright students Latin to help prepare them for Black Rock High School. Learning Latin may be an excellent cognitive exercise; however, knowledge of this dead language also can be used to suggest “educated” status. Intelligent but less-affluent students without access to a teacher or a family that realizes the language’s symbolic importance could
easily be excluded from learning institutions through a Latin exam. In *Fair and Tender Ladies*, Miss Torrington singles Ivy out for instruction in French, plane geometry, and drawing. While these subjects will improve Ivy intellectually, the course of study also hints at the appropriate subjects for a “lady.” Neither mountain farm wives nor Boston matrons “need” to speak French; this linguistic knowledge primarily indicates a high level of culture and education. Both Burlage and Miss Torrington try to help their favorite students acquire information that is not only mentally challenging, but which mark them as “educated” in the teachers’ respective homes of Richmond and Boston.

Smith’s characters at times compile a list of the “knowledge” which they regard as social currency. Their class background and the extent of their knowledge of upper class culture typically color their view of the appropriate knowledge to acquire. For example, the grandmother in the short story “Artists” uses conspicuous leisure to help her escape her country background. As a young woman, the grandmother was not allowed to attend school because her father did not believe in the education of women. Married at fifteen, the grandmother attempts to make up for her rough and difficult childhood by establishing herself as a Southern lady. Part of the grandmother’s program of advancement includes studying a questionable array of “cultural” topics. Repeatedly taking courses from “a dubious institution known as the LaGrande University of Correspondence,” she becomes knowledgeable about “Christianity, including particularly the lives of the saints; Greek mythology; English country houses; etiquette; Japanese flower arranging; Henry VIII and all his wives; crewel embroidery; and the Romance poets.” The list bears a remarkable resemblance to Veblen’s enumeration of “dead languages and the occult sciences; of correct spelling; of syntax and
prosody; of the various forms of domestic music and other household art . . .” (45). In the absence of experiences with school that could provide substantive information and insight, the grandmother has picked up on the social benefits of education and acquires those instead.

Her daughter-in-law, a debutante, finds the grandmother’s forays into self-education comic, suggesting the difficulty of gaining socially advantageous knowledge outside sanctioned channels. The debutante daughter-in-law is impressed, however, that the grandmother has read the entire *Encyclopedia Britannica*. Neither this series nor the “LaGrande Correspondence School” would likely qualify as a source of weighty “academic” knowledge, though the latter is more socially acceptable. As Pierre Bourdieu suggests in *Distinction*, knowledge that is not legitimized by a credentialing institution may be considered invalid. For example, regardless of how much medical knowledge an individual has, they cannot legally perform operations without a medical degree (24-25). The grandmother may well gain interesting and useful information from both the encyclopedia and her correspondence classes. However, because she does not realize that a correspondence school, no matter how “LaGrande” it is, cannot provide the same social power as a finishing school, her status is further marked in the eyes of her upper class daughter-in-law.

The grandmother in “Artists” is both sympathetic and pretentious in her struggle to gain social status. In addition to acquiring what she deems aristocratic knowledge, the grandmother also paints china, raises beautiful roses, joins every club in town, and overdresses on a daily basis. Her choices gain her local status—the local minister’s wife considers her “a great lady”—but it also earns her the snickers of her aristocratic daughters-in-law and distances her from family members. The story reveals that her husband, who does
not share her social ambitions, has had an affair with a local beautician for decades; the text is never clear about whether the grandmother drove him away with her status seeking, or if she began her process of self-education to make up for his emotional absence. The grandmother and the mistress symbolize opposing approaches to the world: aristocratic snobbery versus the earthly corporeality of the mistress. The grandmother’s misplaced focus, her emphasis on status rather than people and ideas, is gently but firmly rebuffed.

A different approach to knowledge acquisition appears in Smith’s recent story, “The Happy Memories Club.” Former teacher Alice Scully, a nursing home resident, joins a writing group recently organized in the facility. The story intersperses contemporary scenes of Alice dealing with life in the nursing home with the memories of her past that she wishes to share with the writing group.

Unfortunately, the writing group decides to only discuss “happy memories.” Alice, in contrast, wants to recall both the exciting and tragic elements that have made up her life—her father’s suicide, her affair with a rich young man who left her, their illegitimate son who she raised and, once, was tempted to throw through a window out of sheer exhaustion. Of course, Alice never harmed her beloved son. However, her verbalization of the passions, fears, and mistakes of her life upset the other writers so much that she is eventually forced to leave the group. As Alice speeds away in her wheelchair, with the group in an uproar behind her, she hears group leader Martha Louise Clapton say, “I simply cannot believe that a former English teacher—” “This strikes me as funny,” Alice remarks (200).

Alice responds negatively to the group leader’s expectation that teachers are the purveyors of decorum, that they pass on not just good knowledge but also social
understanding and solid values to their students. While the latter may be true, Alice believes that she teaches primarily knowledge, not the social graces. Martha Louise, as a woman in the early twentieth century, likely did not have an extensive education herself and used her knowledge primarily to suggest social status. Therefore, she may assume that Alice does the same thing.

If so, she assumes wrongly. A tough but fair teacher, Alice taught her students useful facts and information, as well as the ability to make connections between such facts. Alice showed her students how to successfully diagram long sentences that they created to stump her. She taught geography by telling the story of a little leaf that floats down the Mississippi, past cities and lakes and waterways, until it became “part of the universe” in the Gulf of Mexico. Patterns and connections, a repeating theme in Smith’s work (A. Jones 262), are stressed in Mrs. Scully’s teaching.4

Just as the grandmother in “Artists” has a list of facts that she has acquired, Alice Scully has a list that she passes on to her students. However, Alice’s list focuses on technology and history:

I taught my students these things: the first sustained flight in a power-driven airplane was made by Wilbur and Orville Wright at Kitty Hawk, North Carolina, on December 17, 1903; Wisconsin is the Badger State; the Dutch bought Manhattan Island from the Indians for twenty-four dollars in 1926; you can’t sink in the Great Salt Lake. (182)

Instead of making her students “cultured,” Alice tries to make them informed, connecting them to the more public worlds of science and history rather than the private realm of taste.

---

4As a college student at Hollins College, Smith rafted down the Mississippi with fellow coeds, re-enacting the journey of Huckleberry Finn; her forthcoming novel, The Last Girls, imagines the reunion of fictional women who made a similar journey. The leaf on the Mississippi, illustrating the interconnectedness of life, reflects how Hollins launched Smith out into the larger world as well.
and culture. The information may not be more useful than the list that the grandmother of “Artists” created: is it more important to know that Wisconsin is the Badger State or who the fourth wife of King Henry VIII was? Nonetheless, the kind of information is different. In his examination of the 1980s literary canon controversy, John Guillory remarks that “the division now characterizing the humanities syllabus . . . is the symptom of a historically significant split between two kind of cultural capital, one of which is ‘traditional,’ the other organic to the constitution of the professional-managerial class” (45). He notes that the declining number of humanities students resulted not from the diversification of the syllabus, but from rising middle class students realizing that professional or technical knowledge has more value for them in the market place than the traditional liberal arts curriculum (45-46). This argument suggests that the knowledge that indicates an “educated” status is not necessarily static from generation to generation. Technical and professional knowledge have become more crucial as the twentieth century has progressed, as Guillory notes, and Alice offers her students the kind of information that will help them appear “educated” in a modern world. At the same time, she stresses knowledge that shows connections rather than elevates her students above others, as the grandmother’s aristocratic approach did. Alice attempts to empower her students professionally and personally through her teaching.

This discussion is not intended to suggest that some cultural capital is practical and some is not. Cultural capital is universally practical in that it socially demonstrates that individuals understand the knowledge that has the most value in contemporary culture. In late twentieth century American culture, science and math override art and culture in the market place. Furthermore, the content of the knowledge the grandmother and Alice possess are both
potentially transformative; understanding the lives of the saints and learning about the interconnectedness of the natural world could both have a positive impact on an individual’s life. However, the purpose for which each lady uses the knowledge makes a crucial difference. The grandmother focuses on status, which distances; Alice focuses on connections.

Alice has an advantage in her relationship to education, however. Though she comes from a troubled and poor background like the grandmother, Alice attended school and learned to teach. Her relationship to education is not only institutionally legitimized but also guided by professionals, which gives her an appreciation of educational content and its uses. The grandmother, never allowed to attend school, can only parrot the social applications she has seen. Therefore, while Alice’s approach to education reflects sound academic practices more than the grandmother’s, the texts are careful to emphasize that the grandmother is not completely to blame for her perspective. Though the narrative undercuts her pretensions in good egalitarian, Appalachian style, the grandmother is a sad comic figure rather than a buffoon.

The grandmother and Alice Scully suggest that both social class and educational experiences shapes individual’s attitudes towards education. Material conditions affect a character’s ability to receive education, but once acquired, that knowledge provides a tool that can help alter that individual’s class standing, changing their perspective and providing them additional opportunities for further study and occupational choice.
Conclusion

As stated at the outset of this chapter, social class and education are not synonymous. However, in Lee Smith’s work, social class does shape physical, social, and psychological access to education in her texts. The situation is particularly noticeable in her early twentieth century mountain settings, when wealthier teachers travel into the hills in the hopes of serving the community (and sometimes themselves). As the century wears on, holler and rural characters remain on the social periphery of the schools. Rural students continue to have more difficulty attaining and utilizing academic knowledge than town students because their home culture differs more drastically from school culture. While this last fact can make the acquisition of educational capital more transformative for rural students, it also contributes to the inevitable separation from family and culture which critics note in her educated rural characters.

Nonetheless, education remains a valuable personal and professional possession in Smith’s work and is only panned when acquired exclusively for status purposes. Education is a resource that gives students addition job opportunities, mobility, and social status, in addition to the more valuable private enrichment. However, Smith never shirks from demonstrating the difficulties in gaining education for rural and working class students or the resulting complications that town students seldom grapple with. Education may not always determine class, but social class almost inevitably shapes the acquisition and application of education in Smith’s work, making its acquisition simultaneously more empowering and risky for working class characters.
CHAPTER FIVE
“HOW COUNTRY ARE YOU?”: TASTE IN LEE SMITH’S FICTION

A great taboo subject in America is class. We pretend it does not exist here, but of course it does. I have lived in every class and think it is critical to talk about the different manners, mores, and values. And we need to think about the cost of upward mobility in this country. So often to achieve upward mobility, you have to cut your roots. But then you are adrift. (Lee Smith, Ballantine Reader’s Circle book club interview included with her 1997 short story collection, News of the Spirit)

In her Time magazine column, “I Am What I Say I Am,” Lisa Funderburg discusses the potentially positive effects of new Census categories on the way Americans think about race. The child of a bi-racial marriage, Funderburg explains that her “purported racial characteristics” confuse rather than clarify her identity:

Examples follow:

My whiteness: love of Joni Mitchell. A fondness for the Midwest. A taste for soy milk, vanilla flavored. Tendency to be underdressed for any event. Disdain for black eyed peas. The ability to dwell, for long spells, in a world not eclipsed by race. Skin, eyes, hair. My mother. (82)

Funderburg’s facetious division of the codes for her racial identity focuses not primarily on physical appearance or even on values, but on taste—the aesthetic cues that help individuals decipher and understand each other in social situations. Though she undoubtedly does not take this list seriously, Funderburg later states that:

In my day-to-day life, it is thousands of unofficial, unsolicited enumerators who make the call on my race by way of offhand remarks, furtive glances, head wiggles, bullhorned street sermons, the pointed embrace, casual snub, the kiss, the oversight, the intimacy, the job. (82)

Even for a social identity as hypothetically apparent as race, aesthetic practices and personal manner—taste—often serve a critical part in socially placing an individual.
As Funderburg indicates, individuals at times participate in more than one socially constructed identity, aesthetic, or status group (Hall 272; 276). The relationship and movement between positions, however, may be either relaxed or fraught with difficulty, depending on the social contexts and the relative value of the perceived differences. An amusing example is the contemporary Disney cartoon, “Teacher’s Pet.” The premise of the series is that a dog desperately wants to be a boy. Unlike Pinocchio, who becomes a real boy because he is very good, Spot/Scot simply puts on pants and goes to school; changing his appearance allows him to change his role and social identity. However, while Pinocchio is transformed into a boy, Spot/Scot is playing a role that is only partly true; he is still technically a dog. Much of the humor in that cartoon results from Spot/Scot’s struggle to keep his canine instincts from overriding his human persona and giving him away. For example, the principal of the school loves cats, which tease Spot/Scot at the most inopportune moments. The dog dresses and acts convincingly human, but cannot completely obliterate his “dogginess.”

This somewhat silly example illustrates a serious tension in late twentieth century/early twenty-first century culture. Social identity is perceived as relatively malleable because individuals supposedly can adopt different aesthetics or personas at will; pop stars and politicians alike succeed partly because of their ability to “reinvent” themselves. Certainly, individuals change and grow, sometimes radically and abruptly, as they respond to life experiences. As Tanya Bennett rightly observes of Ivy Rowe in *Fair and Tender Ladies*, “her identity [is] a fluctuating and fragmented self, rather than a fixed one” (78). Ivy states near the end of her life that, “I have been so many people” (266); a similar observation is made by retired teacher Alice Scully in Smith’s recent story, “The Good News Club.”
However, despite this acceptance of “fluidity,” many people, including Smith, regard the self as at least somewhat continuous (“Female Imagination” 245). In The Devil’s Dream, Katie Cocker says, “There’s a lot of folks in this business. . . . [that] think you can just make yourself up as you go along” (5). Katie, however, cannot do that because of her rich family heritage in country music. Smith states that, “I think if [people] give them up entirely [their pasts], they can often become very rootless and lost in a certain way” (Appendix 348). While loyalties and identities that shift through time and experience may be inevitable, in Smith’s fiction some sense of personal continuity and connection are necessary for a successful life.

This conflict suggests that personal identity originates in an individual’s past but is continuously re-constructed in response to life experiences. Self-creation is a key theme in Smith’s work (V. Smith 274; Wesley 89, et. al.), and her characters frequently struggle to craft an identity independent of society’s proscriptions. Some individuals achieve this by rejecting society’s images (“Female Imagination” 245); others, like Ivy Rowe, resist limiting definitions through a fragmented and fluctuating identity (Bennett 94-95). Country singer Katie Cocker of The Devil’s Dream changes her public persona from hick comedian to honky-tonk angel to California country to good old girl, but acknowledges all as part of her life story; her positive and negative responses to these roles reflect her evolving sense of self (Wesley 98). Smith’s characters often experiment with a range of perspectives, sometimes adopting them, often discarding them, and occasionally adapting portions of those perspectives to create a core self, malleable yet distinct.

The creation of the self can be seen as a humanistic project, one antithetical to the idea of all-defining and fixed social class position. However, in Smith’s work, the process of self-creation is tied to social class, which shapes her characters’ opportunities for self-definition.
Ulrich Beck’s *Risk Society*, despite its denial of class in favor of the late twentieth century individual as “the reproduction unit for the social in the life world” (Savage 103), at times suggests that inequality and “individualization” are not incompatible, though globalization of risks, such as environmental hazards, may mitigate differences (103-104). Beck defines “individualization” as the process of late twentieth century citizens becoming separated from historical social contexts, losing traditional understandings, and then being reflexively reconnected to a social world:

What Beck appears to mean is that individuals are able to reflect on the implication of various structural processes that surround them, and can thereby choose how to act with respect of them. Individuals cannot escape structural forces in general, but they can decide which ones to act on, which to ignore, which to oppose and so on. Reflexive modernization does not create the ‘free’ individual. Rather, it creates individuals who live out, biographically, the complexity and diversity of the social relations that surround them. (Savage 104)

Similarly, Anthony Giddens, best known for his theory of class “structuration,” argues that modernity is constituted of a time/space separation and recombination; “the disembudding of social systems;” and the “reflexive ordering and reordering of social relations” (16-17). The reflexivity of both modern and postmodern society is made possible by writing, which creates a reflexive time/space split. Contemporary individuals and societies constantly reinterpret and revise social practices as new information becomes available (37-38). Both Giddens and Beck reflect a shift in British sociology from a focus on class to the individual (Savage 7), a move that may mirror the increasing focus of American scholars on status rather than class as the driving force in society.¹

¹ Pierre Bourdieu also has discussed reflexivity, but confines his focus to the sociologist: “For Bourdieu, reflexivity means subjecting the position of the observer to the same critical analysis applied to the object of sociological investigation” (Schwartz 276). Bourdieu does not apply these concepts to the average person’s experience.
This chapter begins its discussion of social class, status, and culture with a premise similar to the above summary of Beck. Lee Smith’s narrative perspective, often reflecting a combination of humanism and the late twentieth century belief in a malleable identity, affirms rather than denies the individual’s role in constructing personal and social identities. At the same time, class, status, and culture limit the accessibility of possible identities and personal resources in Smith’s work. Her less privileged characters have fewer perspectives and tastes to draw from in assembling a personal identity because they do not have comparable access to alternative perspectives, as Smith has stated (Appendix 346). Town characters have access to more alternatives, but this does not necessarily translate into more accessible options; town characters may be limited by their desire to appear “respectable,” which generally involves separation from the rural perspective and an imperfect modeling of aristocratic culture (Wesley 90-91); they may not have access to the holler culture that Smith’s working class characters can fall back on (Teem 65). Some town characters balance their aesthetics and incorporate rural elements, but there is typically a perceptual gap between the two groups. Outsider characters often manifest a condescending attitude or a self-serving acquisitiveness towards folk culture (Wallace 368; Buchanan 338), while town characters define themselves against that same rural culture. Options for self-creation are therefore limited for Smith’s characters, significantly shaped by their class and status positions and accompanying aesthetics.²

² A number of sources, including Wesley, Stanley, Hill, and Jones, acknowledge that the holler, town, and outsider characters have difficulty understanding each others’ perspectives because of their distinctive aesthetics. This dissertation intends to expand on that scholarship by focusing on the part of class and status in these cultural negotiations.
Class, Status, and Distinction

Discussions of the interconnections between class, status, and taste are complicated by the fuzziness inherent in contemporary discussions of social class and status. Raymond Williams says in *Keywords* that class has three generally accepted definitions: group, rank, and formation. Status is the term frequently used as a more precise definition of the second meaning of class, indicating lifestyle and social standing (252). While sociologists often follow Weber’s example and differentiate between class (an economic relationship) and status (prestige), the terms are often conflated in public and scholarly discussions. For example, Paul Fussell’s amusing study of how choices in dress, decoration, education, and even entertainment mark individuals for status in late twentieth century America is titled *Class: A Guide Through the American Status System*. Furthermore, discussing status and class separately produces a one-sided view of a social world, suggesting the economic structure of the community but ignoring significant ways that rank and privilege influence social and economic relationships. Therefore, this chapter discusses the terms in tandem, partially to allow them to illuminate one another and partially because neatly dividing the two is difficult for Smith’s fiction.

In *Distinction*, Bourdieu observes that, “Taste is the basis of the mutual adjustment of all the features associated with a person” (174); it is “a practical mastery of distributions which makes it possible to sense or intuit what is likely (or unlikely) to befall—and therefore to befit—an individual occupying a given position in social space” (466). Bourdieu suggests that all the consumption choices of individuals, including food, clothing, language, occupation, and recreation, as well as their attitudes towards such choices, are influenced by their social position and mediated through their relationship to the culture of the dominant
class. An individual’s habitus—the aesthetic disposition that provides “the capacity to produce classifiable practices and works” and “to differentiate and appreciate these practices and products (taste)” (170)—is primarily subconscious and intuitive. The habitus is created by the combination of the amount, kind, and temporal changes of capital an individual possesses. This can be economic capital; social capital, which consists of family and personal connections; or cultural capital, which includes education, consumption, and taste. Cultural capital includes symbolic capital, which is the power to legitimate cultural practices; significant symbolic capital often corresponds to high cultural and/or economic capital.

Bourdieu’s theory of class and taste in *Distinction* has provoked lively discussion among American scholars. A number of sociologists have identified significant limitations in his approach. Influential studies, such as Michele Lamont’s *Money, Morals, and Manners: the Culture of the French and American Upper-Middle Class*, suggest that Bourdieu’s theory of social reproduction is not applicable to the contemporary United States. Lamont protests that Bourdieu neglects the importance of ethics in creating boundaries (184-185) and unrealistically stresses the role of high culture as a structuring element (186). Many scholars cite a lack of clear connection in the United States between economic class, consumption choices, and attitudes as evidence that Bourdieu’s approach, developed in more stratified France, is not applicable to America. Others argue, with some merit, that education and prestige, integral parts of Bourdieu’s approach, belong to status groups rather than classes (Hall 272). Furthermore, Bourdieu has been critiqued for attempting to reduce the complex system of stratification to one monopolizing principle (273), a charge that has been launched at class studies in general.
Douglas Holt, co-editor of *The Consumer Society Reader*, defends Bourdieu by suggesting that some of these studies mistakenly emphasize the “what” rather than the “how” of consumption. Manner of consumption, not its objects, suggests social distinction in late twentieth century America. Furthermore, Holt argues that studies emphasizing the minimal role that high culture, which Bourdieu saw as definitive, has in American life ignore the fact that consumption includes a variety of fields, such as food, fashion, sports, and socializing (219-220). Just because elites do not reflect high cultural art aesthetics in their consumption does not mean that their intuitive view of the world is not shaped by the economic, social and cultural capital they possess. It simply means that high cultural aesthetics are not the central organizing principle of American aesthetics and life.  

Bourdieu’s critics provide useful correctives to his approach. Without doubt, his theory, based on France’s more static and credential-focused society, cannot be applied without emendations to the United States. High culture, while a persistent status marker, does not serve a gatekeeping function in the United States; suggesting that all class perspectives are derived from a relationship to high culture is questionable when even the upper class is not required to attend Van Gogh exhibits to make the Fortune 500. Furthermore, Bourdieu’s

---

3 *Cultivating Differences: Symbolic Boundaries and the Making of Inequality* (1992) includes essays by a number of Bourdieu’s best-known critics, such as editor Michele Lamont, Paul DiMaggio, and David Halle, as well as essays by those who modify Bourdieu’s position, like John Hall. David Halle’s study of the responses of elite and working class New Yorkers to abstract art seems to challenge Holt’s view that the classes consume differently; all groups often saw the artwork in the homes as representing landscapes, even though the upper class favored abstract art and the working class avoided it. This finding may indicate that the subjects have a similar underlying aesthetic (145-146). Vera Zolberg responds to Halle’s study by arguing that “it is the manner that counts, not pedantry” (199). While Bourdieu emphasized the importance of “naturalness” in elite manner, he also suggested that leisure activities indicating conspicuous leisure, such as wine tasting or sailing, are important parts of
emphasis on the relationship of social class to high culture denies the possibility of creative cultural practices originating in the less privileged classes. While Bourdieu’s focus on the connection between social class and taste provides a useful framework, his theory is hampered by its insistence on the primacy and determining nature of elite artistic culture.

John R. Hall suggests a useful addition to Bourdieu’s approach that does not define the dominant class’s artistic culture as society’s organizing principle. Hall notes that Bourdieu’s class cultures are a version of Weber’s social classes, or class-based status groups, rather than strict Marxist economic classes (274) and recognizes that societies typically include a number of structuring elements, such as gender and ethnicity. Social classes, therefore, serve as one of many potential status groups. Class becomes status, rather than status becoming a kind of class, as Raymond Williams argued. While some status groups and practices are based on class, others rest on different cultural criteria (279). By regarding aesthetic practices that indicate status as originating from a variety of sources and as resulting in complimentary and contradictory structures, Hall complicates Bourdieu’s approach while retaining class and culture as part of society’s structuring play.

This chapter also alters Bourdieu’s approach by affirming the possibility of cross-class understanding and limited conscious agency in choosing taste. For Bourdieu, the *habitus* is effective primarily because it exists “below the level of consciousness and language, beyond the reach of introspective scrutiny or control of the will” (466). While this definition helps explain the pervasiveness of class-based aesthetics, it denies the possibility of understanding or profiting from an aesthetic perspective other than one’s own. In contrast, Smith’s fiction the elite aesthetic (*Distinction* 281). Holt agrees that consumption demonstrating individual knowledge marks for status in late twentieth century America (238).
features characters that recognize and learn from the perspectives of others, though their understanding is routinely hampered by their class position and experience. By adding this kind of limited consciousness to Bourdieu’s approach, this dissertation avoids restricting taste to a single, unknowable principle but retains the importance of intuitive, class-based aesthetics in stratification.

So, despite its limitations, Bourdieu’s theoretical framework provides a useful approach for discussing the relationship between class, culture, and aesthetics in Smith’s work. Bourdieu builds on Weber’s recognition that the relationship to the means of production is not the only source of wealth or power in a community. His designation of capital as economic, social, or cultural provides a way of examining how not just property and income, but also less tangible elements such as educational credentials and an understanding of social expectations, can be valuable possessions that significantly alter life chances. By arguing that the amount and kinds of capital an individual possesses not only shape his or her life chances, but also choices of food, clothing, entertainment, manners, and behavior, Bourdieu provides a useful way to discuss how social class influences the everyday experiences of individuals and effects their ability to successfully negotiate their social worlds.

**Aesthetics and Social Position**

Throughout Smith’s fiction, characters interpret the world through class-based aesthetics that both enrich and hinder social interaction. The difficulty of negotiating between cultures and aesthetics is well-documented in secondary criticism on Smith. Anne Goodwyn Jones observes that differences often draw together Smith’s most passionate and volatile pairs of lovers, like Dory Cantrell and Richard Burlage of *Oral History*. However, the desire that
lures these pairs together also inspires them to ignore their real differences, dooming the relationship (“Orality” 16). In his study of Smith’s short stories, William Teem observes that Smith’s women often use their rural past to cope with the challenges of urban intrusions (65). Suzanne Jones finds that while Richard Burlage is badly served by the perspective he adopts towards the mountains, Jink Cantrell’s world is expanded by his contact with Burlage’s ideas (111). Repeatedly, critics acknowledge the interaction of varied culture and class aesthetics within Smith’s work.

Smith’s stories at times explicitly contrast class-based aesthetics, as in “Tongues of Fire.” In that story, set in 1957 Alabama, thirteen-year-old Karen deals with her father’s mental illness and her “invisibility” in her family by exploring religious practices explicitly tied to the lower class. A country club girl, Karen, is overjoyed when Tammy Lester, “[s]hunned by Sub-Debs, sent to Detention, noticed by older boys” (84) seeks out her friendship. Karen is fascinated with Tammy’s life: with her family’s “old unpainted farm-house with two boarded-up windows, settled unevenly onto cinder-block footings” (86); with the Dinty Moore stew that contrasts to the elegant, almond-encrusted “Lady Food” her own mother’s bridge companions eat; but especially with the ecstatic religion of Tammy’s mother, which differs from the staid Methodism of Karen’s family. Overlooked in her own home, Karen believes that she has literally found a voice in the practice of “speaking in tongues.” Tammy, on the other hand, prefers the safety and comfort of Karen’s world; just as Karen longs for Tammy’s world, Tammy covets the luxury and reassurance of the country club and lemon meringue pie with Karen’s grandparents after Methodist services.
When Karen first takes Tammy home for a visit, the county girl dresses appropriately:

Although we had not discussed it, Tammy showed up dressed more like a town girl than I had ever seen her—a plaid skirt, a white blouse, loafers, her dark hair pulled back and up into a cheerful ponytail . . . She could have been a member of the Sub-Deb Club. No one could have ever guessed what she had in her pocket—a pack of Kents and a stolen kidney stone once removed from her neighbor, Mrs. Gillespie, who kept it in a jar on her mantel. (92)

Tammy understands instinctively that appearance is a critical part of social acceptability and is able to replicate fairly convincingly the taste of a town girl, but her personal property shows that she is only “passing”; she dresses like, but has not become, a town girl.

Karen and Tammy are attracted to the economic and cultural class of the other, but this story is Karen’s. The girls drift apart as Karen gains a voice in her family and no longer needs the county religious aesthetic to provide her a language. The separation is sealed when Karen catches Tammy “petting” in a drive-in movie. Karen responds by running back to her older sister and smoking her first cigarette, which “tasted great”; the girls only greet each other in school afterwards. Karen integrates what she needs from the county aesthetic, a language and some rebellious behavior, but stops at the line of sexual mores. She learns from the rural class perspective, but returns to her own cultural world.

“Life on the Moon” examines a similar pairing from the opposite perspective; this time the poorer, “rural” girl tells the story of cousins who are emotionally distanced because of their class-related aesthetics. When Lucie, the middle-class cousin, plays Elvis Presley’s “Heartbreak Hotel,” she claims to “love it,” hearing drama, sexuality, and danger in the recording. June, however, hears the voice as “hot and crazy and full of pain”; she thinks of her aunt and uncle’s romance and her widowed mother’s longing for her traveling salesman father. Years later, June realizes that the cousins’ conflicting reactions to the song crystallized
the differences that separated the girls, differences caused by June’s experience of a less-sheltered childhood and her awareness of her lower class status.

The kinship tie allows Smith to plausibly reconcile the cousins as adults, with Lucie helping June accept the failure of her marriage. As in “Tongues of Fire,” the rural aesthetic initially provides insight, allowing the younger June to understand the reality rather than the drama behind the Presley song. However, the story does not portray the rural aesthetic as the only source of wisdom; the adult Lucie can help June through her divorce because she has a non-traditional views of relationships. Lucie’s perspective owes a great deal to her economic resources, which purchased her an outside education and the security to view deviating from community norms as exciting and desirable, as illustrated by the Presley song incident. June, acquainted with real struggle as a child, yearns instead for security; as a young married woman, she tries to prove she deserved her extended family’s financial assistance with respectable behavior, indicating that she has developed the middle class striving for respectability. Both women, therefore, demonstrate class-based aesthetics that shift as they move socially from the rural to the town and the town to the outside. June and Lucie have unique insights to offer each other, a pattern also seen in *Oral History* (Cunningham 49; S. Jones 110-111).

In both “Tongues of Fire” and “Life on the Moon,” social class position shapes the perspectives of the main characters, helping to create distinctive aesthetics that reflect the characters’ experiences. Furthermore, the aesthetics are typically recognized by other groups as indicative of a particular social status or affiliation. As these examples indicate, the regular juxtaposition of characters from different economic and social positions is an integral part of Smith’s fiction, coloring the aesthetics and relationships of her characters. However, the
usefulness of each aesthetic is dependent on social context and the needs of her characters. In “Tongues of Fire,” Karen gains a voice through the ecstatic church of her county friend, but she is savvy enough to return to her upper middle class life when her emotional needs are met; remaining affiliated with the intense county church eventually is too risky emotionally and socially. The negotiation between classes and culture in Smith’s work is typically influenced by both a consistently positive valuation of mountain and rural culture and the simultaneous acknowledgement that identifying with these viewpoints can exclude one from status and class privilege.

Class, Status, and Taste in the United States

Two sociologists, Richard Peterson and Albert Simkus, offer an approach that essentially Americanizes cultural capital and argue for the continuing role of artistic taste in reflecting social status. While previous work of Peterson’s found no close connection between social and cultural class (Hughes and Peterson 477-478), the team’s 1992 study finds that occupational status correlates with musical taste in late twentieth century America. Using data from the 1982 national Survey of Public Participation in the Arts (SPPA), Peterson and Simkus conclude that there is general consensus that classical music has the highest status. Moving down the ranking of musical tastes, however, reveals a variety of musical styles of roughly similar social status. The authors find that the taste hierarchy is “not so much a slim column of genres one on top of the other as a pyramid with one elite taste at the top and more alternative forms at about the same level as one moves down the pyramid towards the base” (168). Furthermore, they find that high-status groups do not necessarily list classical music, the most elite taste, as their favorite style. Instead, high-status individuals are defined more by their appreciation of a wide variety of musical tastes than by their association with one elite
genre. They may know jazz, folk, rock, opera, and easy listening, whereas lower status individuals may only listen to country, rock, and gospel music.\textsuperscript{4} High-status groups, typified by their comfort with a wide range of musical styles, are cultural “omnivores.” In contrast, low status individuals who consistently choose a limited number of musical styles are “univores” (169). In a 1996 follow-up study, using data from the 1992 SPPA, Peterson and student Roger Kern found evidence of an increasing number of omnivores in the United States (903-904).

However, becoming omnivorous does not mean abandoning discrimination. Peterson and Kern suggest that while omnivores are open to varied cultural expressions, their manner of consumption may be distinctive, a view that reflects Bourdieu’s emphasis on the way culture is consumed (904). In “‘Anything But Heavy Metal’: Symbolic Exclusion and Musical Dislikes,” Bethany Bryson finds that omnivores often avoid musical styles associated with less educated groups, notably rap, heavy metal, country, and gospel music (894). Furthermore, Bryson finds that education correlates with cultural tolerance as it does with political tolerance (891), suggesting a kind of educated “multicultural capital” (888). Despite this, because of the purported omnivore dislike of music associated with less educated groups, Bryson concludes that “cultural tolerance . . . [is] a reordering of group boundaries that trades race for class” (895).

Bryson’s study indicates that education, not income or occupational status, effects musical taste (890). In a later article, she finds that individuals with low levels of education are more likely to define themselves around race, ethnicity, religious conservatism, and

\textsuperscript{4} Koen van Eijck stresses the role of social mobility in creating both a diverse upper status class as well as omnivorous, upwardly mobile, high status individuals.
geographic region than high status cultures (149), a view consistent with Peterson’s
acknowledgement of multiple status groups (164). Peterson and Kern state that in both of their
studies, “highbrows” had approximately two years more schooling, earned five thousand
dollars more in family income, were about ten years older, and were more likely to be white
and female than other respondents (901). In “It’s Not All Education: Network Measures as
Sources of Cultural Competency,” Michael Relish, using data from the 1993 General Social
Survey Culture Module, finds that while education increases diversity in musical tastes,
geographical mobility and organizational membership also are significant predictors of broad
taste, suggesting that both formal and informal learning contributes to musical taste (133).

The cultural omnivore provides a useful concept for discussing the connection of
class, taste, and culture in Lee Smith’s fiction. The omnivore is a late twentieth century
phenomenon, created by historical factors such as social mobility, the contemporary value of
tolerance, and political shifts, while Smith’s multi-generational texts often span the century.
However, Smith’s work consistently suggests that high social class corresponds with
education, opportunities for travel, and a wider range of social contacts—all avenues to more
tastes and options for use in self-creation. Therefore, because Smith’s fiction privileges self-
creation and because higher status should allow her characters to access more options for this
project, social class status becomes a significant shaping element in her characters’ lives.

However, Smith has betrayed mixed attitudes towards access to multiple perspectives.
Her comments on intellectuals from a 1984 interview with Edwin Arnold, quoted in the last
chapter, are worth repeating:

Several people . . . have said that anytime I have a fairly well-read character in my
work, he’s always weak and doomed. I really don’t know what to say about that. In
terms of *Oral History*, I’m much more like Jennifer who comes with the tape recorder,
or like Richard Burlage than I am like anybody else in the book. But people who are
not what we think of as intellectuals are often stronger. They may be terrible and
wrongheaded, but they are able to be stronger in their opinions, more decisive in their
actions, because they don’t know the alternatives. Maybe, to some extent, I’m
romanticizing them. And maybe I’m not giving them credit for complexity. But it does
seem that, a lot of times, when people do “get culture” or “get learning,” it does tend
to water them down. (349)

More recently, Smith has affirmed the value of omnivorous access. In an interview for this
dissertation, she stated:

A lot of times, as in life, it [class] limits possibilities for some of my characters;
some them can leapfrog around. But for instance with Saving Grace, there’s a
character, Grace Shepherd, who at the end of the book is actually unable—because of
the social class she was born in, because of the educational level she had, because she
never really could imagine anything different because of lack of experience in the
outside world—she’s made a circle in the journey she takes in that novel. She’s gone
back to her mother’s life, back to the hollers, back to the religion of her childhood,
instead of breaking free, which is what I think she ought to do, but she didn’t have any
basis to make that decision. So I think social class is very much a determining factor.
(Appendix 346)

Grace Shepherd’s story is not a tragedy; she triumphs by affiliating herself with the religion of
her mother, a generous and lovely woman, rather than the manic, self-indulgent religion of her
father or the repressive spirituality of her husband. Therefore, while having the resources of a
more privileged class status would have provided Grace additional options for dealing with
her life, as a resilient and imaginative person, she nonetheless succeeds within the confines of
her social world. Like Ivy Rowe of Fair and Tender Ladies, also described by Smith as
having a “limited life,” Grace is not disconnected from the process of self-creation because of
her class status, but she arguably must accomplish the same task with fewer resources than
Smith’s economically and culturally privileged characters. While Smith’s fiction is filled with
an understated admiration of women who successfully cope with “limited lives,” the fact that
these lives are “limited” lurks in the texture of her fictional worlds.
In both passages, Smith acknowledges that education and social class status provide additional perspectives. The question is the relative value of these alternatives. Smith’s assertion that education can make a person less decisive does not necessarily contradict her statement that additional perspectives provide desirable choices; perhaps recognizing the value in multiple options leads to a less intense outlook. However, there is a cost for this trade in Smith’s work. Emotional intensity is often equated with the rural aesthetic (S. Jones 109); when additional perspectives are added, Smith’s characters often lose this passion, which they long for nostalgically (A. Jones 267). Just as education is an ambivalent advantage in Smith’s work, providing insight but altering communal relations and perspectives, omnivorous taste is both an advantage and a hindrance, providing options but also distanc[ing] one from the nurturance of the folk community.

**Bourdieu and Rural Culture**

Smith’s characters generally are represented by three aesthetics—outsider, town and holler or rural—that correspond in some important ways to the hierarchical class tastes that Bourdieu identified in France in *Distinction*: aesthetic detachment, “cultural goodwill,” and functionalism. Each class may be further broken into fractions, depending on the kind and type of capital (social, economic, and cultural) possessed by members.\(^5\) Because Bourdieu’s larger taste categories correspond to the major social divisions within Smith’s work, his approach provides a useful starting place for discussing class, status and culture in Smith’s work.

---

\(^5\) The proportion of capital possessed is important in determining disposition; i.e., upper class industrialists have a less austere outlook than the cultural elite because their income is higher and education level lower.
According to Bourdieu, each aesthetic is determined by the class’s relationship to high culture. Aesthetic detachment, the perspective of the cultural elite acquainted with upper class culture from childhood and an elite education, focuses on form rather than function and is characterized by a spirit of distanced, light-hearted play. The middle class aesthetic of “cultural goodwill” has a familiarity with artistic culture betrayed by a lack of subtlety. This class takes culture too seriously, strains for respectability, and often betrays pretensions. Finally, the working class views the world from the functional “choice of necessity,” desiring what they must choose anyway because of lack of funds and access. The dispositions engendered by each group’s position and possession of capital extend to all their consumption choices and value judgments; these “aesthetic choices belong to the set of ethical choices which constitutes a life-style” (283).

It should be noted that “culture” in Smith’s texts is not exclusively Bourdieu’s elite aesthetic or capital-based class cultures, however. A common critique of Bourdieu’s approach is that he regards agency as the possession of the victors in the contest for distinction—the upper classes—and therefore has difficulty recognizing agency in dominated groups (Longhurst and Savage 295). While Bourdieu identifies the working class’s “sole function in the system . . . is to serve as a foil, a negative reference point” (57), in Smith’s work rural culture often appears as a distinct culture with recognizable music, speech patterns, religious expression, and customs. Many of these elements are attributable to the material realities of existence or originate in class conditions. For instance, Smith has suggested that ecstatic religious practices of the rural working class serve as a compensating mechanism, adding drama to the dull lives of those stuck in isolated rural or menial jobs (Appendix 343). Smith also regards rural culture as the most distinctly Appalachian:
I just read a really interesting book named *Creeker* written from the point of view of a woman who did grow up in a holler in eastern Kentucky. She makes the point, which I think is valid, that for kids who grew up in the town near where she lived, they might as well have been in Lynchburg, Virginia. Their town world was very different from the world of the holler, the world back in the hills. (Appendix 340-341)

Smith’s suggestion that the uniqueness of Appalachian culture originates in the isolated hills echoes much early Appalachian literature (Williams 59-60). While rural and rural taste indicate low status to Smith’s town and outsider characters, and the interactions between rural, town, and outsider culture reflect the interplay of class aesthetics that Bourdieu describes, it is important to remember that Smith’s rural aesthetic represents not only a class culture but a classed *culture*.

Therefore, a significant modification of Bourdieu’s view of the working class aesthetic must be made to apply it fairly to Smith. In *Distinction*, the lower class “choice of necessity” teaches individuals to unconsciously prefer that which they must choose anyway because of economic limitations. This aesthetic supposedly leads to a preference for function over form, favoring representational art. Smith’s work does suggest that her characters often prefer pragmatic approaches in keeping with their lifestyles. In “Life on the Moon,” for example, a VISTA volunteer is regarded suspiciously because he jogs during the middle of the day. Local housewives and coal miners have no need for such exercise because their lives are strenuous enough and because they realize the danger of heatstroke that running at midday can cause. Only someone accustomed to indoor work would choose to run for the “health benefits” in the heat of the day.

However, Smith’s rural aesthetic is also typified by the imaginative. When Pearl Cantrell of *Oral History* suggests that she, her sister, and her aunt alternate the layers of peppers they are canning between red and green to make a pretty pattern in the jars, she is
expressing her creativity. Her aunt refuses because the idea is impractical, and the narrative perspective sympathizes with the rebuff of Pearl’s imagination. While Pearl says that the red and green jars would make nice Christmas gifts, suggesting the functionalism Bourdieu finds typical of the choice of necessity, it also indicates a more imaginative approach to life in the working class than Bourdieu often recognizes.

Throughout Smith’s work, the value of “everyday” artists (Wesley 89) and the ability arts and crafts have to enrich the lives of individuals is affirmed (Appendix 343). Though the work of these artists is often representational, such as Oakley’s animal carvings or the personalized cakes that Florrie makes in “Cakewalk,” it is seldom purely functional. In fact, these artists are often censored for waste; Florrie’s sister thinks she should save time by using a cake mix. The “function” may be that these characters use their art to make sense of their experiences (Appendix 343-344). Nonetheless, the imaginative quality of their work indicates a degree of freedom and vitality that Bourdieu does not recognize in Distinction.

John R. Hall’s suggestion that Bourdieu’s class cultures can be separate rather than continuous, overlapping realms helps here. If the mountain/working class aesthetic is not necessarily dependent on outsider cultural capital for definition, then it can have its own valuable logic, while still being classed by outsiders. Perhaps it is fairer to suggest that town culture defines itself in opposition to the rural aesthetic, distancing to show status, rather than saying that the rural aesthetic bows to the town view; Cratis Williams observes that individuals in larger mountain towns have often resented being equated with their poorer neighbors (58-59). Recognizing the mountain aesthetic, which existed for years at a distance from the larger culture, as having its own social space in some ways makes the comparisons of cultures and classes in mountain life more powerful.
Bourdieu’s “choice of necessity” can be seen from another angle. Bourdieu argues that individuals retain trace elements of the social class aesthetic they are born into (108-112). Many of the elements of the mountain aesthetic began in and symbolize a less privileged economic status. For example, in “Life on the Moon,” the less wealthy family eats vegetables from the garden, a thrifty and healthy choice. The middle class family experiments with more exotic fare, such as pizza. However, because of long familiarity, those who grew up in the country often prefer the fresh garden food to more unusual tastes because they are accustomed to it. They become like the woman in the old joke who cuts both ends off her roast beef before cooking because her mother did; the mother sliced the meat because she did not have a pan big enough for the whole piece. The daughter transforms the intelligent adaptation into a tradition, created in a specific economic and cultural situation, but now determined by habit and a sense of “fitness” rather than immediate circumstances. Similarly, the rural aesthetic becomes a culture because of its association with place and heritage, yet never entirely loses its status and class associations. Rather than influencing rural characters to prefer inferior versions of upper class culture, “the choice of necessity” could imply that working class characters may develop a taste for the food, clothes, or manners of the holler or county, which persists in subtle ways despite changes in financial and social circumstances.

Furthermore, knowledge of holler culture does have some exchange value in specific markets. In some ways, holler cultural practices become an internal form of cultural capital. Some aspects of holler culture can be useful in town/rural scenarios; businessmen may retain mountain accents to maintain cordial relationships with their customers (Appendix 347). Holler culture also may have value in the larger regional and national market, as the popularity of local color fiction about the mountains demonstrates; such a transaction occurs
in *Oral History*, when locals turn the haunted Cantrell rural into an amusement park (Wallace 372). More benignly, in *The Devil’s Dream*, the family of musicians records their songs for sale, though some feel they have lost something precious in the process. These insider-outsider transactions are frequently based on misperception, of the outsider characters seeking a local color or simplified version of Appalachia and the mountain rural or town characters selling what the outsiders want to buy. This transaction ironically leaves both owners of the cultural capital they desire: mountain characters have not sold their real culture but only a fake version, while outsiders purchase mountain culture tailor-made for their personal preferences. However, this process further devalues local culture by placing a premium on what tourists will buy. While Smith’s rural characters have a rich tradition of local culture and can intuit at least some aspects of outside culture, the primary forms of rural culture with exchange value are simplified, commodity-defined versions; this complicates their status by emphasizing not the subtleties but the marketable novelties of mountain culture.

### Class and Culture—A Case Study

A model for the kind of culture classing and aesthetic clashing in Smith’s work can be found in Alice Walker’s “Everyday Use.” Set in the late 1960s, the short story illustrates a difference in perspectives towards rural culture caused by education and class awareness. A rural African-American mother discovers that her stylish, college-educated daughter, Dee, once ashamed of her family and their poverty, has suddenly decided that her roots have worth. Because intellectual culture has reappraised the value of soul food, folk artifacts, and homemade crafts, Dee perceives the culture she grew up in and despised as desirable for consumption. Returning in a car, with a boyfriend, and wearing African-inspired garb and gold jewelry, Dee snaps pictures like a tourist. She asks for and receives a butter churn top
and dasher, both bearing marks of repeated use by her mother, to display in an “artistic”
fashion in her home. When Dee finds a quilt, handmade by her grandmother, she requests it as well, so that she can hang it in her apartment.

However, Dee has a sister, Maggie. Maggie was severely burned in a fire years before, and looks, money, and quickness have “passed her by” (50). Maggie has been promised the quilts for her upcoming marriage, which horrifies Dee. “Maggie would put them on the bed and in five years they’d be in rags!” The mother insists that the quilts were made to be used and refuses to force Maggie to part with them. Dee leaves in a snit, chiding her family for not understanding their “heritage.” However, as the child who adopts a condescending attitude towards the people, if not the items, of her past, Dee is the sister who has no appreciation for her “heritage.” Dee and Maggie suggest class- and academic-influenced approaches to rural culture: one visualizes quaint commodities for aesthetic consumption, while the other sees the quilts as practical and appreciated items created for “everyday use.” Walker affirms the latter.

Smith alludes to this story in her novel, *Fair and Tender Ladies*. Ivy Rowe’s college-educated daughter Joli a novelist, has become interested in mountain culture and folklore after living away for years; apparently she has written to request a family quilt. In her response letter, Ivy explains that the quilt was originally meant for her mother’s burial, but her paternal grandfather took Maude Rowe’s body and buried her in Rich Valley. Ivy meant to reclaim her mother’s body, but time passed, making disinterment disrespectful. “And because I love a crazy-quilt and hate a waste, I took it out and put it on our [Ivy and Oakley Rowe’s] bed” (311). Ivy later put the quilt away when her sister gave her a comforter set in “Early American.”
The quilt eventually ended up with Martha Gayheart, the mildly retarded daughter of Ivy’s union-organizer friend, Violet Gayheart. Ivy raised the shy girl while her mother traveled. When Martha married, Ivy gave her the quilt because “she likes the old ways”; Ivy believes the girl may still be using the quilt. Therefore, “[a]ll this is by ways of saying NO, honey, I can’t send you the quilt for your exhibit, I am sorry” (311). The quilt will stay in “everyday use” rather than become part of a cultural display.

Like the mother in “Everyday Use,” Ivy defends the sweet, slow girl’s right to the “everyday use” of the quilt. Both mothers suggest that the daughter figure who treats the item not with cultural reverence but as a useful tool has the better claim. In many ways, this view mirrors Smith’s narrative perspective of Appalachia, which she regards not as an amusing trinket but as a source of spiritual and cultural nurturance. Just as Smith’s fictional women may reach back to their rural past to deal with contemporary urban society (Teem 65), she does the same with her fiction. Her reworking of Walker’s story illustrates Smith’s consistent interest, not only in folk culture but also in the relationships among perception, culture, education, and class.

In both texts, the richer, better-educated daughter has the less desirable perspective. The outside world has taught these women to regard folk culture as exotic and consumable, much as the local color writers regarded both Appalachian and African-American culture at the turn of the twentieth century. Dee and Joli can view the quilts as aesthetic art(ifacts) because of their separation from the “everydayness” of the item. Since they have no need to churn butter or sew quilts, they can ignore the functions of the products and focus on the items’ aesthetic qualities.
To a degree, financial security is generally part of an easy acceptance of this detached aesthetic (Bourdieu 5), though it can be incorporated in a less privileged position. Education often inculcates the distanced aesthetic in Smith’s characters. In *Oral History*, mountain boy Jink Cantrell is disturbed that the pig’s blood at a hog butchering looks “pretty” to him. He has absorbed enough of the perspective of his teacher, Richmonder Richard Burlage, to perceive the artistic aspects of bright red blood (Reynolds 116-117), but still recognizes its source as a dying animal killed for its meat. Certainly, the mountain aesthetic is not more compassionate; Jink later eats cracklings from the pig while staring at its butchered head. But it is stoicism, not beauty, that the action celebrates. The distanced perspective may not be inextricably linked to financial ease, but it often originates from outside the mountains in Smith’s work, from characters with the institutional and financial authority to sample the cultures of less powerful individuals (x).

It should be noted, however, that Smith’s appropriation of the events and theme of “Everyday Use” complicates the original story. While Dee is a shallow, selfish girl, Joli’s psychic split from her home community is less intentional and more complicated. Joli left the hills to go to school, as Dee did, but only at the insistence of her mother. She does distance herself when she marries her first, aristocratic husband, Taylor Cunnigham III by allowing the wedding to occur on her groom’s home turf, though she did bring her groom home to meet her parents first. She and Ivy correspond for years and, after Joli divorces, Ivy discourages her from moving back to the mountains because “it is too late for you to turn back, honey. You have got past the point where you could ever come back here and live. I know it and you know it” (281).
While Joli remain both respectful and connected to the mountains, education and living away from the hills makes maintaining an acceptable mountain aesthetic difficult. Smith affirms this difficulty by censoring Joli for wanting the quilt for an exhibit. Because of Joli’s schooling and consequent gain in cultural capital, she unintentionally changes her view of her home culture and must be reminded how to view the culture as an insider.

Focusing on the perspectives and aesthetics of culture and class groups avoids the trap of designating items “folk” or “not folk,” rather than focusing on constitutive practices. As Ivy Rowe illustrates with her positive reception of the mass-produced comforter, attractive and well-made commercial items are just as valued by rural characters as folk crafts. In *Oral History*, Jennifer’s oral history project goes awry because she only records what she feels is “authentic,” such as Little Luther’s dulcimer playing and the family’s clogging, while ignoring their customized van and the children’s love for *Magnum, P.I.* Because she maintains a stereotypical view of Appalachia, Jennifer cannot recognize what life is actually like there (Wallace 366). In his discussion of that novel, Fred Hobson observes that mass culture actually appears more natural than folk practices in the lives of Jennifer’s relatives (26), indicating that cultural practices shift with time and circumstance. While the holler/town/outsider dichotomy is relatively consistent in Smith’s work, the practices that make up those divisions vary with circumstance, supporting the idea that aesthetic and taste are effected by situation.

This contrast of cultural and aesthetic perspectives, with their connections to social and economic class, recurs throughout Smith’s fiction. Paul Kingston argues that the differences in American cultural practices can often be equated with educational rather than class differences (129), and Smith and Walker’s texts do acknowledge that education plays a
critical role in the creation of ranked aesthetics. The power conferred by outside educational institutions often authorizes the characters to reappraise rural culture and consume it through an oppressive class relationship; furthermore, Bourdieu considers education and the family as the major sources of cultural capital (13). However, the concept of taste extends beyond the value of educational credentials, skills, and even acquired culture associated with schooling. Taste reflects a unified approach to the world that encompasses all consumptive choices and reflects a distinct value system. Ivy Rowe’s refusal to allow the quilt to be used as a purely aesthetic object when it can be part of “everyday use” reflects a sensible view of the world, perhaps partly conditioned by her lack of a secondary education but also shaped by her economic struggles and connection to her foster daughter, Martha. Education may serve as a base for taste, but in Smith’s work it is not the only source of a legitimate worldview.

The Limitations of Class Aesthetics

Rural or mountain characters in Smith’s texts who wish to access alternative perspectives may be limited by their fear of appearing “uppity.” Egalitarianism helps solidify mountain communities by censoring those who attempt to elevate their status above their neighbors, as critics have noted. Smith’s rural characters who consciously appropriate new styles and tastes to appear better than their peers are routinely critiqued by the community—and even more harshly by the narrative voice. Beulah in Fair and Tender Ladies, who “puts on airs” and wants so much to be a lady becomes an alcoholic, because she fears her peers in Charleston will realize she was not born in their social class. Even education, which Smith tends to affirm, is regarded ambivalently because it can cause an individual to alter her perspective from that of the community, as detailed in the last chapter. Not only are Smith’s
mountain characters limited because they do not have physical and economic access to other perspectives, they are often hindered by their lack of socially sanctioned access as well.

Smith’s characters who live in towns or outside the mountains have greater access to alternative points of view. Smith has identified the ability to travel, to gain experience outside of the mountains, as a clear class marker (Appendix 346), and her fiction supports this assertion. In *Oral History*, Richard Burlage has the time and resources to leave his Richmond home and seek his soul in the mountains. When Ivy moves to Majestic in *Fair and Tender Ladies*, she meets her mother’s friend from Rich Valley, another girl from the hills, schoolteachers, company officials, a judge from outside the community, and even a handsome young man from a nearby town. Living in town provides Ivy with numerous chances to encounter new perspectives and to expand her view of the world. While not all of Smith’s characters healthily integrate the perspectives they encounter, town and outsider characters have a distinct advantage, if the creation of self is partially dependent upon the evaluation or incorporation of different points of view, because they have access to more perspectives than Smith’s rural characters.

However, this advantage is tempered by the difficulties Smith’s more privileged characters have in understanding perspectives besides their own. Smith’s wealthier characters often misperceive mountain or lower class cultures, because of either their own preconceptions or their possession of a different aesthetic. In *Oral History*, Burlage misunderstands the mountain culture because he romanticizes it, never recognizing the more difficult and complex aspects of local life. Neither he nor his granddaughter, who returns years later looking for her “roots,” can see mountain rural or town culture as anything beyond the “two sides of the pastoral coin” (Buchanan 337-338). Similarly, in “Live Bottomless,” a
non-Appalachian short story, Jenny Dale is “absurdly” proud of the blouse she makes while staying with a middle-class cousin. Her mother, a former debutante, later tells her to take off the blouse because it “looks like somebody made it” (137). In the home of the middle class cousin, the blouse codes positively for thrift and self-sufficiency; in the upper-middle class family, it suggests a lack of the funds and the sense to purchase an elegantly made garment. Having access to different cultures or points of view does not necessarily mean that one understands the way that members of that culture perceive their practices (Holt 244-245), a danger that Smith often points to.6

Furthermore, while Smith’s privileged characters are often limited by a distanced aesthetic, her middle class or town characters are frequently limited by more overt class markers. Town characters may define themselves in opposition to rural characters and often pursue “respectable” lives of hard work, appropriate socialization, conventional moral behavior, and careful attention to aesthetic choices that emphasize wealth and elegance as they conceive it. Because some of Smith’s middle class characters are newly arrived to the class, they emphasize their distance from rural or working class culture as a way of indicating their position (Bourdieu 58). Their aesthetic is often defined by an anxiety over status as they strain to distance themselves from rural culture, a view that Smith critiques. While some of her town characters do maintain a healthy continuum between town and rural, and social mobility is an occasional reality, the split between the two groups is fairly consistent and makes maintaining cross-class connections complicated.

---

6 See Parrish, S. Jones, and Wallace for discussions of this difficulty in *Oral History*.
Once sufficient social distance has been achieved, upwardly mobile mountain characters may join middle class outsiders in consuming rural culture as a delightful novelty, as typified by their patronage of the Cantrell amusement park in *Oral History* or middle class Mrs. Gladys Rush’s fascination with country music stars in *The Devil’s Dream*. Gladys’s assertion that the star-studded wedding of Black Jack Johnny and Rose Annie is “history” is accurate in the field of country music but also a mark of her misunderstanding of what constitutes significance in the larger culture. Smith’s fiction both critiques this middle class aesthetic by making it comedic, as in the case of Gladys, but also reflects the consumptive attitude towards holler culture through her fiction’s consistent fascination with mountain music, religion, and culture. The difference is that Smith’s narratives move through this aesthetic to a more culturally complex portrayal than her middle class characters generally recognize. These characters mistakenly combine some aesthetic distance with an attraction to the emotional drama that separates their view from the intellectual disinterestedness of Bourdieu’s aesthetic elite.

Though changes in taste reflect social mobility for some of Smith’s characters, socially rising or descending characters display traces of the taste of the class of origin, indicating that they stray from the typical trajectory for their initial class status. Capital acquisition or loss over time is not unusual, but typically individuals have several probable routes for rising or falling trajectory; when an individual deviates from the general paths of their group, their taste bears the mark of a different class than the rest of their group (*Distinction* 108-112). In *Fancy Strut*, Miss Iona was once the daughter of the wealthiest man in town. Though her fortune has waned and the family mansion is dilapidated, Miss Iona is still respected as a representative of the Old South in Speed, Alabama. She is allowed to keep
her job as society page editor of her father’s old newspaper through a “gentleman’s agreement” with the new editor, whose bemused acceptance of her lofty attitude reflects the general sentiment of the town. Wearing long dresses and a dated hairstyle, Miss Iona promotes the standards of grace and classical art that she idealized when she was young. Her style and perspective reflect her personal identity as an aristocratic lady, not an aging and socially descending spinster. A sympathetic but somewhat absurd and comic figure, she retains her position in society partially by refusing to release it.

In the same book, Bevo Cartwright’s grandmother, called MaMaw, retains a rural lifestyle, despite her family’s economic advancement. After Bevo’s father makes a small fortune from his chain of junkyards, the entire family moves into a brand new suburban home, where they all feel ill at ease. MaMaw responds by turning the backyard into a vegetable and flower garden like the ones that she had in the country. She becomes a neighborhood expert on flowers, offering advice and selling seeds through a catalogue franchise. Like Miss Iona, MaMaw keeps an old style of dressing in long skirts with pockets and uses snuff, though it is “unladylike.” Both older women demonstrate the style of their class of origin, not the class status they have attained.

However, and significantly, both women are consciously playing at the class stereotypes they fulfill. Miss Iona’s mother was an unaffectionate alcoholic; after her death, Miss Iona responded by becoming “a perfect little lady,” a role she continues to play, serving as the self-appointed arbiter of taste. Similarly, Bevo believes MaMaw has watched too many episodes of *The Beverly Hillbillies*, noting that she copies Granny, the spry and wise country woman on the show. Therefore, while both women reflect the taste of their class of origin, they do this partially by copying popular stereotypes. Though they gravitate towards types
that affirm their class culture origins, at some level they are consciously using these models to shape their class identity by demonstrating socially appropriate taste.

Both Miss Iona and Bevo’s grandmother are comic characters whose refusal or inability to assume the taste and perspective of their new social position makes them figures of fun. The fact that this disjunction is played at least partly for laughs demonstrates the connection between taste and status in the collective American consciousness. If the audience cannot “intuit” the appropriate taste for each character’s social position, as Bourdieu suggests, then failing to adopt the expected aesthetic will not be comic. Social dissonance creates the humor.

Individuals who have maintained a roughly stable class status over a long period of time, as these older women have, may have more difficulty altering their taste when they gain or lose economic capital. This retention of the aesthetic from a previous class status suggests that while taste is connected to economic capital, the connection is somewhat loose; individuals may utilize the style that reflects their allegiance, not necessarily their position. At the same time, the style suggests a social position, because it reflects a status that may support or override class. Finally, though the women tend towards the aesthetic they feel most comfortable with because of their class origins, they also display some agency in their manifestations of taste; the grandmother, especially, really does choose to model herself on the popular culture image of Granny on The Beverly Hillbillies. By suggesting that taste is mostly intuitive but also somewhat conscious, Smith’s work emphasizes its pervasiveness and its power as capital that can be employed in the status game.


**Taste, Ladies, and Limits**

Some of Smith’s middle class characters, especially male characters, do find a comfortable path between rural and town culture. The grandfather in “Artists,” for example, runs a general store but does not work harder than necessary. He has a number of male friends that he drinks and gambles with, much to his wife’s dismay. His taste in socializing and enjoying other ordinary pleasures such as eating ice cream and telling ribald stories runs counter to the aristocratic and dignified mien his wife assumes. When the grandfather is ultimately revealed to have had a mistress for several decades, the narrative never determines whether it was the grandmother’s off-putting ambition that encouraged his actions or if she became focused on “improving” activities as a compensating mechanism. However, the grandfather seems to have maintained a comfortable lifestyle and the respect of the community without cutting himself off from the county or town residents.

Part of the issue may lie with gender. While men have a number of avenues for gaining power and status, women often are limited to inheritance, marriage, appearance, and embodiments of socially appropriate style for advancement, which leads mobility-minded women to emphasize their superior sense of taste. The merchant grandfather in “Artists” needs to maintain good relationships as part of his business. He can be social with his customers without losing class status; in fact, he is more likely to have a flourishing business if perceived as an unpretentious local. In contrast, the grandmother, who never wants to return to the difficulties of her rural youth, assumes an artistic and respectable aesthetic to demonstrate her distance from her former condition. While understandable, this distancing is routinely harmful in Smith’s work. A connection to a personal usable past is necessary for a
triumpant life in Smith’s work (Underwood 146-147); without it, something important is lost (Appendix 348).

One strategy that the grandmother in “Artists” draws upon to improve her status is, once again, the image of the Southern lady. Deborah Wesley has chronicled how Smith’s women struggle with this class-based image, which can provide status but also limit creativity and communal relationships. Wesley concludes that Smith’s most admirable characters are unaware of or reject the image (48). Although Wesley does not significantly investigate this resource, women with mountain connections are more successful in escaping the image because they have an alternate perspective to draw from (212-215). Because the image of the lady limits rather than expands options in self-creation, it works against Smith’s wealthier and better educated characters. Those characters with multiple perspectives to choose from are healthier; however, just as the holler aesthetic censors individuals who tried to “get above their raising,” the class-privileged image of the lady restricts its adherents from “unladylike” behavior and perspectives.

Therefore, even though town characters may have more perspectives to draw from than rural characters, simply having this access does not mean that a character can utilize varied aesthetics successfully. In Black Mountain Breakdown, upper middle class Crystal Spangler morphs too easily from cheerleader to coed to bohemian to teacher to society wife to catatonic. Because she tries to please everyone and accepts rather than chooses an identity (Buchanan 243), Crystal fails, despite all the options available to her. In some ways, Crystal has too many possibilities and refuses to eliminate any, which ultimately removes all by default; she lets others decide for her (Hill 87). Though having more options for self-creation
is demonstrably an advantage, the class-based strictures on Smith’s middle class women and their personal limitations prohibit many from taking advantage of these choices.

Crystal’s struggle illustrates the subtle tensions and connections between town and rural aesthetics. Though she grows up in town, Crystal spends part of her childhood visiting relatives near the defunct Little Emma coal mine that once made her family rich. While her great aunts Nora and Grace are originally from Baltimore, during their decades in the mountains, Nora in particular has made herself comfortable as a “country woman.” As a teen, Crystal becomes popular in town but retains her great aunt’s affinity for the rural aesthetic. When out driving with friends one day, she sees a house covered with hubcaps, polished and shining in the sun. While her one of her town friends regards the display as “the tackiest thing I ever saw,” Crystal says simply, “I like it” (52). Her boyfriend grins indulgently, knowing that she would favor something so unstylish; he finds this quality endearing. Both the friend and boyfriend acknowledge that Crystal’s taste is misplaced and eccentric for a town girl. However, because Crystal is so thoroughly marked as a member of the town class by her beauty, her family connections, her manner, and her status a popular cheerleader, this quirk does not alter her social identity. Her social class position lets her sample less valued perspectives while inevitably returning to her more powerful world view.

Crystal’s actions move from sampling to slumming when she dates a holler boy with a bad reputation, Mack Stiltner. She enjoys testing Mack to see if he has socially appropriate taste: “It always interests Crystal to see if Mack can tell what’s tacky and what’s not. Usually he can’t, but how could you expect him to, coming from the background he does?” (94). On one date, Crystal rudely keeps Mack waiting while she preens at the mirror with a “tacky” lavender shawl that her aunt made, imagining herself variously as the Little Match Girl, a
flamenco dancer, and a haughty, turbaned native, casually trying on personas (Underwood 39). Significantly, the narrative perspective shifts to Mack’s point of view as the couple leaves the house. Once in the car with Mack, Crystal sets Mack up by asking his opinion of the shawl. Mack chivalrously praises the garment as any good date would, mentally noting its “careful stitching”; he observes that Crystal, after enthusiastically agreeing with his assessment, emotionally withdraws. The reader senses that she is laughing at Mack, though perhaps also trying to deny that she sees the shawl’s beauty, too. The narrative perspective reveals Mack’s confused attempts to understand Crystal and his genuine feelings towards her. Because Smith first depicts Crystal’s haughty attitude and then its effect on the sincere Mack, the reader’s sympathies align with the tough but sensitive boy from the holler and the taste that he manifests.

Though she regards Mack as socially inferior—and in the eyes of the town, she is right—Crystal misses her chance for a mutually fulfilling relationship by ultimately rejecting Mack (Hill 87). Of all the characters in the book, he comes the closest to understanding her and allowing self-definition within a relationship. However, teenage Crystal is too conscious of the social class division between town and holler to openly affiliate with him and the holler lifestyle.

Juxtaposing Crystal’s affirmation of the “tacky” hubcap house in front of her town friends with her later test of Mack’s taste indicates that Crystal, the town girl, has more access to more perspectives than her rural boyfriend. While Mack only sees through the rural aesthetic, Crystal can respond to multiple, contrasting perspectives because of her family connections to and her experiences with a variety of social class aesthetics. Though Mack makes good use of his aesthetic, escaping Black Rock to become a successful singer in the
working class genre of country music, he has fewer economic, social, and personal options than Crystal.

However, simply having access to different aesthetics does not mean Crystal can appropriate them effectively. Her failure is uniquely middle class. Mack cannot choose anything but the rural aesthetic while in Black Rock because others are economically and socially inaccessible to him. Stanley observes that while Crystal can dabble in working class expressions of sexuality and religion, she exoticizes these experiences in keeping with her social class perspective (344). Crystal, with her middle class access and ability to embody different tastes, can adopt the outer trappings, but misses the value of each view because she does not allow herself to pursue the implications of the accompanying aesthetic. Though Crystal’s ultimate failure results from passivity, Smith here depicts eclectism as dangerous if it is rooted in a misunderstanding of the lower status aesthetic that refuses to affirm its possibility for agency and identity.

**The Darker Side of Mountain Taste**

Though *Black Mountain Breakdown* suggests that a relationship with Mack Stiltner and all that his aesthetic implies is a viable if class-restricted option for Crystal, Smith’s later fiction depicts a darker fate for a similar couple. Smith revisits and extends the character of Mack Stiltner as Black Jack Johnny in *The Devil’s Dream* (Byrd 102). When he disappears from *Black Mountain Breakdown*, Mack goes to Nashville and becomes a country western singer. Black Jack Johnny, a honky-tonk singer with one hit and a lot of attitude, demonstrates one possibility of what might have happened to Mack, and Rose Annie, Johnny’s girlfriend, suggests what Crystal’s fate could have been as Mack’s wife.
Johnny and Rose Annie grew up together; his mother married her uncle, but the two were not blood related. An emotionally fragile girl, Rose Annie began having visual hallucinations of a “little-girl ghost” at the age of nine; eventually the girl becomes an alter-ego who speaks up for the meek Rose Annie. Partly because of her sensitivity, the romance between the teenagers affects Rose Annie profoundly. The relationship of Johnny and Rose Annie had such an intimacy and intensity that she said it “has ruined me for men ever since. Or for life—I might as well say it. Johnny ruined me for life by making me feel so much then” (141). The relationship leads to an unplanned pregnancy and a nervous breakdown for Rose Annie shortly after her mother dies; while she is away “recovering,” her father tells Johnny that she has died and the young man leaves town. Rose Annie marries Buddy Rush, a hard-working local boy bound for success, and settles in to be a suburban housewife.

However, Rose Annie remains emotionally attached to her rural past. While she pines primarily for Johnny, Rose Annie is also nostalgic for the life on the family farm before the imposition of the modern, middle class aesthetic. The rural aesthetic she longs for is not poverty-stricken; while she and her cousins worked on their farm, and “it was hard, hard!” (135), Rose Annie makes a point of saying that her aunt could have had a hired girl to help with chores. Her mother-in-law describes “the Baileys [as] being the most famous family in this valley, and one of the most well-to-do” (192). Though Rose Annie is clearly wealthier when married to Buddy than during her childhood, the contrast is one of degree, not opposites. It is Rose Annie’s aesthetic and lifestyle as a housewife, not just her economic standing, that contrasts with the rural perspective of her childhood.

Though Rose Annie and Buddy build their house on her father’s property, the life she leads is aesthetically different from the one she knew as a child:
For I’ll tell you, folks are not the same anymore. *families* are not the same anymore. Of course I am grateful that Buddy has done so well and all, but a big family night at our house these days is when Buddy and me and Gladys take the kids and ride over to Bristol and eat at Jack Trayer’s Restaurant . . . and then we go to a movie. These family nights are not a thing like a stir-off, for instance, although of course they are more modern. I don’t expect that Sugar and Buddy Junior will remember them in particular either. I wouldn’t if I was them. It is nothing like standing out in the meadow in the forty-degree cold, clapping your hand together to keep warm, waiting on it to get dark, watching them press the cane. (146)

Rose Annie says that the “stir-off has come to stand for a lot in my mind, all the good times we had growing up here, and all the things we done together, all that hard work and fun and music, I mean, the way we lived then” (146). Since both Rose Annie and her cousin, Katie Cocker, regard the stir-off as a defining moment, the last “big old time” before death and change scattered the family, the scene deserves close scrutiny.7

Rose Annie’s description of the stir-off appears at first to recount a combination communal work scene and social gathering, a happy folk event. Neighbors come to socialize and take a bit of molasses home, young adults dance, little kids taste dip their stalks in the “sweetening,” and men get drunk on the sly. Rose Annie, Johnny, and other teenagers play a traditional game of hide-and-seek in the frosty hayfield. In some ways, the picture is idyllic pastoral.

Yet the community gathers for the stir-off largely because Rose Annie’s uncle, the popular and seriously ill Durwood Bailey, has always loved the event. Though the sugar-cane stir-off likely had its origins as a community work project, after Durwood’s death, “no one planted any cane, and the stir-offs were over and done with” (145). The event’s purpose had become purely social by Rose Annie’s childhood, demonstrating that the way of life she longs

---

7 In *Fair and Tender Ladies*, Ivy Rowe fondly remembers a similar stir-off (201-202); however, the event does not exemplify rural culture for her.
for was disappearing as she experienced it. Just as Richard Burlage in *Oral History* does not recognize the logging companies’ entry into the mountains as the start of the destruction of the landscape (S. Jones 109-110), Rose Annie does not realize how quickly the community of her childhood is changing.

Furthermore, the final stir-off includes a number of ominous elements. Rose Annie punctuates her description of the event with an anxious search for Johnny, her teenage lover. When he finally appears, Johnny uses the guise of a hide-and-seek game to pull Rose Annie to an outlying hay pile for intense love-making. She remembers that “[f]rom where we lay out in the cold dark field, we could look back at the stir-off and see it all as a dream, the black figures moving to and fro in the orange firelight” (147). The assignation occurs less than 300 feet from where Rose Annie’s family stands, highlighting the connection of sexuality, danger, and even insanity to her rural aesthetic. “Something broke in me that night, and it has not gone back right ever since” (145), Rose Annie recalls. When her uncle and then her mother die almost immediately after the stir-off, soon followed by her own miscarriage, Rose Annie has a nervous breakdown. The stir-off, Rose Annie’s symbol of her family and their way of life, therefore includes not only elements of a joyful communal celebration, but also a sense of its own demise and elements of danger, sexuality, and insanity.8

Rose Annie contrasts her reflections on her childhood with repeated attempts to content herself with the life that her doting husband has given her. The owner of a cement

---

8 Emotional instability recurs throughout Smith’s texts and is no respecter of class; however, in Rose Annie’s case, her emotional fragility increases throughout her childhood, which she associates with rural culture, and culminates in her “break” after the stir-off. For examples of middle or upper class mental instability, see Eugene in *The Last Day the Dogbushes Bloomed*; the father in “Tongues of Fire”; and the schizophrenic brother in “News of the Spirit.”
company, Buddy is financially successful and buys Rose Annie jewelry, clothes, and the most “modern” appliances. However, because her heart is with Johnny and the “old ways,” Rose Annie has a difficult time heeding the advice of her Aunt Alice, who says, “If I had me a new ranch-style house on top of a hill with a General Electric kitchen and a nice husband like you . . . I believe I would be able to get up out of bed” (133). Rose Annie tries to participate in the activities appropriate to her station—“I do go to church, and I read the Bible and The Upper Room and Good Housekeeping and the Reader’s Digest, I try real hard to be as good of a wife and mother and citizen as I can (Buddy is in the Toastmasters), but things get away from me somehow” (129). The middle class perspective rings false to Rose Annie because it seems to substitute material advances and social conformity for authentic communal and personal relationships. Rather than enjoy “respectability” and comfort, Rose Annie prefers the wildness and passion she experienced as a child.

However, part of the appeal of her rural memories is their starkness and intensity. Rose Annie prefers the “old tunes” of Chicken Rise Church to the “velvet cushions” and organ of the Methodist Church she attends with Buddy, the scratchiness of Johnny’s necklace of scarlet haws to the smooth pearls her husband provides. Like Myrtle in Family Linen, who wishes she had experienced the pain of natural childbirth because it might have tied her more emotionally to her life (Hill 229), Rose Annie wants to connect with the physical experience that is by definition removed from middle class comfort and elite disinterestedness. This nostalgia for limited discomfort, which is regarded as more “real” than suburban plenty, appears in a variety of Smith’s characters: the ambivalent upwardly-mobile rural characters, dissatisfied middle class characters (Hill 205), and touristy outsiders who value cultural “authenticity” (Holt 238-239). In The Devil’s Dream, the working class, hard-shell Baptist
faith depicted depends heavily on an austerity in ethical behavior, theological doctrine, and music. One character inadvertently sums up that value system by stating, “[T]hey is pretty singing, and then they is true singing” (40)—the two cannot be the same. Characters from varied class positions routinely regard the source of emotional intensity as the rural or working class aesthetic and connect this “authenticity” partially to the physicality of the rural aesthetic.9

William Teem argues that Smith’s female characters adapt the values of their rural roots to cope with contemporary urban life (65). Rose Annie attempts to do this by keeping her memory of Johnny alive and by running away with him when they find each other again. However, the result is disastrous. Rose Annie and Black Jack Johnny, a moderately successful country music singer, move to Nashville and, partly on the strength of their story’s romance, become “The King and Queen of County Music.” Though they marry in matching white cowboy outfits, similar to the ones they wore in a family singing show as children, their lives do not resemble the childhood Rose Annie nostalgically longed for.

One of the songs that made their success possible is their duet “Subdivision Wife”: “She used to be somebody’s sweetheart/She used to be somebody’s wife/She used to own/A new brick home/And a subdivision life” (186). Here, Rose Annie and Black Jack Johnny consciously contrast their life as stars with her experience as a middle-class housewife. Ironically, the star aesthetic is in some ways the perspective of the working class with money, consciously defined against middle class suburbia, just as the middle class defines itself against the rural.

9 An exception occurs in The Devil’s Dream, where West Coast producer Tom Barksdale craves the intensity of a fast lane lifestyle; the upper class can also exist outside
As rich country stars, Rose Annie and Black Jack Johnny are expected to spend lavishly and eccentrically, but they must continue to embody the rural aesthetic of country music, the basis for their wealth. Though their home is described as “modern architecture,” it features a wrought-iron gate with the musical notes for the first line of Black Jack Johnny’s first hit song. Because Rose Annie loves the color blue, the living room is furnished in blue velvet furniture, while the master bedroom is “Gone With the Wind all the way” (200); Black Jack Johnny’s trademark black cowboy suits fill his closet. Though their lifestyle is wealthier, it could hardly be described as elite taste. Though they gain economic assets, Rose Annie and Johnny do not acquire cultural resources that would allow them to consider alternative approaches to their lives because their taste must continue to reflect working class and rural connections. While taste is not all education, Black Jack Johnny and Rose Annie indicate that it is also not just economic.

In some significant ways, however, Rose Annie and Black Jack Johnny’s life in Nashville is too much like their romance in the hollers. While it could be argued that the commercialized version of working class culture fails to provide them the nurturance of rural aesthetic, their unhealthy relationship has its roots in their intense teenage romance. Rose Annie acknowledges that as a child, “Johnny had a wildness in his bones” and told her that “whatever I do when I ain’t with you don’t have a thing to do with . . . this” (144), suggesting that he was unfaithful to her even then. When the couple travels towards Nashville after being reunited as adults, Johnny wrecks his Cadillac, hinting at the “fast lane” lifestyle associated with country music stars such as Hank Williams and Willie Nelson. Like the once notoriously unreliable George Jones, Johnny begins missing performances, just as he skipped school as a of community norms.
kid. The dark side of rural life extends into the good-timing, fast-living lifestyle of the rockabilly country music star, with unfavorable results. Ultimately, a young woman comes to their Nashville mansion and tells Rose Annie that she is pregnant by Johnny. When he returns to the house, Rose Annie shoots and kills him, later claiming her alter-ego imaginary “little girl” performed the deed.

In *Black Mountain Breakdown*, Crystal Spangler is socially and culturally incapable of embracing a relationship with a rural boy and the taste he represents, despite narrative hints that both were potential sources of strength and nurturance. In *The Devil’s Dream*, Rose Annie’s story suggests that integrating a rural identity into a town perspective is not necessarily an easier project. The very things that attract Rose Annie to the rural aesthetic are some of the elements that can be destructive, if unchecked. The narrative never suggests that Rose Annie would have been happier with Buddy Rush in the suburbs; their life together is sterile (R. Smith 223) and summarized by his repeated insistence that, “You are like a little doll” (131). Nonetheless, her attempts to recreate her childhood fail. Though Smith generally depicts the rural aesthetic as a vital source of spiritual and cultural nurturance, here she suggests that such unfettered intensity can become destructive. In “Artists and Beauticians: Balance in Lee Smith’s Fiction,” Lucinda MacKethan argues that Smith’s fiction inclines towards thematic and technical balance, with pretentious characters such as Stella of “Cakewalk” offset by working class, communal artists like her sister, Florrie. *The Devil’s Dream* suggests that this tendency towards balance may help prevent the limitations of one aesthetics from countering its virtues; access to further aesthetics might have helped Rose Annie deal with the world in a more stable manner.
Capital and Aesthetics

Some characters are more successful than Crystal and Rose Annie in combining and integrating aesthetics. Tanya Bennett suggests that Ivy Rowe fluctuates between rejection and acceptance of the theoretical systems, such as capitalism and patriarchalism, that surround her (78). While she affirms some aspects of folk culture, enjoying storytelling and living on the mountain, Ivy also embraces elements of modern life. Her description of the introduction of the rural electrification project to nearby Home Creek, with the new lights resembling “a lovely lady’s necklace laid out on the side of Bethel Mountain” (192) suggests the power and possibility of connection inherent in contemporary life (Bennett 90). Ivy’s sense of self fluctuates and she skillfully pulls from varied positions to construct a perspective that works for her.

This fluctuating use of perspectives and aesthetics recurs throughout Smith’s fiction. While distinct aesthetics can be identified, many with a basis in or connection to class, individuals are shaped, not determined by these aesthetics, if they have viable alternatives. While rural, town, and outsider groups form the main divisions within Smith’s work, individuals within those divisions vary in their perspectives. This situation occurs partly because of the presence of individual agency, which Smith is loath to discard. However, Bourdieu suggests that individuals do not occupy social classes simply on the basis of one kind of capital. Economic, social, and cultural capital all contribute to determining the perspective and aesthetic of an individual; furthermore, capital may have different values in diverse social situations (Hall 276). As a result, a woman who married well and is rich but has little education may differ significantly in taste from a woman of the same class background with more extensive formal schooling. Furthermore, a man with excellent social connections
and a European education who has fallen on hard times may have a very different perspective than a man doing the same job, with similar income, who has worked hard to improve his economic capital and gain status. This multiple capital approach to social structuring provides a useful framework for discussing the constitution of social classes and aesthetics, as well as the relationship between aesthetics, in Smith’s work.

“Live Bottomless,” a short story from Smith’s most recent collection, *News of the Spirit*, illustrates most succinctly the classifying effect of aesthetic taste and related capital that recurs throughout her fiction. The adults in the life of protagonist Jennifer (Jenny) Dale represent distinct lifestyles that reflect their access to economic, social, and cultural capital. By juxtaposing these capital-based approaches to life for upper-middle class Jennifer, Smith indicates the extent to which social background and the access to different perspectives influence the way an individual deals with the world. Since “Live Bottomless” is set in the non-mountainous South, the complication of “folk vs. non-folk” culture is eliminated; the story instead illustrates the importance of class, status, and life experience in constructing social aesthetics, ethics, and relationships.10

“Live Bottomless” tells the story of a crisis in the marriage of Jenny’s parents, Billie Rutherledge Dale and John Fitzhugh Dale, Jr., of Lewisville, Virginia. Her father has an affair with the artistic daughter of a local judge; when he leaves the family for a time, Jenny’s mother retreats into drink and is briefly institutionalized. While her parents are gone, Jenny stays in Repass, South Carolina, with her mother’s cousin, a school principal. Jenny’s parents eventually try to salvage their marriage by taking a family vacation to Key West, Florida.

10 In addition to Ivy Rowe and Crystal Spangler, Katie Cocker of *The Devil’s Dream* and Grace Shepherd of *Saving Grace* arguably make similar journeys.
While there, Jenny befriends young Hispanic strippers from a nearby bar (without her parents’ knowledge) and spies on a film crew staying in their hotel (with her mother’s blessing and assistance). Jenny and her family are even invited by actor Tony Curtis to serve as extras in the movie the crew is filming, *Operation Petticoat*. Smith juxtaposes these varied social worlds within one hundred pages, which are threaded together by the story of the parents’ struggling marriage. This allows Smith to explore a number of social perspectives in the South of 1958 and to demonstrate how economic, social, and cultural capital combine to influence individual perspectives.

The first capital-based perspective that Jennifer encounters is her mother’s. Billie Rutledge Dale is a woman comfortable with her upper middle class role. “Widely known as one of the most beautiful women in Virginia” (57), once the loveliest girl in South Carolina, Billie has a charm bracelet made with the fraternity pins from former beaus. Though some claim she looks like Marilyn Monroe, Jenny believes that she is “bigger, blonder, paler, with a sort of inflatable celluloid prettiness” (58). Like many of Smith’s female characters, her beauty is a stylized commodity that gives her power within the social worlds of Charleston and later Virginia.

Billie marries well. John Fitzhugh Dale, Jr., then a naval officer in World War II and son of a mill owner, weds her in a lavish affair complete with a six-foot tall wedding cake, ten attendants, and a former suitor who tries to commit suicide during the rehearsal. Billie’s life suggests moderate class privilege; her suitors are suitable college boys or officers, and her Charleston family has enough social clout to make her a debutante. Furthermore, like many of Smith’s women, including Ivy Rowe (Bennett 91), she betrays an interest in drama and romance, a view that she passes on to her daughter.
Once married, Billie transfers her love for drama and romance into an obsession with movie stars and celebrities. Married at seventeen, her abbreviated education gives her a preference for mass culture to feed her emotional desires. This preference is not bereft of value; Jenny enjoys the unusual jobs depicted on her favorite television show “What’s My Line?” partly because they “made me feel that the world was a much more open place than I had been led to believe thus far” (94). It is significant, however, that Billie’s aesthetic choices reflect her economic and social comfort, as well as an absence of connection with “high” culture. As Jenny observes:

She [Billie] loved the lives of the stars above all else. She hated regular newspaper. She hated facts. She also hated club meetings, housework, politics, business, and her mother-in-law. She was not civic. She adored shopping, friends, cooking, gardening, dancing, children and babies and kittens (all helpless little things, actually,) and my father . . . . She’d cry at the drop of a hat, and kept a clump of pink Kleenex tucked into her bosom at all times, just in case. (56)

Billie is not an industrious housewife or a pure, pious, and submissive Southern lady. She is an upper middle class woman with social power, comfortable with her economic and status position.

Unlike many of Smith’s middle class characters, Billie is uninterested in civic duty. While some of Smith’s upper class women, such as the mother in “Tongues of Fire,” dutifully participate in social clubs (Wesley 76), Billie instead belongs to an informal women’s network of visiting and neighborliness. Part of this practice may be personal preference; it also may reflect the social security of a mill owner’s wife and former debutante who does not need local sanction.

Billie is unusual in Smith’s fiction. She most resembles the mother in Smith’s early novel, *Something in the Wind*, set in non-mountainous Virginia, or the mother in *The Last
*Day the Dogbushes Bloomed*, again set in non-mountainous Virginia. Billie’s sense of ease with privilege is missing from most of the wealthy women in Smith’s Appalachian texts. Born to relative privilege, if not great wealth, Billie does not need to strive to keep up appearances or demonstrate her worth. In Smith’s mountain texts, many of her characters are newly-arrived in the middle class and therefore feel constrained to demonstrate that they deserve the status that often goes with moderate wealth.

Despite the modest privilege of her background, Billie’s life has not been easy. When she was a young married woman, both her parents died in the same year and she took in her brother, Mason. Jenny thrills to know that Mason was a *juvenile delinquent*:

> He had graduated from our local high school by the skin of his teeth, distinguished by nothing—no sports, no clubs. Nice girls would not date him. College was out of the question. Mason wore T-shirts and the same old leather jacket all through high school; his swept-back hair was long and greasy. Even Daddy could not get a button-down shirt or a sports jacket on him. (81)

Like his sister, Mason apes popular culture; though the timeline of the short story places him in high school during the 1940s, his adolescent image resembles the “hood” character epitomized by James Dean in *Rebel Without a Cause*.

Initially, Mason was not a class or social outcast, however; in some important ways, he chooses his class status. Mason’s refusal to conform to local social life represents a rejection of the town and class he grew up in. His reaction is likely caused by being orphaned as a child, but the result is that he descends socially. By doing badly in school and failing to attend college, he is limited in employment options. Mason may have legitimate problems with comprehension; the businesses his brother-in-law sets him up in fail, and the text is never clear if the source is inability, sloth, or bad luck. Nonetheless, debt is a constant problem for Mason, and he ends up working in the shipyards. Similarly, because of his unkempt
appearance and surly manner in high school, he is unable to find a “nice” girlfriend and “marries down,” saddling himself with an older wife and three step-children to feed on a limited salary. As an adult, Mason drinks too heavily and visits his sister only for money, which hurts her feelings tremendously. In every way—manual job, rebellious behavior, inappropriate marriage, and thoughtless manner—Mason descends to a lower social class, apparently by conscious or unconscious choice.

Mason’s rebellion seems to be against middle class society, a common enough teenage project. However, he cannot find a way to reject upper middle class taste and manners without losing the economic and social privileges that accompany it. Once he begins the downward spiral, Mason is only buoyed by the social connections to his sister’s family. As long as these familial connections are in place, re-ascent is theoretically possible, though it never occurs in the story.

Mason is depicted through Jenny’s eyes; like many of Smith’s upper middle class characters, she assumes that real excitement occurs either in the lowest (Hill 205) or highest reaches of the social strata, with the delinquents or the stars. She is very disappointed when, during his infrequent visits, the pudgy, monosyllabic Mason does not live up to her dramatic image of the juvenile delinquent. This narrative choice strips the melodramatic Jenny of any illusions about the excitement of working class life and humanizes the mysterious uncle with the rough life.

Though Jenny associates Mason with rebellion and danger, Smith complicates him, as she does most of her “low life” characters. Mason’s social descent does not make him happy, and Jenny sees her mother’s pain at “not being able to make a loved one become the person you think he ought to be” (83). Eventually, Mason’s wife leaves him for another man and
Mason is killed when she confronts the couple in a bar. Jenny thinks this tragedy sounds “like a country song,” distancing the events by contextualizing them in a working class form. Despite his class origins, in death as in life, Jenny associates her uncle with a different class than herself.

After his tragic and sordid death, Mason’s wife does not attend the funeral that Jenny’s family organizes. However, two of Mason’s stepdaughters do:

trashy girls in their late teens with curly red hair who cried like they meant it and told Mama that Mason had been a great stepfather to them. I know this was more important to Mama than anything else that was said at Mason’s funeral. She clung to their arms, and gave them money later. (88)

Billie needs the positive image the girls provide of her deceased brother, the good father—which he may have been. While he descended socially and “married down,” Billie needs to believe that her beloved and wayward brother was at least in one important respect “classy.”

Mason represents “low life,” which is typified more by behavior, lifestyle, and unstable income than by class origins. Working class and “low life” are not interchangeable in Smith (A. Jones 254), though many of the situations that her working class characters face are similar to those of low life: insufficient income, violence, and unstable family relationships. The difference is behavior and is recognized by working class characters, not middle or upper class characters who assume, as Jenny does of Mason’s step-daughters, that those with an appearance suggesting a lower class fraction are “trashy.”

However, if behavior is an assumed differential between classes, it is a faulty one. Mason’s death was the result of a fight caused by his cheating wife; Jenny’s aristocratic father, John Dale, cheats on his own wife and chooses the family gathering after Mason’s
death to reveal his affair. While Jenny’s father is depicted sympathetically, his actions here are selfish and ill-timed—hardly the mark of moral superiority.

Despite her father’s behavior, however, it is Mason’s loyal stepdaughters that Jenny labels “trashy.” Throughout Smith’s fiction, girls like Crystal Spangler of Black Mountain Breakdown, who are promiscuous but discreet, act “nice” and come from “good” families, are able to maintain social acceptability, while those from “trashy” backgrounds are condemned as morally challenged simply for poor choice in tank tops and eye make-up. Taste often is assumed as equivalent with behavior and values, sometimes fairly but often to the detriment of those outside the most socially powerful taste.

For women, the assumption of a connection between taste and morality is especially strong. Because many of Smith’s texts are set before 1970, many of her female characters do not have careers or property of their own; in the absence of these possessions, taste and behavior become more critical social markers. Smith’s texts with more contemporary settings tend to reflect a past emphasis on female taste and behavior, changed and less prevalent, but still exerting influence.

Carroll Byrd, the mistress, is a stark contrast to wife Billie. A painter and sculptress, Carroll’s education and experiences have given her a more austere aesthetic, one indicative of the “detached gaze” that Bourdieu identifies with high culture. Jenny admires this hard, unflinching vision and believes it draws her father to Carroll. Jenny finds her mother “too soft” after watching Carroll, not realizing that both provide different versions of the drama that she craves.

Carroll moves from Maine into the home of her deceased father, who had been the town judge, thereby acquiring the economic capital of her family’s accumulated wealth. “The
Ivy House,” as the townspeople call Carroll’s lavishly furnished ancestral home, represents wealth, family connections, and local privilege. However, her father was something of a hermit, as well as an atheist, a combination that simultaneously lowered his social standing as a community member and raised his profile by giving him the role of eccentric. Carroll, in similar fashion, refuses the local social connections offered by the women who bring welcome casseroles. Sending them back with written thank you notes, she offends the local women; the “fine creamy paper with raised initials” that she uses makes Jenny’s mother most upset (“I’ll swear! It’s certainly not like she doesn’t know any better!”) (66).

Ironically, this avoidance of social capital solidifies her role in the community; she becomes the “famous woman artist” who “[n]ever goes past the gate” (68). Her connection to a hermit-like father with economic capital and social power as a judge allows Carroll to forgo local conventions and still retain a social identity with power. While other characters certainly shuck convention, such Nettie in *Fair and Tender Ladies*, most fall from grace socially; intellectuals often do not fare well because they cut themselves off from the community, a negative in Smith’s view (“World of Lee Smith” 249). Rather than accepting herself and the community (Campbell 94-96), Carroll rejects the community, but her status provides her a social niche. Carroll, the artist, unintentionally orchestrates her economic, social, and cultural capital to construct a personally and socially powerful identity.

The difference between Billie and Carroll is not only social. The aesthetic choices of the two women indicate their worldviews. Billie is described by her daughter as “a great big baby doll” (58). Her charm bracelet and softness contrast with Carroll Byrd’s black leotard, halters with no bra, lack of makeup, and uncolored graying hair. Carroll knocks out walls in the house, paints the dark wood paneling white, welds sculptures in the yard and, most
horrifyingly, digs up the front yard for a vegetable garden. “No lady has a vegetable garden, and no person in their right mind would put such a garden *in front* of a nice house, anyway” (67). Jenny finds Carroll’s flinty beauty a bracing and refreshing change from the women she knows and “is a little in love with her myself.” In her dress, decoration, and manners, Carroll displays a somewhat bohemian aesthetic, which in 1958 could still be considered the province of a segment of the cultural elite. While economic and social capital matters most in the story’s small town, Carroll’s cultural knowledge of high art, combined with her social and economic capital, serves as a source of identity and social power for her. Furthermore, her social identity provides Jenny a different model of femininity that allows her to consider alternative roles for women.

When the affair between Jenny’s father and Carroll Byrd is made public, he leaves the family for a time, and her mother is eventually put in a hospital for “a nice little rest.” Jenny is sent to her mother’s cousin, Glenda, a school principal in Repass, South Carolina. Glenda, a younger, poor relationship of Jenny’s mother, is thrilled to help the daughter of her favorite cousin, Billie, who she reverently calls “an angel.”

Moving from her more privileged life in Virginia to cousin Glenda’s house is a trip to another world for Jenny, emphasizing the importance of class and capital on worldview. Glenda and her family follow meticulous rules about what chores to do, where items such as shoes should be kept, and how one should behave. Some of these rules seem connected with Glenda’s evangelical Christianity, which involves very personal prayers and more religious expression in church than the Episcopal Jenny is used to. (Later, Jenny’s mother discourages her from reading her *New Testament* in public because it is tacky; Glenda, however, would have approved). Other rules originate in Glenda’s personal preference for efficiency and
order, rather than from any clearly thought-out creed. Jenny does not find the strict rules of
the house or cousin Glenda oppressive; after the chaos of her home, a place with clear-cut
answers is somewhat reassuring. Life in the “hick” town provides a sense of normalcy and
structure that Jenny both longs for and questions:

“But the Bible was written a long time ago. . . . How do you know He wants you to
have a phone? How do you know He doesn’t like the Everly Brothers? How do you
know He doesn’t like eye makeup? There wasn’t any makeup back in the Bible days,
so—” “Jennifer, Jennifer,” cousin Glenda said, hugging me, “get a grip.” (106).

Cousin Glenda and her teenage daughter both adore Jenny, and, as the new, rich girl at the
“hick school,” she is quite popular. To her parents’ amazement, she does not want to leave
when they come to get her.

The manner of stout and sturdy cousin Glenda suggests stability and practicality, from
her blonde helmet of hair, to her “two story brick house with no shutters and no shrubbery”
(97), to the well-stocked bomb shelter behind the house. Her daughter, Rayette, is fascinated
by Jenny’s teenage paraphernalia, such as records and lipstick, implying that she does not
have such items, but she does not “have a jealous bone in her body” (101). The focus on duty,
righteousness, and personal responsibility in this household suggest a family that bases their
identity not on their occupation or possessions but on their respectability, on their lifestyle.
While Bourdieu suggests that the middle class is characterized by “cultural goodwill,” the
need to live up to the standards of the upper class, and Glenda’s family strives to maintain
appropriate standards, there is also the possibility of internal rather than externally imposed
standards in this text. Glenda and her family seem to come about their perspective naturally
and it provides needed stability for Jenny. However, even during this short visit, Jenny
already begins questioning its limits as arbitrary, a tendency that many of Smith’s
protagonists have. While in this later fiction the claim to respectability by the middle class characters is presented as a valid and comforting way to deal with the world, Smith as author slides towards the tendency of her earlier fiction to evade the limits of the middle class (Stanley 340). The need for complexity, for alternatives, must be balanced with stability for a workable worldview.

The highest and lowest class fractions in this story have cameo appearances. During their vacation in Key West, Jenny’s family learns that they are staying in the same hotel as the cast and crew for Operation Petticoat, which is being shot locally. Tony Curtis, one of Jenny and her mother’s favorite actors, stars in the film. The actor makes nightly long distance calls to wife Janet Leigh on the lobby telephone; Jenny and her mother surreptitiously listen in. Though they swoon at his nightly good-byes of “God bless you, darling,” Jenny is surprised how often Curtis and Leigh discuss boring topics like money or mutual friends. She also is surprised by how hard the movie people work and the relative lack of “Hollywood high jinks.” While Jenny and her mother remain star struck and jump at the chance to appear as extras in the film, the glamour of the stars dims a bit for Jenny by the end of her vacation.

The least powerful group in the story is represented by the employees of the strip club that Jenny hangs around during her Key West vacation. Jenny briefly befriends two very young Hispanic strippers and their boss, a barkeeper named Red. The strippers, Luisa and Rosa, are described as sweet but unhealthy looking, which inspires Jenny to surreptitiously leave vitamins for them; both speak broken English. When Luisa, “mincing along in yellow short shorts and high heels” (149), waves at Jenny in front of her mother, the reader senses Billie’s social revulsion and knows that the friendship will not last much longer.
First, however, Jenny tries on the role of barfly. One evening, preteen Jenny patronizes the strip club, determined to prove her maturity. Several strippers perform while she is present; one embarrasses a young sailor, who reminds Jenny of the boy who gave her a first real kiss during the previous school year. An overweight older man buys her a Coke and insists the bartender put alcohol in it. Jenny is beginning to feel uncomfortable when the other bartender, her friend Red, runs her out.

In these few moments, Jenny has the culture of the strip club de-romanticized for her. Though intensely interested in dramatic and romantic relationships, this scenario is not what she bargained for. Fortunately, Jenny can leave, while Luisa and Rosa do not have readily available alternatives. The girls’ broken English and lack of formal education, social connections, and economic capital suggest that their route out of the strip club will be difficult. Red chases Jenny, a tourist kid, out; Luisa and Rosa, not much older, are paid to stay.

Upon leaving the bar, Jenny runs into her brother-in-law, furious with her for running off and worrying him. In anger, he calls her “You little bitch!” (154). After all the roles of femininity offered to her—society wife, artiste, angel, tease—“bitch” is the label Jenny accepts. Ironically, it is a label she herself applied derogatively earlier in the story, first to Ava Gardner for trying to steal Shelley Winters’ husband and then to her difficult and deceitful grandmother. In this final scene, however, after straining to be good to get her parents back together, Jenny finds relief in not being “an angel.” Furthermore, the adult Jenny narrating the tale connects the fact that she is “not good” with Carroll Byrd, who was “ornery and difficult and inconsolable” (155). The label of “bitch,” of attitude and behavior, provides her a role, just as “artist” supplied Carroll one. While Jenny’s role is more internal than Carroll’s, it is
important to note that it was a socially prescribed label, given by her annoyed brother-in-law. “Bitch” for Jenny becomes the same as the title of “ruint” that Ivy Rowe received after she became pregnant out of wedlock. Ivy rejects the negative connotations of the word, instead using it as a way to escape society’s strictures rather than as a mark of shame (Bennett 86).

While Jenny creates this role somewhat independently of her class-based models of femininity, without those models she would have nothing to define herself against; Smith has stated that “you have to define yourself against someone else. And if there’s nobody that’s ever any different, then you don’t define yourself” (Appendix 350). By accepting a label that she can invest with her own meaning, Jenny creates an identity that encompasses the best she has experienced while leaving room for growth.

“Live Bottomless” indicates the interplay between economic, social, and cultural capital in creating social identity for Smith’s characters. Jenny’s position as an upper middle class girl not only provides her with sufficient capital for this process; it also allows her the mobility and freedom to survey other perspectives that result from different views of the world. Because Jenny identifies in some important way with an individual who embodies each perspective she encounters (mother, mistress, cousin, friends), she avoids the problem of objectifying and consuming each perspective. As a teen searching for identity, she is not playing when she joins the Tri-Hi-Y club in Repass, South Carolina—she is really joining. At the same time, Jenny does not have to abandon her identity as a rich relation to do so. Jenny knows that her parents will eventually come for her; her social ties allow her to experience other points of view, at least for a time, without sacrificing her social position.

William Teem argues that Smith’s rural women may find a place for themselves not by adopting another view but by altering their own (68). Jenny does this as well, ultimately
returning to her own upper middle class, as Karen did in “Tongues of Fire.” However, the negotiation is not as simple as rural/urban. The multiple combinations of capital and aesthetics in Smith’s texts give her characters different perspectives to draw from, though the limitations inherent in the perspective created by their social class position and experience always serve as mitigating factors. Jenny may sample the barfly and small town girl roles, but her family’s capital and connections allows her to return; her cousin Rayette and the teenage Hispanic stripper have no such options. And, significantly, when Smith turns to her Appalachian material, the limited position is often held by her protagonists.

**Taste, Mobility, and Country Music**

Like Jenny of “Live Bottomless,” Katie Cocker in *The Devil’s Dream* moves through a variety of perspectives and aesthetics before arriving at a comfortable version of herself. Comparing Katie to Jenny is especially instructive because, while Jenny suggests a typical Southern girl, Katie grows up in a rural mountain community and takes a very different journey through the many tastes of country music, largely considered a working class genre. As in the case of Jenny, while class and status are not the only elements that influence the aesthetics around Katie, economic, social, and cultural capital shape her opportunities and worldview.

*The Devil’s Dream* “portrays the evolution of country music, capturing its changing image—from home folk hillbilly to radio barn dances to cowboy to honky-tonk to rockabilly to Nashville sound to country-pop to California-influenced country-rock” (“Country Music” 58). Katie Cocker, the family’s contemporary star who narrates the final third of the book, is Rose Annie’s cousin and childhood playmate. As a child, Katie much preferred Rose Annie’s house to her own, where an alcoholic and sometimes abusive father and a hard-shell Baptist
mother made life unpleasant. Perhaps as a result, Katie does not have the strong attachment to the rural lifestyle of her cousin; once out of high school, with college not an option, she leaves home to become a country singer.

The first class-based identity that Katie adopts is that of a country fool. Katie works as part of the comedic team Mama Rainette and Her Raindrops on a country music variety show. Playing Minnie Pearl-esque bumpkins who are not very bright but man-hungry, the group’s routines feature Little Moron jokes and disparaging remarks about the girls’ intelligence. This type of comedian, the country fool, was especially popular on country music program during the early to middle twentieth century. The bumpkin typically exploits society’s pretensions (Bufwack 179), similarly to how “The Grand Ole Opry” puns on “Grand Opera.” Katie’s ability to embody this extreme version of “country-ness” become cultural capital, allowing her to work as a comedian and eventually break into the music business. The performance both pokes fun at societal pretensions and reassures the largely working class audience that, even if urban elites regard them as rural and backward, there is someone else more slow and country (Williamson).

Katie’s next class-based stage persona also distances her from the audience, but as an object of desire rather than ridicule. Katie moves to Shreveport, Louisiana, where she is hired as a singer with the popular Louisiana Hayride, a radio and stage show second only to the Grand Ole Opry during the 1950s and 1960s (“Country Music” 67). Soon she meets Wayne Ricketts, an “independent contractor” and part-time musician who lives in a trailer park; he quickly becomes her lover and agent. With Wayne in charge, Katie becomes a country caricature along the lines of Dolly Parton rather than Minnie Pearl: “He stuck me in a push-up bra and four-inch heels and the fanciest low-cut outfits you ever saw” (252). Katie also fixes
her teeth and begins to wear a wig. Wayne explains that the audience “wants you to look like all their dreams” (252), not the girl next door. Like her first image, this persona enacts an extreme version of a country stereotype: the honky tonk angel. While the image does not trade on country stupidity, it suggests the blatant sexuality often associated with social marginality and therefore communicates a working class identity.

Katie encounters a more economically and socially privileged version of country in her next producer. Tom Barksdale, a northerner who attended the Berklee College of Music, has a wife whose grandfather had been a Tennessee governor; he possesses economic and social power, as well as cultural capital through his education and status as a producer. Favoring the more heavily produced and mainstream “California” country of the late 1960s, Tom also changes Katie’s look, encouraging her to wear long, straight hair and fringed miniskirts reminiscent of the “Harper Valley PTA” period in country music. He also tries to “educate” Katie, giving her books on history and vocabulary and encouraging her to take a critical rather than patriotic view of America. Tom attempts to give Katie the “cultural capital” of the upper class, but she finds some of it offensive and much of it useless. Tom turns Katie’s album into a “crossover” hit, but she feels it is more his project than hers; eventually, she decides good naturedly that “I was not sophisticated enough for Tom, I guess” (279). Tom’s education, cultural capital, social connections, and wealth contribute to a worldview that Katie ultimately cannot accept, partly because his different background and capital have made it foreign to her, but partly because she disagrees with the values his taste represents.

Feeling dissatisfied with her “California Country” persona, Katie is ready for something more familiar when she receives a note from former backup singer Ralph Handy:
“I thought I told you to keep it country.” Ralph sends her the message after he sees Katie perform on *The Ed Sullivan Show*, chiding her for getting away from her musical “roots.” This critique pops up regularly in country music circles, part of the ongoing tension between those who favor “traditional” country music and those who prefer more pop-influenced sounds. Richard Peterson’s perceptive division of country music singers into the “hard” and “soft shell” performers reflects this consistent tension of the old and the new, the working class icon and the more sophisticated artist in country music. The tension between the hard country performers, who often write autobiographically and feature a “raw” singing style, and the soft shell performers, with a slicker, more heavily produced sound, suggests a difference in production values, perhaps implying greater access to equipment, as well as a difference in familiarity with working class life. Since the hard shell performers are defined as working class people who happen to sing and the soft shell are identified as performers, this division can suggest a class division either between performers or perceived audience within country music.

Katie adopts a more “country” style that feels comfortable to her while she dates and marries Ralph. The two are quite happy until Ralph dies in a bus wreck just a few years later; bereft of a man to define herself against, Katie rediscovers a version of her childhood faith and makes peace with her family. At the end of the novel, she is organizing a reunion album of her singing family and has found a way to unify her public persona, family, and religious heritage.

Through all her successes and failures, her initial poverty, her later wealth, and her various personas on the way to stardom, Katie remains within the world of country music, a genre typically regarded as working class. While Jenny of “Live Bottomless” surveys
perspectives that represent various social classes and educational perspectives, Katie moves between positions within the same field. While Katie’s primary capital is her talent, which she skillfully employs, her ability to embody the many class-tinged definitions of “country” becomes part of her cultural capital. Each choice is based on adapting to the status and class environment she finds herself in; while her talent sustains her in each, Katie is more comfortable in styles close to her own experience and capital, such as with Ralph Handy or her family, than in California country or country bumpkin garb that do not reflect her social status present or past.

Further, Katie illustrates Bourdieu’s principle that taste represents an ethical approach that constitutes a lifestyle. Katie leaves Tom Barksdale not only because she dislikes the cosmopolitan sound he gives her music, though that is a major reason; she also is annoyed by his unpatriotic statements during the Vietnam Era, by his patronizing project of improving her mind, and by his lack of empathy for the many people who pass into and out of their lives, who he often discusses as good “stories” rather than hurting people. She falls for Ralph Handy, the good old boy, because she understands his manner and the love of family and music he represents. Her final choice to affiliate with a New Age Church in Nashville allows Katie to connect her musical and a loving religious faith, stressing the connection of taste and ethics. Weber defines social classes as clusters in which movement is typical. Katie’s rise is not typical but is possible due to her knowledge of country music conventions; taste allows her to gain capital, though few can follow her. Katie illustrates that while class limits the aesthetic choices available, those choices are still class/status-based and both reflect and create the values of their members.
Difficulties in Mobility

In “Southern Cross,” Chanel (Mayruth) Keen was “raised to leave” rural Paradise, Kentucky. Her mother, a school cafeteria worker, repeatedly urged her daughter to: “Be nice. Please people. Marry rich” (158). Like the desperate mother in the Bobbie Gentry and more recently Reba McIntyre song “Fancy,” Chanel’s mother sees the only “way out” for her daughter to be association with a wealthy man. Attempting to follow her mother’s advice to “marry up,” Chanel accompanies her wealthy but still-married boss/lover/fiancée, Larry, and his business associates on a yachting trip to the Grenadine Islands. The relationship is a strategic move for Chanel, who finds Larry’s kissing “not really great but ok” (161). She is seeking a marital and class position, not a soul mate.

The story hints that Larry has his own economic motives for bringing Chanel. Though the narrative is told through Chanel’s eyes, the reader realizes before she does that Chanel is being used. The holiday is actually “a business trip . . . involving a huge mall and a sports complex. It’s a big deal” (163). Chanel knows that “a fiancée such as myself can be a big asset” on such a trip, and her presence does improve Larry’s status, but not the way she thinks. Chanel believes that she is the lovely, “classy” fiancée; the actions of the men suggest that she is the mistress from the wrong side of the tracks, an acquisition to be displayed, not a partner in a joint project.

Though Chanel thought the other men’s wives were coming, she is the only woman on the boat. Chanel is glad not to have “competition,” but the reader senses that the wives were never scheduled to attend, that she has already been judged socially inappropriate. Furthermore, when Chanel is introduced to Larry’s business associates, “They both stand there grinning at me. I can tell they are surprised that Larry would have such a classy fiancée
as myself” (162). As the story unfolds, the readers intuits that the smiles may have been more derisive than desirous.

While Chanel is used by the men, she is not a passive victim; on the contrary, Chanel’s relationship with Larry is the culmination of years of efforts to improve her economic and social standing. In lifelong attempts to improve her social class, Chanel has worked to adopt the taste of the rich:

Give me caviar. Which I admit I did not take to at first as it is so salty, but now have an acquired taste for, like scotch. There are some things you just have to like if you want to rise up in the world. (158)

Chanel attempts to legitimize her position in the upper class world in a number of ways, including heightening her beauty (“There has been some surgery involved”) and making herself useful by taking care of the men on the yacht in traditionally feminine ways, bringing them drinks and worrying about sun tan lotion. One of her main strategies is to fit in by assuming the taste she assumes her hosts will value. This strategy proves more difficult than expected because Chanel’s background and education have not prepared her for the situations she encounters. Her choice of the name “Chanel” illustrates her repeated mistakes in taste. While the name has a French, sophisticated sound to her, no pseudo-aristocrat would name her child for a perfume or a designer. These subtle misunderstandings plague Chanel and make it impossible for her to pass herself off as a social equal of her hosts.

Early in the story, when told that the yacht is traveling to the Grenadine Islands, Chanel mentions to her fiancée that there is a drink with the same name. “Larry says, ‘Is there?’ And kisses me. He is such a hard worker that he has missed out on everything cultural” (161). The reader, who probably knows of the beverage but would never consider such information “cultural,” understands that Larry is laughing at Chanel. She does not, and
the reader, privy to her schemes of marrying for money, feels comfortable snickering a bit at her.

Chanel’s audience on the yacht does not believe her performance either, partially because her behavior reflects her class origins. When Larry explains that wealthy people often “dress down,” Chanel is shocked, believing that “people should dress as good as they can” (161). In his light-hearted book on class in 1980s America, Paul Fussell notes that “upper and upper-middle classes like to appear in old clothes, as if to advertise how much of conventional dignity they can afford to throw away” (58). Chanel, with working class origins and no education, cannot spare “conventional dignity” and therefore legitimately prefers her own perspective of looking as smashing as possible. Similarly, when her hosts revel in an “authentic” island restaurant, the rustic building makes Chanel think, “Why I might just as well have stayed in eastern Kentucky!” (167). Her wealthy hosts can designate folk culture as an object for consumption; as one attempting to escape folk status, Chanel regards it not as a novelty but as a lifestyle that can stigmatize. Her perspective reflects a middle class desire to define oneself against rural taste without having a true understanding of what an upper class view consists of.

While on the island, Chanel is surprised by a local man who calls her, “Pretty missy” and touches her hair. Chanel says that he looks “as if he knows me” (169). This line is prophetic in Smith’s work: Crystal in Black Mountain Breakdown paralyzes herself after an encounter with a mental patient that she identifies with; the troubled housewife in “Dear Phil Donahue” also has a psychotic break after connecting with a mental patient; Ivy Rowe in Fair and Tender Ladies has an affair with a traveling bee man, partly because she feels “I had known him. Forever, for always, years and years and years” (216). Chanel’s flirtation and
identification with a man she perceives as different suggests a coming change in her self-perception.

The connection between Chanel and the man is their position in the social structure. The island man is of African descent, which Chanel identifies as “other.” Though the story is set in the late twentieth century, Chanel’s initial view of African-Americans reflects uneducated attitudes from mid-century: she often refers to African-Americans as “Negroes,” and confidently asserts that, “My own relationship with black people has always been very good. I know how to talk to them, I know where to draw the line, and they appreciate it” (160). Chanel partially rationalizes the moment of emotional connection between herself and the island man by stating that “He is much lighter-skinned and more refined-looking than the rest of them” (169), but she clearly finds the man’s race a divisive factor.

However, the text hints at a number of cultural connections between Kentucky and the island. The restaurant, which looks like an old farmhouse and has chickens running around, reminds her of Kentucky. Chanel does not care for the beer or food served, which is “rice and beans and seafood mostly, it’s hard to say. I actually prefer to eat my food separately rather than all mixed up on a plate, which I’m sure is not clean anyway” (170-171). Nonetheless, she finds the guitar music that the island man plays in the restaurant entertaining. Additionally, Chanel and her host discuss the differences in language between the islanders and the Americans. Language is a frequently discussed marker in Smith (Jennings 10), and the focus on the linguistic faculties of the islanders demonstrates their level of sophistication.

Bruce smiles at us like he’s some guy on the Discovery Channel. “For example,” he lectures, “one of those men just said, ‘Me go she by,’ which is really a much more efficient way of saying, ‘I’m going by to see her.’ This is how they talk among themselves. But they are perfectly capable of using the King’s English when they talk
to us... “Then that gives them some privacy from the tourists, doesn’t it?” I remark. “From people like us.” (168)

Adeptness with spoken language repeatedly indicates intelligence and cultural connectedness in Smith’s work. While written language is often suspect (Jennings, A. Jones), a sensitive use of oral language is often a sign of cultural health. Though Chanel’s own accent is never commented on, her connection to an oral culture evidenced in her narrative surely links her to the islanders.

However, it is not just Chanel’s accent or narrative perspective that equates her with the islanders. One of the men in her party, Mack, makes a pass at an island waitress, who refuses him. “Goddamn bitch,” he calls her. Later, as the men try to load the drunken Mack into the boat, Chanel finds his struggle funny. “What are you laughing at, bitch?” he asks her. Mack linguistically equates the island girl, whose refusals he will not accept, with Chanel, indicating that in his eyes, they occupy the same social ground.

Eventually, her rich host both outs and propositions Chanel: “‘Listen here, whatever your real name is . . . Larry’s not going to marry you, you know that don’t you?’ . . . Then he sticks his tongue in my ear” (173). By that time however, Chanel recognizes both her diminishing chances of “rising” in their eyes and, more importantly, the value of her own taste. She has identified with the islanders, despite her lingering racism, and, perhaps through the revaluation of the rural culture that her condescending host has unwittingly led her through, she can appreciate the aesthetic embodied in that social position. Chanel escapes to the island and restaurant work, a job similar to her mother’s. The taste and values of the island and, by extension, of rural Kentucky suit Chanel better than the world of the upper-class yacht.
Significantly, what Chanel and the islanders share is social position. Their cultures have some similarities, but race, geography, and language separate them. The main similarity is their position in a culture that provides valuable nurturance but is also commodified, and likely misunderstood in some ways, by the wealthy. While her hosts see the island restaurant as an “authentic” and exotic experience, it reminds Chanel of Kentucky. Clearly, the men on the yacht are wealthier than the islanders and expect to be catered to in many ways, which may extend to romantic attention from the women. However, while the islanders are less wealthy than the outsiders, they are not without resources. The locals own the restaurants and businesses that the outsiders patronize. While the outsiders do not see the relationship as one of equals, that factor is not significant to the locals, who make money off the tourists and live as they please. After she identifies with the island man and is identified with the island woman by Mack, Chanel decides to embrace her past and not kowtow to the men on the yacht, despite the fact that she must leave “some brand-new perfectly gorgeous shoes and several of my favorite outfits on the yacht” (175). The escape is worth it.

“The Southern Cross” begins with a class-struck young woman trying to leave her rural past behind and become “upwardly mobile.” To do so, she rightly perceives that a Kentucky past will only get her bemused condescension. However, she foolishly believes that she can take on the taste and status of the upper class without understanding, in terms of economic, social, and cultural capital, how they got there. Like many of Smith’s grasping middle class women, she embodies what she perceives as the markers of the upper class; however, because Chanel misunderstands upper class markers, she is even more strongly marked as different and less. Her fiancée most likely chooses her because he knows that she would never fit into his social world and is therefore no real threat to his marriage. While
Smith’s rural characters are sometimes marked as only socially different, these outsiders regard Chanel as no more socially substantial than the islanders because of her class and culture codes. She demonstrates the difficulties inherent in trying to change class status without capital to back up one’s claim to privilege.

Chanel does not move socially up at the end of the story; instead, she makes a lateral move by choosing to row to the island rather than stay with the insulting men. Teem’s observation that Smith’s women often reach back to their rural heritage to deal with urban life is relevant to this story; certainly, it is the things that remind her of Kentucky that help Chanel identify with the islanders and concurrently to accurately judge the men on the yacht. However, while Chanel struggles to understand the taste of men in a social class above her, she has little problem shifting sideways to identify with and access the taste of the islanders, who are of African descent and whose dialect she finds almost incomprehensible. Social position provides for a greater sense of community than apparently race, language, or nationality.

This story reflects Bourdieu’s theory of taste but suggests that there is more than one rural or working class aesthetic to draw from. In this way, it echoes Petersen and Simkus’s classification of musical tastes into not a “slim column” of ascending status but a pyramid, with one taste clearly on top (classical music) and a steadily increasing number of equal tastes at the bottom. Appalachian and Grenadine Island culture, while quite different, are both equally rural and occupy roughly the same status; Chanel seems able to intuitively grasp both, while she never understands the upper class aesthetic, no matter how hard she tries, because she cannot relate to its material conditions of existence.
However, Chanel’s story complicates Petersen and Simkus’s findings by suggesting that rural and lower class individuals can access each others’ taste. The study of musical taste found that working class individuals who identified with country music, for example, seldom connected with hip-hop music; the taste communities represented, regardless of similar economic standing, have too many other differences for easy identification. In the “Southern Cross,” however, Smith identifies the conditions of rural and working class life as definitive enough to provide a basis for identification.

Most of Smith’s characters do not have the same access to equivalent yet alternative perspectives that Chanel stumbles into. However, the step of identifying with the natives because of similar social position suggests a possible option for individuals in late twentieth/early twenty-first century culture. Numerous studies arguing for the demise of class in contemporary society point to affiliations based on interests, lifestyle, and beliefs. Paul Kingston argues that movements such as the environmental lobby cut across class and make it invalid as a source of differentiation. “Southern Cross” indicates that status and class markers still restrict, complicate and even exclude individuals from opportunities and associations; however, it also hints that alternative lifestyles based on relatively similar conditions of existence and social status may provide useful models for each other. Chanel cannot access upper-class culture because it is restricted to her by the men’s attitudes and her lack of education; however, she can, and does, learn from the rural island culture because the housing, jobs, food, dialect, and music are intuitively accessible to her. “Southern Cross” suggests the possibility of accessing equivalent perspectives without gaining class status, and therefore leveling the social playing field of self-creation.
Conclusions

In twentieth century culture, social class status is not defined simplistically by the relationship to the means of production. Economic, social, and cultural capital all combine in determining the life chances and social aesthetic of an individual. Taste in manner and consumption choices is often the most obvious and practical means of socially placing a person. In Lee Smith’s fiction, the subtle cues of elements such as accent, dress, possessions, food, music, religion, and friends guide characters in their understanding of social relationships and status negotiations.

However, contrary to Bourdieu, aesthetic taste in the United States is not based around a single axis. Not only does each social class fraction shape its members’ aesthetic taste and corresponding values, but because these tastes represent legitimate responses to a social position, each potentially has valuable insights. Just as Smith’s work resists privileging one narrator in her multi-narrator texts because no one teller possesses all truth, her fiction resists affirming one aesthetic taste as authoritative. Despite her clear affection for the classed rural culture, Smith’s critics note that she repeatedly affirms the desirability of accessing multiple perspectives (S. Jones 111; Bennett 86-87; et. al). Since expanded access is often connected to upper class privilege, as the concept of the omnivore indicates, upper class status suggests not only economic but also aesthetic privilege.

These perspectives are not equally available to all nor is the capital they offer equally valuable. In “Live Bottomless,” protagonist Jenny benefits from experiencing the world through a variety of perspectives, though she spends much of the story learning the errors of her status-class based aesthetic. Her small town cousin and the Hispanic strippers she meets, however, do not have access to the same range of perspectives because of their limited
physical, social, and economic mobility. Katie Cocker in *The Devil’s Dream* suggests that even within a single class field, different combinations of capital create distinct aesthetics that are recognizable and meaningful for the participants. Finally, Chanel of “Southern Cross” illustrates that simply accessing taste does not mean that one understands it or will be allowed to employ it when the social, cultural, or economic capital it requires are not in evidence.

Most of Smith’s characters accept the divisions caused by taste classes. The town/rural division epitomized by the Crystal Spangler/Mack Stilner pairing emphasizes that Mack’s taste—his greasy hair, bad teeth, smoking, cinder block house—all mark his class status and perhaps even justify it. Crystal may enjoy toying with the taste division by trysting with Mack, but she never really accepts that his aesthetic deserves serious attention. As with most town characters who dismiss the rural aesthetic, this is depicted as a mistake.

Other Smith characters see value in alternative perspectives but have difficulty accessing them because of their own class’s aesthetic. Jenny in “Live Bottomless” must work through her own preconceived notions about the aesthetics of less powerful classes, such as in the “hick school,” in order to benefit from the insights they have to offer. Karen in “Tongues of Fire” has more difficulty and, though she gains a voice from the rural church, never really penetrates her assumptions about the excitement of lower class life. Many critics have commented on the difficulty that stereotypes and assumptions cause Richard Burlage and Jennifer Bingham in *Oral History*. Smith’s work as a whole suggests that this difficulty is not unique.

A number of characters succeed in both accessing and profiting from other class fraction’s aesthetics. Jenny of “Live Bottomless” and Katie Cocker of *The Devil’s Dream* might be considered examples. Both gain insights from other views, if only to define
themselves negatively against some aesthetics. Jenny returns to her original class status and Katie, though she gains wealth, still exists in the field of country music, a working class genre. Both learn from other aesthetics but do not alter their own standing by doing so.

Smith also has her characters deal with contrasting tastes through an old-fashioned approach: moral choice. Bourdieu argues that “aesthetic choices belong to the set of ethical choices which constitutes a lifestyle” (283). While he finds each “set of ethical choices” to be determined by capital, Smith’s work, which provides for limited agency, can affirm some of these taste cultures and dismiss others because individuals can theoretically alter their aesthetic. Katie Cocker leaves Tom Barksdale because their class backgrounds make them aesthetically incompatible, but also because she dislikes how he treats people. Chanel of “Southern Cross” could have remained on the yacht—by her own admission there had been a time she would have—but she instead chooses to abandon the status game and affiliate with a more egalitarian taste culture of the islanders. Access to the alternative perspective of the islanders, her social class equals, has given her another option. Admittedly, in each case, the character opts for an aesthetic that is familiar; the taste of the social class closest to their own configuration of capital is often the one that seems the most natural. Yet since aesthetics reveal not only consumption but also values and because Smith allows characters some consciousness in responding to taste cultures, these choices of aesthetics reveal not only the characters’ social place but also the way that they are placing themselves in relationship to others.

Taste is in some ways the most obvious mark of social class status, yet it is also the most elusive because it varies in different social fields. The capital Katie Cocker wields so well in the field of country music would negatively mark her in Jenny’s world, just as Jenny’s
baby doll mother would not last a day in a honky tonk. Smith’s work suggests that access to multiple aesthetics is a qualified good because it allows her characters options in how they deal with their world. However, social class status also impacts the way characters regard those options, making some seemingly obvious choices either practically or morally unacceptable. Ultimately, Smith’s fiction affirms the incorporation, though not the wholesale adoption, of alternative aesthetics when possible and the respectful contemplation of the perspectives of others as a potential source of knowledge and connection.
EPILOGUE

The importance of community remains one of the most durable themes in Southern literature, and perhaps rightly so; it is, after all, the region’s social worlds that inspire much of what is distinctive about the South and Southern texts. In the late twentieth century, however, there has been an increasing awareness that the rural Deep South of Faulkner, O’Connor and Welty is not the only or the normative South. Peter Taylor, Bobbie Ann Mason, Alice Walker, Anne Tyler, Ernest Gaines, Dorothy Allison, and Ellen Gilchrist are just a few of the contemporary writers who have enriched the region’s literature by extending the settings, subjects, and perspectives included under the umbrella of “Southern” literature.

As the canon of Southern literature expands, it becomes increasingly important to examine carefully the sub-regions depicted. Too often, the theme of “community” is invoked generically, without sufficient consideration for the specific fictional communities. This practice essentializes community, erasing its potential critical power and oversimplifying the social dynamics of a diverse region. For the concept of “community” in Southern literature to continue having meaning, the nature of specific fictional communities must be examined to determine how they function and what importance their social relationships have for the texts.

Much of the criticism on Lee Smith’s fiction discusses the relationship of the individual to the nurturing and/or oppressive community, which is typically depicted as either in Appalachia or the larger South. This study offers an in-depth examination of some of the social and economic dynamics of communities in Smith’s texts, identifying both the continuities and variations among her settings. Because Smith prominently foregrounds cultural and class differences, and because her sophisticated depiction of social dynamics is one of her strengths as a writer, this dissertation has attempted to highlight the complexity of
her deceptively straight-forward texts. By looking at some of the stratification elements of her texts, rather than merely simply labeling them as “Appalachian” or “Southern,” this dissertation has hopefully demonstrated the complex social negotiations rather than simply equated her social settings with an accepted folk stereotype.

Though the Southern and especially the Appalachian settings of Smith’s fiction are often popularly assumed to be relatively homogenous, significant tensions recur, often in the rural/town/outsider split Smith and her critics have noticed. Class and status resources are not limited to economic property in her texts; though absentee ownership and the division between coal miners and coal mine owners frequently divide her communities, other resources such as education, family connections, and personal taste can provide not only status markers but also real possession with exchange value on the market. These markers are not value-free nor do they only serve stratification purposes; education, for example, can be personally enriching as well as professionally empowering. However, by acknowledging the multiple sources of class and status, this project has attempted to demonstrate the subtle negotiations in Smith’s fiction as well as the ways that individuals may compensate for a lack of property by utilizing other resources.

No matter how successfully and admirably an individual copes with a limited life, however, that life remains more difficult than of the wealthy and privileged. Smith’s rural mountaineers, whose culture her fiction routinely affirms, may improve their standard of living but by retaining their “holler” taste, they remain at the bottom of the social strata. While Smith’s fiction never casually depicts the hardships of mountain life, her texts find the mental and personal deprivation of an abbreviated education and fewer options for self-creation to be real lacks of working class life. However, as Chapter Five demonstrated, this
access is never direct for any of her characters; culture not only complicates matters for her mountain characters, but for all classes of her characters.

This researcher has intentionally focused on the status and class markers as they appear in Smith’s texts rather than applying an ill-fitting Marxist or Weberian paradigm. However, now that the ideas are established, a promising line for further research might be to apply a structural analysis to Smith’s work. The world systems approach, which acknowledges Appalachia’s position as a source of raw materials for the larger country but provides a more nuanced examination than the internal colonialism model, might be a possible option.

Lee Smith’s texts have engaged, encouraged, and entertained readers for two decades. Since her forthcoming text will feature a steamboat trip down the Mississippi, perhaps now is a fortuitous time to summarize the social and economic dynamics of her previous texts, and to acknowledge the contribution Smith has made to creating a complex fiction in and of Appalachia.
LEE SMITH BIBLIOGRAPHY

Novels


Short Stories


Selected Nonfiction


**Selected Other**

*Good Of’ Girls*. Musical collaboration with Jill McCorkle


**Secondary Sources**

**Books**


**Articles**


Introductions


**Dissertations**


Hill, Darlene. “From Aunt Mashula’s Coconut Cake to Big Macs: References to Food in Recent Southern Women’s Fiction (Welty, Tyler, Mason, Hill, Smith, Shivers).” Diss. The University of Rhode Island, 1989.


McVoy, Sarah. “Deconstructing the Stereotype of Rural Appalachian Religion Through the Examination of Four Modern Appalachian Novels (Lee Smith, Robert Morgan, Meredith Sue Willis, Cormac McCarthy).” Diss. The University of North Carolina at Ashville, 2000.


Selected M.A. Thesis


SECONDARY SOURCE BIBLIOGRAPHY


APPENDIX
TELEPHONE INTERVIEW WITH LEE SMITH, SEPTEMBER 29, 2000

Colley: How did your most recent project, *Sitting on the Courthouse Bench*, develop? What is the concept behind it?

Smith: It’s an oral history of the town where I grew up, Grundy, Virginia. I had always wanted to do a real oral history of the town. But then [I discovered that] the town was going to be flooded. The town has flooded completely twice—once in 1957, once in 1977—and ever since 1977, smaller floods. It’s becoming a ghost town, the actual downtown business area—nobody will live there because of the flooding. And so, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and the Virginia Department of Highways have banded together to have this flood control project, which will essentially make a wide place in the river out of what is now the town. The businesses that want to may relocate to higher ground to be reached by bridges.

I was spurred on to think that, gosh, maybe this [the oral history project] had better be done. Then, I was talking to my good friend, Debbie Raines, who is a high school English teacher [in Grundy]. We got the idea that instead of just me doing it, that it could be a community project. We picked thirty high school kids over two years, with ten kids each time. We made a whole kit for how to do it for the kids, worked with them, and then sent them out in pairs. They could get high school credit, which was great.

So we have 30 authors and 47 people that were interviewed! I was also collecting old photographs, and my friend Susan Raines came to Grundy and took contemporary photographs. It’s a coffee table book which attempts to be like a family album of a town. It’s not really a commercial project—a real press is publishing it, but it’s a small press [Tryon Press, NC] because I wanted it to be extremely local, more local than it would be if it were a
book that I was writing for a larger audience. Even though I did write a thirty-page
introduction about my own childhood there, it’s really VERY local. [laughs]
[The town party, with high school students and people interviewed signing books, occurred late in 2000.]

LS: I’m writing a novel, too. The idea [also] came from life; I went down the Mississippi
River on a raft with a bunch of girls from Hollins [College]. We also had two boys because our parents wouldn’t let us go if we didn’t have boys, because we were considered so helpless. That’s where the title comes from, The Last Girls, because today it would be “Hollins women” on a raft who wouldn’t even think of needing these boys.

The book imagines that four women who took such a trip get back together thirty years after and go down the river again. So it’s about the past - it’s about memory.

SC: Has anything surprising come up as you’re writing it?

LS: A lot of surprising stuff has come up. For one thing, I made my husband go down the Mississippi River with me. And while I had imagined it as sort of a tragic novel, suddenly it has become a tragicomic novel because the whole way they run a cruise is such a farce. Everybody’s playing these really stupid games in the Grand Salon, and it’s just so hokey. But it was really interesting too. [The book] became vastly more complicated after we took the real trip.

SC: How is it tragic? Do their lives not turn out well?

LS: Well, some of them do, and some of them don’t. And one of them really doesn’t. It is a tragedy that actually has affected the other women who are on the boat; that becomes clear as they go into New Orleans. It’s about how the past impinges upon the future. And then, each woman has got her own little crisis going on as they go down the river. So it’s complicated.
While it’s not huge in terms of the books some people write, it’s longer than any book I’ve written.

In tone, it may actually be more like *Family Linen* than anything else I’ve done because it is comic and it does switch from one person to another as the present moment action progresses. It’s about stories and storytelling. Each person tells a story, and they all tell it differently. One woman’s story is told entirely through her descriptions of the photographs in her photograph album. I hope it’s not going to seem too complicated; I don’t think it is, but there’s a danger.

SC: You are known for short stories and novels, but some of your work has become plays. I was interested in asking you about *Good Ol’ Girls*, a collaboration, as well as the two other plays based on your novels. How did *Good Ol’ Girls* come about?

LS: Well, *Good Ol’ Girls* has been a total collaboration. I got really, really interested in theater when Paul Ferguson adapted *The Devil’s Dream*, which is a successful production.

SC: Were you involved with that script?

LS: I wasn’t involved with the script; I was just a groupie. [Laughs]. Well, I don’t know, we all wrote some songs and stuff, but mainly I was just a big groupie of the play, and I just loved the way he [Ferguson] worked.

Then, I have a good friend in Nashville, Marshall Chapman, who called me up; she had been talking to this other songwriter named Matraca Berg. She said, “Hey, would you ever like to write a musical?” I said at that point, because I was already starting my novel, “Well, I don’t really know how to write a musical, to write a play from scratch. But I would love to be involved in putting together a revue.” Because they had said they would love to have one and name it *Good Ol’ Girls*. I said, we could have a revue, and it would be an
all-woman, country music *Chorus Line* where we would have spoken narrations, stories, alternating with songs. I would pull from all the stuff that I have written and write other things that would fit.

I decided I wanted to involve Jill McCorkle because I wanted some real sassy, kick-ass voices that I really didn’t have that I thought I needed for some of the songs. So Jill suggests stuff, and I pull out of her work. I told everybody, “I’ve got all this stuff, but I don’t know how to make it theater--but I know who does: Paul Ferguson.” And Paul just happened to have a semester off. So he started working on it; we were all working on it; and it just kind of “grew like Topsy.”

Gradually, it evolved until it traces the arch of a woman’s whole life from childhood to the nursing home, to death. It’s different women’s stories that add up to one woman. It’s real hard to describe! But it works, actually, real well.

We have the possibility of touring it around the South for as long as we want, which I think is what we may rather do, but we also have these big time producers who want to do some big stuff with it if certain changes are made; we’re trying to figure out if those changes compromise what we’re trying to say. The first round with the New York producers, they kept saying, “Well, these girls are too smart to be Southern. Their hair isn’t big enough, and they’re too pretty.” The producers had all of the stereotyped images. It was very strange. [Note: The “big time producers” passed on the project.]

SC: That’s surprising that even now they would . . .

LS: No, people’s attitude towards the South, if they don’t know anything about the South, is really based upon the fact that they saw *Deliverance* and *Easy Rider* and a lot of these spoofs
of the South. Even very sophisticated people have an amazingly incorrect expectation of the South.

It’s very surprising, and you don’t really encounter it until you do something like that. Particularly when you get involved in a situation where you are talking specifically about images, and you come hard up against preconceived images of Southerners and Southern women. You would think that in the year 2000, when you are dealing with what are supposedly smart people, that they wouldn’t necessarily hold those stereotypes.

SC: How involved were you with the plays from *Fair and Tender Ladies* and *Oral History*?

LS: I knew the playwright from *Oral History* really well; he is a friend of mine, but I was mostly a cheerleader. But I said no to certain things with the current *Fair and Tender Ladies* production that the Alabama Shakespeare Festival is touring. In fact, we ditched the first version completely.

SC: What did you not like that they wanted to do?

LS: It was a young playwright, and he wanted to have a very experimental version of *Fair and Tender Ladies* in which Ivy never spoke; everybody else spoke about her. It just didn’t work. I said, “This is all about language, it’s all about her language, you can’t do that.” So they didn’t.

SC: That’s sort of the opposite point of the book, isn’t it?

LS: Exactly. But you know, he’s fairly young and sometimes people want to go at it from different points of view.

A good friend of mine has done the one-woman show of *Fair and Tender Ladies*; it was in New York for a while and all around. She’s done it maybe 600 times. I wasn’t
involved with her adaptation, but I like her and I saw that a number of times. The only thing I’ve really been involved with is *Good Ol’ Girls*.

SC: Probably pretty different from writing novels.

LS: Totally different. I think *Good Ol’ Girls* was my midlife crisis. That and *Sitting on the Courthouse Bench* because both of them have involved just being with a lot of people. It’s been very different. And it’s been fun. [But] I think I’m ready to sink back into fiction now.

SC: You are well known for fiction set in Appalachia. But *The Last Girls* is really set in the larger South. I also have noticed that a lot of your short stories are either set completely outside of the mountains or have a connection to the mountains but it’s very contemporary, it’s a little more distant. You have said that your next book is going back to the mountain subject with a picture man traveling through the mountains. I was wondering if, at this point in your career, if you feel an expectation from your readers to keep writing about your mountains?

LS: No, I don’t. This is awful to say, but I don’t really think much about my readers. I’m not even convinced I have any readers! I’m not putting out a product, because all these books really have been very different from each other. I remember having a talk with [Clyde Edgerton], because his first two books were very funny and very warm-spirited, and then he wrote *Floatplane Notebooks*—real different. A lot of his readers were upset with him, because they had built up certain expectations. But I don’t feel that I’ve built up that kind of a readership.

SC: Do you feel any kind of a responsibility to continue writing about the mountains and depicting them in a positive or complex light?
LS: No. I feel a responsibility to the region where I’m from to keep supporting things like the community college system which has made such a difference there and various organizations that I have been involved with, but I don’t think the writer has any business doing anything but telling a story. In my writing I don’t feel that kind of responsibility, because if I did, I wouldn’t have written a lot of things. If the idea is to change the image of the mountains, then you can’t write honestly. I probably never would have written Saving Grace, for instance. I think the whole notion of serpent handling, there has been enough of that, in terms of image of the region. On the other hand, it’s something that I grew up seeing, and know a lot about, and learned a lot more about, and was absolutely fascinated with, so I wanted to write the novel. I don’t feel like I’m exercising a lot of responsibility in my fiction, so I try to exercise a little responsibility elsewhere.

The reason I probably will always return to the mountains from time to time is because the language touches me so deeply. I love to write things set back in time a little bit in the mountains; there’s a greater eloquence that comes with that. So I’m going to set the next one back again, just to get back to that.

SC: Do you consider yourself a Southern writer or an Appalachian writer or neither one?

LS: I’ve always really considered myself an Appalachian writer because that was my first and best material. I guess this book is more just a Southern novel that I’m writing right now. You know, one thing that happens when you write a lot, is that you use up a lot of your best material. You have to just kind of go with what you’ve got after a while.

SC: Are there any particular earlier novels or literature of the mountains that you see yourself in the tradition of?
LS: I don’t know that I see myself so much in the tradition of; there are certainly earlier books that have been very influential to me. The main one is James Still’s *River of Earth*. That was a book that was of major importance to me. I read it at Hollins at a point when I was trying to write and not writing anything worth a damn, mainly because I wasn’t dealing with anything that I knew about. I thought I had to write about something very intellectual or elegant or away from the mountains. I wasn’t ever writing about anything close to home.

Just by chance, I came across *River of Earth*. It’s kind of an Appalachian *Grapes of Wrath* about a family like the Joads: the crops fail, the mines close, and they have to pull up stakes, and go somewhere else and find work. At the end of the book, the daddy gets them all in the car, and they are all headed off because there’s a new mine that’s opened up - and it’s in Grundy!

It’s a beautiful, beautiful novel, a totally eloquent novel, it’s just gorgeous and beautifully written. It’s all written in the vernacular that everybody spoke when I was growing up, that I was working so hard to get away from. To use one of the mountain phrases, I would have to say that my parents were “raising me to leave.” And all of a sudden, I saw everything that I was leaving transformed into fiction in this incredibly good book. It was very moving. Immediately, I burst into tears and finished it, and read it again.

And then also, Harriette Arnow’s *The Dollmaker*, because I did grow up around so many very strong women. Also, Wilma Dykeman wrote a book called *The Tall Woman*. These are Appalachian women in books that were important to me. And then, Eudora Welty; she was the first writer that I came across in class that I felt this huge affinity for. There was both a mythic quality and a lightness in the writing, and a lightness of heart sometimes that I loved. Particularly I loved *The Golden Apples*, that collection.
SC: Do you make a distinction when you’re writing about the more straight Southern material than when you approach the Appalachian material? Is there any difference in the amount of research you do or your mindset?

LS: It depends on the time when something is set. If it were say, straight Southern but set back in time, then I have to do research. I just have to feel grounded as to place and period. In the novel I’m writing now, different parts were set in different places, and I had to go to those places.

I think that the past always requires a lot more research, but then that’s kind of dangerous because that can overwhelm your fiction. You want to know enough to have things accurate, but you want it to be fiction.

SC: I’m interested in exploring issues of class, which I think is fascinating in the South. I was interested in knowing a little bit about Grundy. You mentioned the other day [at a reading at LSU] about the difference between the holler kids and the town kids.

LS: When you live in the holler, when you live up one of those creeks, there’s a whole kind of society up there among neighbors and clans—different people from one family in one place. It’s very close, warm, extended community. Traditionally, the people who live in the hollers or up in the creeks have less money, and they work in the mines, or they work in the hospital, or they might come to town and clean somebody’s house or work in the tire store. The town people are more the people that own the businesses, the doctors, you know, the people that own things.

I just read a really interesting book named Creeker written from the point of view of a woman who did grow up in a holler in eastern Kentucky. She makes the point, which I think is valid, that for kids who grew up in the town near where she lived, they might as well have
been in Lynchburg, Virginia. Their town world was very different from the world of the holler, the world back in the hills. Even when I was growing up, I was aware of the two worlds.

Then I was also aware of a third world, which wasn’t the creek, it wasn’t the town, but was the world beyond our particular rim of mountains. My mother was from eastern Virginia; she was from a family that had lost their money, but people had been educated—they had pretensions of certain kinds. Mamma aspired to be gentry and knew exactly how things were supposed to be done because she had grown up in that world. Her father killed himself, so my grandmother had turned her big old house on Chitoneague Island into a boarding house, and Mamma had worked in the kitchen, but still they all knew how things were supposed to be.

Because my mother was so markedly different and was determined to remain markedly different from other women in Grundy, I was very much aware of the three kinds of worlds. My mother was the reason why I was sent to school in Richmond, to prep school. Nobody else knew about prep school, but she had friends whose children had all gone to prep school.

SC: For such a small town, it sounds like there must have been a lot of interaction [between classes].

LS: Oh, there was total interaction. And there were no black people, which has always made me feel that the Appalachian experience is vastly different from the deep Southern experience where one does grow up with a sense of racial guilt.

There was a lot of mingling of social classes, and there still is. The differences were just in which church you went to. A lot of times, people that made a lot of money acted the same as they were before. They just built a bigger house and went on stringing beans on the
porch. There weren’t really the degrees of difference because there weren’t institutions there
to support the differences. There was a country club, and there were certain people that went
to the country club, obviously. But there was a lot of movement back and forth—someone
that would, say, make some money, or maybe marry down.

SC: Or people who haven’t gone up in social class but who act in such a way that. .

LS: Oh, yeah. I was always horrified as a small girl in Grundy because I went to school with
so many really, really poor children, and I always felt that I was so rich, even thought I really
wasn’t. Everybody felt that I was rich because my father owned the dime store, which is the
symbol of all the toys of the world. Symbolically, that’s a very big deal. All my extended
family owned other stores downtown. None of them had ever been in the mines except for one
uncle who was a superintendent at one of the mining camps.

I’m really interested in class, and I write about class a lot. The South is the place
where class existed, exists unfortunately still. And in a small town, it’s easy to see.

And then you have other things—I would go visit my Venable cousins, and they were
in a company town. The coal camps were company towns. There was this very rigid class
system there which I used in Fair and Tender Ladies when I have Ivy move to the company
town. Within the coal camps, that’s very stratified, very rigidly defined. You live so far up the
hill depending on the importance of your job, in the company houses.

With the churches, there were the more Pentecostal churches, that were hollering out,
that was the poorer people. And then as you moved up . . . you moved up to the Presbyterian
and the Methodists, who were the town churches. Of course, Baptist was a town church, too.
SC: But it’s not quite the same. .
LS: It’s real complicated. A lot of times people would change churches, if they got a better job, say; somebody who had grown up in a Freewill Baptist church might then come back to town having gone to school, get a better job, and change to be a Methodist or a Presbyterian, particularly if they had grown up in one of those hollering churches.

SC: I wonder if the particular practices that are acceptable in the different churches—do you see that spilling over into life? If you go to a church that hollers, do you tend to be more expressive in other parts of your life?

LS: No, that was one thing those churches were good for. A lot of times the people that went to churches where people are speaking in tongues and hollering and falling down and dancing around—a lot of time those are the people whose jobs are just the most boring. Those might be miners or people who drive a truck and women who live in isolated situations. The church is their one community, and their one chance to be expressive. I think a lot of pent up frustrations come out in that, too—sexual, all kinds of emotional relief that they don’t have a place to release.

SC: Are there any other compensating methods, especially for the working class, that come to mind?

LS: Something that makes people feel better about their lot in life often was if they became really skilled in a particular craft. I grew up knowing a lot of people who did different kinds of crafts, and took enormous pride in that.

It’s also an ordering. When you’re making something, it’s like making art, it’s a certain ordering of the stuff of life, in a way that people who haven’t had certain advantages are often unable to do in their own lives. It [life] often seems chaotic, determined by floods and illnesses and accidents. I’ve written a lot about women who are artists in different ways.
Oftentimes, women who were unable to influence things that happened in the world of men, yet—somebody who was making a beautiful quilt or knitting a beautiful sweater or was famous for her cakes, something like that, does give you a sense of control over something.

SC: Was Grundy a coal-mining town? It sounds different from the company town you were talking about a minute ago.

LS: A company town is always specifically the holler where the mine is located. It’s got its own post office, but it’s just the mine. Harmon was a Post Office, but it was the Harmon Mining Company. Keen Mountain is close to Grundy as you’re coming in, that was another post office, but it wasn’t really a town like Grundy; it was a company town. There was a company store there and all the houses where people lived who worked in the mine. The mine was right there.

SC: So Grundy was a coal-mining town but it wasn’t a company town? The company didn’t own. . .

LS: That’s right. It wasn’t owned by one company. In the company towns, there’s only one store, that’s the company store. Miners would get paid in scrip, and oftentimes they would spend more than they would make. It’s like the Johnny Cash song, “Owed my soul to the company store.”

But in a town, there would be independent merchants. Many of the coal company towns [would be] around it, and then also independent mines. The independent miners were often doing what they called truck mining and strip mining, where instead of going down you just strip off. That can be done less expensively than deep shaft mining. There were all kinds of mining going on around the town; most all the jobs were from mining except for people like teachers or doctors.
SC: But it sounds like there were different mines . . .

LS: Different mines and different kinds of mining.

SC: It sounds like people in towns like Grundy might have a little more control over things than in the company towns.

LS: That’s right. And there’s also a real fatalism that attaches to mining towns because people die so often. They’re hurt so often, there’s something sort of a somber underpinning to it. I think that’s certainly true in the real company towns, but that’s also true in towns that derive all their business from that clientele.

SC: When you talk with people not from the mountains, do they tend to realize that there’s a difference between people who lived up on the mountain and people who lived down in the town or do they sort of lump everyone together?

LS: They lump everybody together. They also lump the Appalachian South in with the Piedmont, which is quite different, and also in with the Deep South. Actually, I’ve got a piece on [my web site]. It starts with me taking my mother-in-law, who is from Boston, up to see where I’m from. Hal’s mother is very smart; she was a teacher in New York state for years. When we started driving up into the mountains, she kept saying things like, “Where are the big houses with the columns?” “Where are the black people?” These stereotypes of the South persist to a degree that we are not always aware of, even with people who are smart.

SC: I wanted to ask you a little more pointedly about social class in your work. How important do you think class tends to be in how you shape your characters, and how do you think it tends to affect their development?

LS: Well, I think it’s very important. When I’m developing a character, I have to know what social class they’re in, what social class their parents were in, and I see that also as economic.
It has to do with money, and it also has to do with level of education. Obviously these are the determining factors in what will be somebody’s outlook on life and how they will view the world.

So I see social class as having to do with the education level and kind of job and the parents’ expectation level and the parents’ social class. A lot of times, as in life, it limits possibilities for some of my characters; some them can leapfrog around. But for instance with Saving Grace, there’s a character, Grace Shepherd, who at the end of the book is actually unable—because of the social class she was born in, because of the educational level she had, because she never really could imagine anything different because of lack of experience in the outside world—she’s made a circle in the journey she takes in that novel. She’s gone back to her mother’s life, back to the hollers, back to the religion of her childhood, instead of breaking free, which is what I think she ought to do, but she didn’t have any basis to make that decision. So I think social class is very much a determining factor.

SC: It sounds like the particular markers you tend to see for class tend to be education, job, your parents’ expectations.

LS: And also, in terms of my books that are set in the Appalachian area, I think mobility is another one. People are always ask, when I would go home to the mountains, “When are you coming in?” It’s viewing the mountains as a place that would hold you in. I knew children who had never been out of the county; I know grown people who’ve never been out of the county. I think [of] mobility as something that had to do with possibility, that had to do with a higher class.

SC: Do you see culture impacting social class or interacting with social class very much?
LS: Now, what does that mean? I think people of a higher social class are more cultured, generally speaking.

SC: I guess I’m thinking especially of the town kids and the holler kids. Can you still be someone from the mountains and move up to another social class?

LS: Oh, yes.

SC: How do you hang on to those different traits?

LS: I’ve been fascinated with this among the thirty kids I’ve worked with in my oral history project [Sitting on the Courthouse Bench] over the last couple of years. A few of them from way back in the mountains are so smart that they have simply transcended a lot of the things that might have held them back. They’ve done so well in school, they’ve attracted the attention of teachers and other people who have, say, helped them get good scholarships. Some of them are from poor families, but they’re going to college. This is a very difficult situation for a lot of their parents. One mother burst into tears when I was talking to her about it. She said, “She just wants to go away from here, away from us.” And her daughter, you’d just be amazed if you met the daughter and then met the parents, because the daughter looks so elegant and has changed her speech to some degree. She’s working on not sounding so country.

SC: I think that’s what I’m actually interested in: are there particular things about the way you speak and that kind of thing that mark you for class?

LS: Speech is a really big one. It’s “How country are you?” A lot of people, of course, who become very wealthy in their businesses still maintain a vestige of their country speech so that they can talk to people they’re doing business with. Then, I have a couple of cousins that you cannot even tell where they are from. They went off to school; one of them is a high school
principal in Colorado. She took lessons to get the country out of her speech. That’s certainly a marker.

SC: I’m interested in characters like the dermatologist in *Family Linen*, who seems like somebody who’s made it but wants to have solidarity and family and all that. How do you move up the social and economic level without losing those things that connect you to your raising?

LS: Well, I don’t know, but that conflict is the sort of thing that you write about in fiction. To have fiction at all, you have to have conflict, and class conflict is certainly one of the major kinds that I’ve written about.

How do you do that? I don’t know. People that have risen up the social ladder like that have certainly held onto parts of their pasts. I think if they give them up entirely they can often become very rootless and lost in a certain way. But I know plenty of people who have made money but continue going to the same church and making their own particular kind of potato salad. They may also own a house in Vail, Colorado, but they still participate in a lot of things that they used to.

SC: It’s interesting to see how people end up working through those issues.

LS: You can choose. When you really are a functioning adult, you get to where you can choose whether you are going to identify yourself by your family of origin, or whether you are going to make yourself up. Which has really always been a possibility in America.

The Appalachian tradition is to hold on real strong to relationships maintained with your family. Say, the younger people might all have to leave to get jobs elsewhere. But they drive enormous distances to come in, to come home every other weekend, or once a month or just to come home for the beginning of deer season. There is a tradition of maintaining much
closer ties than elsewhere in the South. Maybe it’s due to the relative sense of isolation in which so many of them grew up and still are growing up. Because the mountains are pretty formidable, and they remain a formidable geographic barrier. And they are still there, though TV, the Internet, all this is making a big difference.

SC: Some of your major characters are from the holler, and I know that you’ve identified yourself as a town girl. I’m wondering if it’s difficult to write about characters who grew up in a different social class than you did? And how do you approach doing that?

LS: Of course it’s harder, because you have to think about things that you wouldn’t ever think about. Just like it’s harder for me to write from the point of view of a man because I have to think about things that I wouldn’t necessarily think about. Luckily, I had this very open childhood where I spent an awful lot of time with kids who lived up in the hollers, and we always had people in our own family who did, too. There was a whole lot of movement among all of us, and I really felt like I understood. And then also, because my parents were older when I was born, and because there are a lot of older people in our family, I spent a whole lot of time asking these older people questions and listening to them talk about their own lives. I got a lot of it firsthand, what it was like to grow up farther back in the hills than we were. So I just used all that.

SC: You have a lot of cross-class friendship like “Tongues of Fire” and “Saint Paul.” How important are those pairings in your work?

LS: Well, I guess because they were some of the most interesting friendships in my life as I was growing up, I tend to put them in my work. And again, that’s the nature of fiction. So those pairings have been very, very important. They are very interesting because you have to
define yourself against someone else. And if there’s nobody that’s ever any different, then you don’t define yourself.

SC: So you have to have someone different to define yourself against?

LS: Which is why people that came in from the outside, like teachers, were always so interesting to me. You rarely ran into people who weren’t from right there.

SC: How important are teachers in your work?

LS: They are important and, as I say, they were the people who were likely to say things that you weren’t going to hear at home. And also they were often people who did come from somewhere else, as my own mother did.

SC: She was a teacher as well?

LS: Yes. That was a very isolated and closed society, and there were only so many reasons for people to come in. Teaching was a big one.

SC: I notice that in several of your stories, somebody will make a little comment about somebody who has worked at the community college instead of getting a real job, which I think is really funny.

LS: I do, too, because people used to say that, and I thought it was so funny because I’ve always done a lot of that kind of teaching.

SC: Is that indicative of the general attitude towards education?

LS: Oh, yes. I think people do realize that if you want get a better job, get out of the holler, you have to get an education. But on the other hand, people are real scared of it. Like this woman who cried because her daughter was going off to college. She knew absolutely, and she was right, that she would lose her, that the daughter would not be the same when she came home, and she won’t be. So it’s a very fraught situation.
Also there’s a distrust of higher education. People always run around quoting the Bible, saying “in too many books there’s much evil” and stuff like that. . . It’s a complicated attitude toward it. They would say about somebody that they thought had gone off and gotten too much education, that didn’t have any common sense, “[He] can’t park a bike.” Stuff like that.

SC: Are the things that change, that cause concern like when people go off and get education, is it their language changes, their way of looking at things, they don’t value their home as much?

LS: And they are therefore distanced from their family or from their former friends.

SC: That’s a hard bind to be in, I bet.

LS: Well, it is, because you want to succeed but you don’t want to get above your raising; it’s exactly what we were talking about.

SC: Do you think you can belong to more than one class or culture at the same time?

LS: I think you can but it’s hard. I think a good example of it would be Dolly Parton. [She] obviously belongs to a very small elite of enormously successful people in the world at large, yet also due to her language and the kind of persona that she has adopted, she is very much a part of the Appalachian culture that produced her.

SC: It seems like that’s an effort for her, though, she has to consciously. . .

LS: It’s an effort for anybody.
VITA

Sharon Elizabeth Colley was born in Dalton, Georgia, on May 9, 1969. She attended Northwest Whitfield High School in Tunnel Hill, Georgia, graduating in 1987. She earned the degree of Bachelor of Arts with majors in English, Speech and Drama, and a concentration in Communications from Mercer University, Macon, Georgia in 1991; she earned the degree of Master of Arts in English from the University of Tennessee, Knoxville, in 1993.

During the 1993-1994 academic years, she worked for a semester at the Baptist Friendship House in New Orleans before teaching spring and summer semesters at the University of Tennessee, Chattanooga. She taught freshman composition at LSU as a graduate assistant for three years before taking time off to pursue other interests. During the interim, she worked as a development assistant at a non-profit theater, an assistant magazine editor, and a part-time instructor with Shorter Professional Programs in Atlanta, Georgia. In the summer of 2001, she returned to LSU to complete her dissertation, teaching as an adjunct faculty at LSU. Currently, she is teaching part-time at both LSU and Baton Rouge Community College. Her research interests include Southern literature, Appalachian literature and culture, cultural studies, and social class studies.

She will be awarded the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in English from Louisiana State University on May 24, 2002.