The Narrative Voice of Lee Smith:

Emergence of a Passionate Narrative Voice through Body and Spirit

Judith A. Eddy

A thesis submitted to the faculty of the Humanities Program of the
Marshall University Graduate College in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the
degree of Master of Arts in Humanities.

Fall 1998

Dr. Barbara Ladner, Thesis Advisor

Marshall University Graduate College

December 2, 1998

We hereby recommend that the thesis prepared under our supervision by **Judith A. Eddy** entitled **"The Narrative Voice of Lee Smith: Emergence of a Passionate Narrative Voice through Body and Spirit"** be accepted in partial fulfillment of the degree of MASTER OF ARTS IN HUMANITIES.

Barbara E. Ladner, Ph.D.
Thesis Advisor Barbara Ladner

Joyce E. East, Ph.D.
Program Director Joyce East

Leonard J. Deutsch
Dean of the Graduate College
Leonard J. Deutsch

Thesis Committee:

Marcella Barton, Ph.D.
Marcella Barton

Barbara V. Yeager, Ed.D.
Barbara Yeager

Joyce E. East, Ph.D.
Joyce East

Contents

Chapter One

Introduction

Winding farther and farther off the concrete interstate, climbing higher and deeper into the mountains, leaving two-lane roads behind for a one-lane dirt road, and then leaving the last vestiges of the dirt road behind and forging still deeper and deeper into the mountains, the adventuresome traveler beholds the emerging isolated rural hollows. What kind of people choose to live in this remote southern geographical region known as the Appalachian mountain range which runs from northern Georgia through the Carolinas, Tennessee, Kentucky, the Virginias and Pennsylvania? The people who chose to live in these isolated regions are not the town and city dwellers of Appalachia, nor are they the valley farmers. The people living in these remote areas of the mountains are known as "branchwater" mountaineers, occupying the branches and coves, living on the ridges and in the most inaccessible parts of the mountain region. They are small landholders, or tenants or squatters on usually poor land, and they move from abandoned tract to abandoned tract.

The formidable geography of this area has acted as a natural barrier, keeping its inhabitants in, holding others out. The Appalachian region exerts a strong influence on its inhabitants and commands their loyalty. The isolation allows for the development of a rich folk culture, distinctive speech patterns, a strong sense of tradition and radical individualism. It is this group of Appalachian mountaineers that have become the mountaineers of fiction, often portrayed with moral and cultural standards similar to those characters of Erskine Caldwell and William Faulkner. This is the region and these are the people Lee Smith has chosen to present in her fiction.

In his essay "Appalachian Values," Loyal Jones, a mountaineer himself, characterizes his people as a "traditional people, clinging to things of the past" (125). Their ancestors migrated to this region during the middle of the eighteenth century, and they came mainly from England, Wales and Scotland, a few from France and Germany. Most of the people came seeking freedom from religious and economic restraints that the space and solitude of

these remote regions offered. When these immigrants moved into the mountains, they chose freedom and solitude, rejecting the regimentation of civilization and abandoning formal education.

Before the twentieth century, the people of this southern region pursued a grazing and farming economy much like their ancestors had done. Hogs and cattle grazed on unfenced woodlands or open range. The people practiced "patched" farming, clearing temporary fields, planting corn until the soil was exhausted and yields declined, abandoning the old fields and then clearing new fields from the remaining forests. Both together -- livestock grazing and corn farming -- allowed the Appalachian family to meet their subsistence and cash needs while providing the economic basis for a distinctive way of life (Otto 325).

After 1900, however, extractive industries, logging and coal mining, competed with the mountaineers for the use of the land. From 1900 to the 1930s, private companies acquired large tracts of land, turning whole valleys over to railroads, to coal mines and to coal towns. The companies denuded the forest slopes for the timber to use in underground mines, to make lumber needed for the erection of coal towns and to ship to buyers who lived outside of the region. This resource-rich region suffered from exploitation by coal and timber barons, and the absentee ownership of mineral rights in this region is one of the twentieth-century's great social injustices. The country has been used and abused by outsiders, and the people of Appalachia have been left with meager means to sustain themselves (Otto 329).

Deprived of the extensive land needed both for cattle grazing and for "patched" farming, the mountaineer farmer suffered economically. With the expansion of federal forests, the introduction of strip mining, and the migration of marginal farmers, the Appalachian people of this region lived on the fringes of a cash economy. Government reformers referred to these people as "sub-marginal" farmers, the city and town inhabitants of the Appalachian region referred to them as "branch-water" people, and the outsiders referred to them as "hillbillies." But the people themselves, to whom the derogatory names applied, continued to regard themselves as "just plain folks" (Owsley 36).

According to Loyal Jones, in his essay "Appalachian Values," the values shared by these "just plain folks" today are similar to those of an earlier America: religion, individualism, neighborliness and hospitality, family solidarity, personalism, patriotism, sense of beauty, sense of humor, love of place, modesty and a realistic view of one's self. (125). It is a culture where babies are loved, children are spoiled, and old people are revered. Appalachia can also breed a culture where a woman marries young, where she is weighed down by poverty and children while she is a mere child herself, and where she usually dies never having seen the world beyond the shadowy mountains (McDonald 36). A characteristic of this same mountain woman, however, this "fair and tender" woman, is her will to survive against such desperate and victimizing conditions and hardships: isolation, economic deprivation, society.

In such conditions, forced upon the "fair and tender" women of Appalachia by economics and society, the Appalachian woman has survived by submerging herself in her religion. Her religious beliefs and her experiences and expressions of these spiritual fulfillments help this determined woman of humble background endure her difficult and often tragic times. She often practices a non-conformist religion that distrusts educated ministers as superfluous, and its most permeating influence is an essentially unintellectual and basically fatalistic religion kept alive by the energy of revivals and untrained ministers.

Frequently in literature a poor white woman remains in the background, and only the Scarlet O'Hara stereotype emerges as a heroine. Lee Smith, a southern Appalachian writer, changes this for her heroine. Smith's heroine is also from the South, but instead of being from the cultured, privileged cities, the heroine claims the rugged and isolated Appalachian mountain hollows as her home. Lee Smith explores the hearts and minds of the poor white Appalachian woman and resurrects her dignity. Her novels reveal a zealous desire to rehabilitate the images, to show how her Appalachian heroines have been marginalized and accorded little value from outsiders. With her heroine Lee Smith confronts seriously a woman's need for emotional self-expression, for a passionate language in an ordinary voice

that will merge both the heroine's body and her spirit. Virginia A. Smith, in her essay "Luminous Halos and Lawn Chairs: Lee Smith's 'Me and My Baby View the Eclipse,' " supports this intent of the novelist: "Smith confronts seriously women's need for a passionate language, an original voice that merges both body and spirit" (484). Smith explores the mind and heart of her heroine, and she creates a woman's narrative voice that emerges through the heroine's history, cultural experiences and religion. However, the spiritual beliefs Smith utilizes with her female characters are not the ones of mainstream, traditional Christian denominations, but rather the less traditional manifestations of belief: holy rollers, snake handlers, and Spirit-filled church members speaking in tongues.

This thesis will show how Lee Smith, an Appalachian author who infuses her works with a deeply spiritual appreciation of the natural world of the Appalachian mountains and hollers, uses her novels *Oral History*, *Fair and Tender Ladies*, and *Saving Grace*, to create and to present to her readers, heroines who exemplify the merging of body and spirit into a passionate narrative voice. It will explore how the Appalachian history, cultural experiences, and religious aspects of Appalachia give rise to the unique mountain female characters and create the passionate narrative voices of Granny Younger, Ivy Rowe and Florida Grace Shepherd.

Chapter Two begins with the biography of Lee Smith, from her parents' courtship until the present. The major part of the biography covers her progress from a writer of stories that could take place in any small town in America to her realization that her writing strength was in creating stories about her Appalachia and its people.

Since Smith sees the mountains as shaping the people (qtd. in R. Smith19), Chapter Three encompasses a general summary of the history of Appalachia -- the people who migrated into the region seeking freedom and an independence to do as they wished, the triumphs they experienced, and the hardships they survived. Next, Chapter Three recounts how this history gave birth to a unique culture. Appalachia is the only section in America with a definite culture inherited, expanded and perpetuated by its people, and Lee Smith's

stories are expressions of this region, not merely a report on it. Her fiction is not romanticized; Smith intimates that once change has come, the past can no longer be known authentically. Her fiction then becomes a strategy for the cultural survival of those things that will not survive in fact.

In addition to history and culture, religion has always played an important role in the lives of the Appalachian people, and also does so in Lee Smith's life. Chapter Three lastly delves into the emotional religious practices of serpent-handling ceremonies in the Holiness churches that appear in the novel *Saving Grace*. Smith has traveled to churches in Jolo, West Virginia, and Big Rock, Virginia, where the church members handle serpents in their services. Although Smith's early experiences were merely as a curiosity seeker, she has expressed an interest in snake handling, and snake handling as a prelude to religious ecstasy is the underlying religious manifestation in *Saving Grace* (McDonald 38).

Chapter Four explores the narrative voices Smith creates for her characters. Crawford Kilian, in "Narrative Voice," asserts that in a work of fiction the narrative voice develops from the personality and attitude of the narrator. In this chapter Smith explains how and where her "voices" originate for her characters. She also discusses the need for a passionate voice for her heroine, a voice that merges both body and spirit. In each of the three novels, *Oral History, Fair and Tender Ladies*, and *Saving Grace*, the economics and society of the first person narrator's environment influence her personality and attitude towards the everyday events that make up her life. In particular, Smith chooses the first person narrator to give the reader the subjective view of her heroine so that only her thoughts, feelings and reactions are known. For the reader this narrative technique builds empathy and creates suspense because the action unfolds with the telling.

The actual " voices" Smith provides for her heroines are the subject matter of Chapter Five. Through the fictional characters of Granny Younger, Ivy Rowe and Florida Grace Shepherd, the reader is able to realize how their history, culture and religious experiences provide them with the "voice" they use in Lee Smith's novels. The heroine speaks in a voice

that is a passionate language merging both body and spirit. Chapter Six concludes the thesis with a brief summary of Lee Smith's accomplishments in creating her Appalachian heroines and the "voices" with which they speak to the reading audience.

Chapter Two

Biography of Lee Smith

Lee Smith's life has supplied material for her writing: the characters she chooses, the obstacles and triumphs her characters face and the settings in which her stories occur. James Still's novel, *River of Earth*, and a comment he made to the *Knoxville Sentinel-News* that "Writing comes out of life," provided an epiphany for Smith (qtd. in McDonald 33). Realizing that truth made a stronger story than any imagined event, she began to look at her hometown of Grundy, Virginia, from a new perspective, and she was suddenly struck by the wealth of characters and stories that she had earlier abandoned. The hometown people Smith knew would now provide the material and background for her fictional characters. Coaxing her mother to tell her more tales of the past and talking to her father about ghost stories and legends of the region, Smith wrote them down and incorporated those anecdotes from Grundy into her novel. The mountains, imprisoning her throughout her childhood, suddenly became her chosen stomping ground (McDonald 32). For Smith, "The stories that present themselves to me as worth telling are most often those somehow connected to that place [Grundy] and those people" (qtd. in McDonald).

Lee Smith, an only child, was born in 1944 in Grundy, Virginia, a small coal-mining town situated in a narrow valley between the high, rough Blue Ridge Mountains of the Appalachian Mountain range. Grundy is in southwest Virginia, not far from the Kentucky border. It is an area where everybody had long ago sold timber and mineral rights to their land, and where the landscape is too steep for farming. Mining has taken its toll on the landscape, and if there is a class structure, it has to do with a person's religious affiliation. Smith, in her article "Far from the White Columns," explains the hierarchy of this religious class structure: at the top Methodist, attended by doctors and lawyers and other "nice" families; Presbyterian, attended by store owners, slightly down the scale; Baptist; the Church of Christ, the largest congregation, with many who thought they were the only real Church in town. At the bottom of the church scale were the "little" churches where people were

rumored to "yell out, fall down in fits and throw their babies" (Lee Smith, "Far from the White Columns," Internet). In Grundy there were also a few Jewish families, a few Catholics, but no Episcopalians.

Smith's mother, Virginia, was a college graduate who had been raised on Chincoteague Island, in the tidewater region of Virginia. She had been "swept off her feet" by Ernest Smith, a native of Grundy who operated a Ben Franklin dime store. He married her and brought her to the remote area of Grundy, where she taught home economics in high school. The Smith home sat on Main Street in front of the Levisa River, and the Smith family attended the Grundy Methodist Church.

As a young girl, Smith adopted her mother's softer, less nasal, less Appalachian drawl rather than that of the inhabitants of Grundy. But her mother, feeling it was her mission to civilize all with whom she came in contact, her students, her husband, and her daughter, sent Lee every summer to visit her Aunt Gay in Birmingham, Alabama. The summers in Alabama worked in reverse. Although Smith loved her mother, she confesses in "Southern Exposure" that she rebelled "against the way her mother talked and against the advice of proper behavior for a southern young lady" her mother had offered her.

Smith grew up among people who liked to talk and to tell stories; her mother could make a story out of thin air, and her father, who came from a big mountain family of storytelling Democrats, recited Kipling out loud. "My Uncle Vern [politician in the Virginia Legislature] was a famous storyteller, as were others, including my dad. It was very local. . . . my mother could make a story out of anything; she'd go to the grocery store and come home with a story" (qtd. in "Lee's Biography"). Even though Lee Smith did not know any authors, she writes in "Terrains of the Heart" how she felt dedicated to the idea of being a writer: "I started telling stories as soon as I could talk--true stories, and made-up stories, too. It has always been hard for me to tell the difference" (Lee Smith, "In Her Own Words"). It was in the attic of her father's dime store, through a peephole in the floor, that Smith was able to watch and listen to the shoppers, paying close attention to minute details of their dress, their

speech patterns and their conversations.

Describing herself as a deeply weird child and an insatiable reader, Smith narrates how she became addicted to stories early, and as soon as she could write, she began writing them down (qtd. in "Lee's Biography"). She wrote her first story at the age of eight on her mother's stationery. The plot featured her two favorite people at that time, Adlai Stevenson and Jane Russell, falling in love and heading out west together in a covered wagon. Once they reached the west, they became Mormons. Even in her early childhood stories, Smith said that she explored the very same themes that concern her today: the dilemma of staying in one place or not staying (containment or flight) and religion (qtd. in "Lee's Biography")

At the age of eleven, Smith and Martha Sue Owens, a best friend, published *The Small Review*, a neighborhood newspaper which they tediously hand-copied for their twelve subscribers. As proof of Smith's emerging talent for detailed observation and her curiosity about people's idiosyncrasies, she published her controversial editorial, "George McGuire Is Too Grumpy." Although she had to apologize to her neighbor, the editorial displayed Smith's dedication to truth in writing (McDonald 35).

When Smith became a teenager, she felt closed in and imprisoned by the mountains, so she transferred, for her last two years of high school, to St. Catherine's, a private Episcopal school in Richmond, Virginia. At St. Catherine's, Smith was guided toward the classics, but her own choices remained relentlessly sensational novels. After graduating from St. Catherine's, Smith enrolled in Hollins College, in Roanoke, Virginia. It was at Hollins College that the rebellious spirit of Lee Smith manifested itself. Smith is quoted in "Lee's Biography" an article found on Lee Smith's webpage, as saying that she "had this kind of breakout period--I just went wild." She and Annie Dillard, also a well-known essayist and novelist, became go-go dancers for the all-girl rock band appropriately known as the *Virginia Woolfs*.

While at Hollins College her writing consisted of stories about stewardesses living in Hawaii, about evil twins, executives, and alternative universes. When her professors

suggested she should write stories about what was familiar to her, she did not understand how anything from Grundy could be of interest and worthy of print. As Smith explains in "Terrains of the Heart," she certainly she did not intend to write about any personal experiences she had encountered in the small coal mining town of Grundy!

According to Smith, early in her sophomore year at Hollins College, when Louis D. Rubin, Smith's professor for Introduction to Southern Literature, assigned the reading of the works of William Faulkner, Flannery O'Connor and Eudora Welty, "A light went on in my head" ("Terrains of the Heart"). She abandoned her stewardesses and began writing stories about childhood. She was now on more familiar ground, but she still was not able to see the stories set in the mountains of her home. It was not until later in her educational process that Smith, by herself, encountered James Still's *River of Earth*. Smith reveals in "Terrains of the Heart" that it was this literary work that would be most influential in guiding her toward the regional writing for which she is known and excels today. The novel, an Appalachian *Grapes of Wrath*, and chronicles the Baldridge family's desperate struggle to survive familiar occurrences in Appalachian life, mine closings and crop failures. At a last attempt for survival, the father in *River of Earth* tells his family they are heading to a new coal mine, Grundy. Grundy! This was Smith's Grundy, the coal mining town, the mountains Smith was trying to escape. Suddenly the past instructions of her professors crystallized. She began writing about women sitting on a porch, drinking ice tea and talking about whether one of them had an illness called colitis or not; about Hardware Breeding, who had married his wife, Beulah, four times; about how she (Smith) was saved at a tent revival; about John Hardin's hanging in the square. The stories flowed easily and naturally from this familiar spring.

With the influence of Faulkner and Welty, with the emotional impact of *River of Earth*, and with the culmination of her instructors' tutelage, Smith submitted an early draft of her senior thesis to a Book-of-the-Month Club contest. She was awarded one of twelve fellowships for her coming-of-age novel. Two years later, in 1968, Harper and Row published her senior thesis under the title of *The Last Day the Dog Bushes Bloomed*. Smith's

first novel dealt with the breakup of the Tobey family and the effect the breakup had on the daughter, Susan Tobey. Running off with another man, the mother in the novel leaves her daughter trying to understand why relationships fail and why betrayals occur.

After graduating from Hollins College, Smith married James Seay, a poet and teacher, accompanying him from university to university as his teaching assignments changed. Smith and Seay had two sons, and the time-consuming job of raising them left her little time for creative writing. She filled this creative void by being a reporter and editor for the *Tuscaloosa News* in Tuscaloosa, Alabama.

By 1971, Smith had completed *Something in the Wind*, her second novel. Brooke Kincaid, the eighteen year old narrator, experiences the accidental death of her close friend, Charles. Shortly after his death, Brooke, emotionally insecure, enters college. Having no sense of identity, she finds herself assuming various poses in her search to belong. Meticulously cultivating an approach to life that dissociates her from reality and permits her to regard herself as a separate being, Brooke participates in actions without personal involvement, including endless sexual experiences with a succession of strangers. Subconsciously wishing to play "Delilah" to all men, she symbolically emasculates them.

Smith's next novel, *Fancy Strut*, published in 1973, was a lighter work. Named after the goose step stride of a drum majorette, the novel was "a comic account of the sesquicentennial celebration in the Deep South of Speed, Alabama" (qtd. in Arnold 240). Rather than focusing exclusively on one character, Smith makes the community at large her subject. As Speed frantically prepares for its birthday carnival complete with the presentation of the outdoor pageant, "The Song of Speed," unscheduled events occur: a riot, a fire, a bungled suicide and seductions. The social arbiter throughout *Fancy Strut* is Iona Flowers, a demented spinster possessed by delusions of past grandeur. In this novel, the proud citizens of Speed kicked up their heels in a "lively, pompous, fancy strut that exposes all their dirty linen. A wickedly witty send-up of small-town Southern life . . . " (Amazon.com: Reviews: *Fancy Strut*).

Even though her second and

third novels, published by Harper and Row, received generally favorable reviews, and though *Fancy Strut* was widely praised as a comic masterpiece, the initial momentum of Smith's career wavered. Her editor, Cass Canfield, retired, and both books lost money for the publisher. At this time her marriage to Seay was disintegrating, and she still had two small sons who were dependent on her. Being published in *Best Writing From American Colleges* and winning a Book-of-the-Month Club Writing Fellowship did nothing to assuage the pain of personal events in her life. Smith moved her family from Tuscaloosa, Alabama, to Chapel Hill, North Carolina, and from 1973 to1978, she taught high school English.

In 1974, Smith finished *Black Mountain Breakdown*, a novel set in Black Rock, a fictional coal mining town in the mountains of Appalachia and very much like Grundy and its surrounding area. This was Smith's first novel to show a growing interest in the Appalachian region and mountain families. In an interview with Edwin Arnold, Smith acknowledges this new directions: "It wasn't until *Black Mountain Breakdown* that I decided to really write about the mountains, and I think that's because it does take a long time to get enough distance, to get a real sort of aesthetic purchase on things" (244). A much darker work than her previous novels, *Black Mountain Breakdown* was also a more mature novel. Not only was this Smith's first novel to be set in the mountains of Appalachia, but it was also the novel in which Smith discovered an "intrusive, down-home narrative voice," the same colloquial voice she would expand on in all of her subsequent works (qtd. in "Lee's Biography"). The novel tells the story of Crystal Spangler and her fall from innocence. Crystal evolves from a romantic, daydreaming girl of twelve into an hysterically catatonic woman of thirty-two. After suffering a number of traumatic shocks -- her father's death, rape by her father's retarded uncle and the suicide death of her lover -- Crystal bounces from identity to identity in an attempt to find meaning in her life. Unsuccessful in her attempts to find out who she is, Crystal, at the age of 32, simply retreats into a catatonic state, lying in bed at her mother's home.

Because both of her previous novels had lost money for her publishers and because she

was a young woman living in Alabama, Smith had difficulty in finding a publisher for *Black Mountain Breakdown*. "Not even my agent believed in me," Smith told Jeanne McDonald (35). Because of this difficulty, she turned to writing short stories for which she won the O. Henry Awards in 1978 and 1980. Finally, in 1981, through her friend Roy Blount, Jr., Smith found Liz Darhanshoff, a New York agent who still represents her work. With Darhanshoff, *Black Mountain Breakdown* was published.

Once again Lee Smith's literary career was active and successful. This same year, Smith also published her first collection of short stories, *Cakewalk*. The fourteen short stories in *Cakewalk* took over eleven years to write and presented authentic small-town life in contemporary America. In *Cakewalk* the stories portray "small town life full of its jealousy, pettiness and dogma, but also its devotion and generosity" (Canin 11). In these stories, the women's ideas originate from women's magazines, soap operas and, the daring ideas, from Phil Donahue (Pollitt 24). The narrative voices of the women all ring with the truest of sounds: Mrs. Joline B. Newhouse, who writes a column for a newspaper; Georgia Rose, who foresees the disaster of others; Helen, whose life is more like a soap opera than the TV serial she is addicted to; Martha Rosnick, who writes to Phil Donahue because "you talked to me all those mornings"; Mrs. Darcy, who learns to keep her visions secret from her nagging daughters; Florrie, who bakes cakes and wears running shoes and athletic socks that fall down around her ankles. (Pollitt 24).

In 1982, her marriage to James Seay ended, and Smith accepted a teaching job at North Carolina State University in Raleigh, North Carolina, where she began work on her fifth novel, *Oral History*. Published in 1983, *Oral History* was the virtual prototype of the modern Appalachian novel. A Book-of-the-Month Club selection, it gained Smith not only regional, but also national recognition. Peter Guralnick, writing in the *Los Angeles Times Magazine* (May 21, 1995) affirms, "Lee Smith is the latest in a long line of Southerners who transform the region's voices and visions into quintessentially American novels" (qtd. in McDonald 34). *Oral History*, the story of the Cantrell family, a mountain family living in the Hoot Owl

Holler, is told with multiple narrators and covers almost a century. Guralnick defines it as "a simultaneous embrace of past and present, this insistent chronicling of the small, heroic battles of the human spirit, a recognition of the dignity and absurdity of the commonplace" (qtd. in McDonald 34). In 1983, Smith received the Sir Walter Raleigh Award for *Oral History*, and because of this novel, Smith has been compared to William Faulkner and Carson McCullers.

In 1985, Smith married Hal Crowther, a syndicated journalist and columnist for *Oxford American* magazine. They met at Duke University's Evening College, where both were teaching writing courses. It was also at this time that Smith wrote *Family Linen*, the novel she dedicated to her new husband. In this story, Smith continues some of the themes and techniques she first used in *Oral History*: a multigenerational story, told by multiple narrators. However, the mystery surrounding *Family Linen* "seems" a more conventional one than the mystery of the ghost that inhabited Hoot Owl Holler. In *Family Linen*, the mystery deals with a murder. Sybil Hess, a middle-aged adult education teacher in Roanoke, Virginia, undergoes hypnosis for recurrent headaches. While hypnotized, Sybil recalls that, as a young child, she had witnessed the murder of her father, Jewell Rife by her mother. She had clubbed him to death and dumped his body in the backyard well. Needing to discover if this scenario is true, Sybil ventures home to confront her mother, Miss Elizabeth, a very proper local poetress. Before the confrontation can occur, however, Miss Elizabeth suffers a stroke and dies. Since the funeral has to be held, the will has to be read and Miss Elizabeth's worldly goods have to be divided, a menagerie of family characters enter the story: Myrtle, Lacy and Candy, Sibyl's sisters; Arthur, Sibyl's brother; Dr. Don Dotson, Myrtle's dermatologist husband; Nettie and Fay, Sibyl's aunts; Sean, Myrtle and Don's eleven year old savant. It is through the reminiscences of the multiple narrators that a portrait of the whole family emerges, and Sibyl's mystery is solved, or is it? The multiple narrators who proved so successful for Smith in *Oral History* are not so successful in solving the mystery in *Family Linen*. The irreconcilable narratives succeed only in raising more questions, and ones that are more

profound than their original counterparts. As Sean, Myrtle's son, articulates, "The thing is, you don't ever know. You just don't ever fucking know" (64).

In 1988, *Fair and Tender Ladies,* considered to be Smith's most fully realized and artistically successful work, was published. This epistolary novel is based on actual letters Smith found at a garage sale. The story chronicles the life of the heroine, Ivy Rowe, a tenacious mountain woman who remains dedicated to the ideal of perseverance through the many formidable challenges she faces. Reviewers saw this novel as a work toward an elemental and profound grasp of emotions and storytelling ("Review of *Fair and Tender Ladies"*), and in 1989, it won the Sir Walter Raleigh Award.

In 1990, Smith's second book of short stories, *Me and My Baby View the Eclipse,* was published, and the regional speech in her fictional voices was at its best (V. Smith, "Luminous Halos" 484). The variety of Southern voices that speak in these short stories attest to Smith's acute observation of the dialects she had so carefully listened to while peeping through the hole in the attic floor of her father's Ben Franklin. Virginia Smith refers to these voices that Smith creates as a "ventriloquial magic" (484). Lee Smith herself has lamented that these Appalachian voices are headed for extinction in the age of the satellite dish. Smith wistfully has stated, "Appalachian children are growing up to speak like Dan Rather -- and that's a shame" (qtd. in McDonald 484).

All nine short stories in *Me and My Baby View the Eclipse* utilize the subject of male-female relationships, usually involving the break-up of the traditional family unit (K. Robbins, 13). Smith's characters in these stories are average people whose average lives are suddenly shaken up by the eclipse of illness, death, divorce, loss of faith, children or dreams. Sometimes the eclipses are funny, sometimes sad and occasionally visionary. All of the stories suggest that love can bring meaning even to the craziest of lives (V. Smith, "Luminous Halos" 494). Three of the stories tell the plight of women whose husbands have left them for younger women. The women in these stories, however, are linked and redeemed by a final vision of their lives that comes out of the ordinary even as it lifts them above it (V.

Smith, "Luminous Halos" 483). "Bob, A Dog" is the story of Cheryl, whose husband leaves her three days before his 39th birthday for a "frizzy headed math teacher at the community college who didn't even wear make-up or shave her legs. Her name was Margaret Fine-Manning. She had been married before. But she was young" (21). Throughout "Bob, A Dog" Cheryl works at keeping her wandering dog chained, takes care of her children, slaves over commissioned slipcovers and mourns the loss of her ex-husband. It is not until the end of the story when she laughs aloud at the dog's most recent escape, that Cheryl has the epiphany that her own aloneness is a blessed and hopeful freedom.

In "Life on the Moon," Lonnie, June's husband, leaves her for Sharon Ledbetter, a twenty-three year old nurse whom he met at the hospital where his son, Richie, was having a tonsillectomy. For two weeks after Lonnie's departure, all June can do is obsessively write lists to organize her increasingly chaotic life, throw up and cry. A visit to Washington's National Air and Space Museum with her cousin, Lucie, and their children enables June to remember the historic lunar landing, and through her "cathartic remembrance of things past allows for a present moment of illumination: 'It was finished a long time ago. . . . I could see this for the first time, being in Outer Space' " (qtd. in . Smith, Virginia, A"Luminous Halos" 483). The third story, "The Interpretation of Dreams," deals with Melanie, a worker at Linen N' Things in an outlet mall in Burlington, North Carolina. Melanie has experienced three failed marriages. Melon's first marriage to Drew, an only child, ends when his father gives her a thousand dollars, a kiss on the cheek and has the marriage annulled; her second husband had been "nothing but a flash in the pan but at least she got Sean out of that one" (131), and her third marriage to Gary Rasnake, "cute, but trouble from the word go, he wouldn't work and all he wanted to do was play . . . " fails also. (131). Despite these failures, Melanie still looks for happiness and continues to search for the perfect man. She seeks her happiness and enlightenment from media personalities of the disc jockeys at WHIT and Stan the Man at WRDU and from Margery Cooper, the author of *How to Interpret Dreams*, the book from which this short story derives its title.

The longest and best known short story in this collection is Smith's "Tongues of Fire." In this story, Karen, a teenage girl and product of the Country Club set, experiences a summer when her father suffers a nervous breakdown and an auto accident almost kills her brother. During this summer, Karen makes friends with Tammy Lester, who lives in a ramshackle farm with a significantly different life style than Karen. Through Tammy, Karen discovers the Pentecostal excesses of the Maranatha service on the other side of the tracks: she is saved, and she is baptized and is rededicated time and again. Because of her mother's disapproval of this relationship and of Karen's deviation from the starched propriety of the Methodist church, Karen is sent to summer camp. At camp she grows away from Tammy and discovers that she needs someone similar. Virginia A. Smith sees "Tongues of Fire" as the "funniest story of the collection -- the narrator's controlled self-irony in describing the rituals of Summer Camp, the Sub-Deb Club, Southern Ladyhood, Prayer without Ceasing, and Petting -- is Lee Smith at her nostalgically comic best" (V. Smith, "Luminous Halos" 484).

In the same year, 1990, Lee Smith won the Lyndhurst Prize to study country music. She then joined Clyde Edgerton and his wife, Susan Ketchin, in forming the Tarwater Band, a country-and-western group that put words and music to the fictional song titles in *The Devil's Dream*, the novel that resulted from Smith's research. As Smith says, "I'm like a fiction-reading Dolly Parton. I get all glittery and low-cut and stomp out in my cowboy boots" (qtd. in Hunt 31). *The Devil's Dream* is another multigenerational family saga centering around the musical Bailey family. Using almost a century of history, the story traces the roots of an extended, country-western singing family in the1830s from Cold Spring Holler to contemporary Nashville. Clearly Smith pays homage to a place and people who have contributed so much to the American music scene, and in doing so, she traces the roots and variations of country music, from primitive Baptist hymns and fiddle-playing, to gospel, rockabilly and contemporary country western (amazon.com: Reviews: *The Devil's Dream*).

The story begins with Katie Crocker, a superstar of country music and the most successful descendant, planning a country Christmas family reunion at the Opryland Hotel.

Gathered together are her famous relatives from Tampa Rainette, nearly 100 years old and one of the original Grassy Branch Girls, to Rose Annie, whose hit 'Subdivision Wife" was based on her own life. Although Katie Crocker is successful once she makes it to Nashville, the story deals more with what problems success brought to her. Not only does it explore the frustrations of success for Katie, but it also makes the reader aware of what success brings to all who achieve it -- the possibility of failure. Smith allows the characters to tell their own story in their own voice, and Smith creates "a vividly labyrinthine world of family ties in which music is always a part" (Amazon.com: Reviews: *The Devil's Dream*).

In 1992, Hollins College, Smith's *alma mater*, awarded her an Honorary Doctorate Degree, and in the same year, Smith wrote the introduction to Shelby Lee Adam's *Appalachian Portraits*. The photographs in Adams' book realistically captures the essence of the branchwater people of Lee's Appalachia.

In 1995, Lee Smith published her ninth novel *Saving Grace*, a work of fiction, a narrative of Christian faith and redemption. Florida Grace Shepherd, the eleventh child of an itinerant preacher who handles serpents and drinks strychnine, narrates the story. It is her story of opposing emotions which exiles her not only from religion, but from herself. Every decision she makes, every yearning she has seems a betrayal. The *Boston Sunday Globe* reviewed it as "a compelling journey into all that matters, southern and spiritual" (Amazon.com: *Booklist* rev. of *Saving Grace*).

The novella, *The Christmas Letters*, published in 1996 returned to the epistolary style Smith had used in *Fair and Tender Ladies*. The story spans and links three generations of Puckett women. Beginning in 1944, Birdie Puckett writes to her mother and sister about life on the North Carolina farm. In subsequent parts of the book, Birdie's daughter and granddaughter continue the letter writing tradition. In the second part of the novella the focus of the novella shifts from Birdie to her daughter Mary. From Mary's letters, the readers learn of Mary's life as a new mother, later as a woman whose marriage is failing, and lastly as a Peace Corps volunteer.

Lee Smith's latest work, *News of the Spirit*, published in September 1997, consists of five narratives. In this collection of short fiction, Smith presents voices of women, young and old, who are trying to muddle through the turmoil of their lives. She excels at creating characters who are boggled at what they have become, and who feel a pressing need to explain themselves to themselves ("Latest Release--*News Of the Spirit*"). The two coming-of-age stories, "The Bubba Stories" and "Live Bottomless," portray Charlene, the college student, and Jenny, a thirteen-year old, as two aspiring writers who find storytelling deeply connected with their identity. The story of Charlene takes place in the college setting of the mid-1960s, and Jenny's setting is in suburbia of the late '50s. Both stories were told with "steeling humor and an unrelenting eye" ("Latest Release--*News of the Spirit*").

In the title story, Paula and Johnny, the long-estranged twins, find that the deep connection between them has its beginnings in the storytelling and make-believe play of their childhood; and for the moribund nursing home resident in "The Happy Memories Club," the only way she recovers the acerbic, but passionate, self she had repressed for so long is by writing down her life story. In this story, Smith's humor, though pointed, is gentle, and although her characters appear priggish and narrow-minded, they are never mean. The characters in *News of the Spirit* never doubt the correctness of their opinions associated with how a proper Southern lady should behave. Like previous works, Smith's obsession with detail makes her heroines both southern and feminine ("Latest Release--*News of the Spirit*").

Smith's latest award, the Lila Wallace-Reader's Digest Grant, provided her with a stipend and a three-year sabbatical from North Carolina State University. She chose to become affiliated with the Hindman Settlement School in Kentucky. There Smith conducted writing workshops and was instrumental in the publication of what her students wrote. In an article by Jeanne McDonald, Smith speaks of the impact: "Watching people express themselves in language is like watching them fall in love. . . . they [adult students] are able to express on paper the scores of stories that have been stored in their heads for years" (39). Besides the awards mentioned above, Smith has been awarded the North Carolina Award for

Fiction in 1984, The John Dos Passos Award for Literature in 1987, The Weatherford Award for Appalachian Literature in 1988, and the Robert Penn Warren Prize for Fiction in 1991.

Taking a sabbatical from North Carolina State, Smith participated in a workshop for public school teachers in Kentucky. In the fall of 1998, she returned to her teaching duties at North Carolina State University in Raleigh. Lee Smith is now working on the songs and stories of Florida Stone, a lively ballad singer who enrolled in the Hindman Settlement School after she was widowed.

Smith and her husband have bought an old house in Hillsborough, North Carolina, and they have also purchased a cabin in Jefferson, North Carolina. There Smith enjoys the peaceful life of growing roses and dahlias while nourishing twenty apple trees. Nevertheless, plots are still being contrived, and she rarely vacations from her stories. Louis Ruben has said of Smith, "Lee's a real writer. She writes all the time. She writes when she's down. She writes when she's up--that's just her way of dealing with the world" (qtd. in McDonald 40). Smith herself says she writes "because I must - a way of reclaiming self, to release emotion, and to give expression to my feeling about creativity and religion" (qtd. in Ketchin 4).

Both of Lee Smith's parents are deceased. Her mother died in 1988, and in 1992, her father had a stroke on the last day of his going-out-business sale and died a few days later. Smith has donated her father's store building to the town of Grundy for a teen center. Her parents suffered from manic depression, and at one time during Smith's childhood they both were hospitalized in separate psychiatric hospitals. It was not until after their deaths that Smith was able to deal with their illness openly and honestly. The death of both parents and their constant history of depression would have overwhelmed Smith if writing had not provided a therapeutic outlet. "I write fiction the way other people write in their journals. . . . Sometimes when I look back at something I've written, I remember what was going on in my life at that time, and I see how I worked it out through writing" (qtd. in McDonald 40). "I think of writing as self-repair . . . artistic . . . therapeutic . . . life-enhancing" (qtd. in R. Smith, 27).

Chapter Three

The Land and Cultural Traditions in Smith's Fiction

For Lee Smith, Appalachia is a "somewhat mythical region with no known borders. . . . a domain that has shaped the lives and endeavors of men and women from pioneer days to the present and given them an independence and an outlook and a vision . . ." ("Far From the White Columns and Marble Generals"). Because Smith considers place especially pivotal for her mountain books, and because Smith affirms that the mountains shape the people, it is essential to examine the history and settlement of this area where the ancestors to Smith's fictional characters emigrated and settled. Granny Younger, Ivy Rowe and Florida Grace Shepherd are the descendants of the first Appalachian mountaineers.

Most of the immigrants who settled in this region came from Scotland, Wales, England, Ireland and Germany during the middle of the eighteenth century. They arrived seeking religious freedom and economic betterment. These immigrants were composed of like-minded groups consisting of several nationalities rather than one distinct racial type. Although poor in material possessions, the immigrants had their language, their love of music, their strong drink and their sexual adventure (Covington 86). They also brought with them, however, their fear of outsiders and hostility towards clerics and established religions. They settled in the Valley of Virginia with the Tidewater Anglicans and in Pennsylvania with the gentle-mannered Quakers.

When the immigrants arrived in the United States, they faced discrimination because of their relative poverty, appearance and reputation for being noisy, quarrelsome and proud. When the cities along the eastern seaboard became overcrowded and when confrontation with the original settlers occurred, the Swiss and Palentine Germans were the first people who migrated into the Blue Ridge and Allegheny fertile limestone belts. These immigrants sought land on the "western" frontier, long sheltered valleys between hills with rocky outcroppings, temperate climate and plentiful water. Shortly afterwards the Scotch-Irish appeared, attracted

by the democratic and religious liberty on the frontier. They were brave, hot-headed, quick-witted, rather visionary, imperious and aggressive (Kephart xxi).

The characters that Lee Smith gives life to in her fictional works are the Scotch-Irish who came from Northern Ireland. When Granny Younger in *Oral History* explains how Almarine Vance Cantrell accumulated so much land, she relates briefly the ancestry of Almarine: "His daddy [Charles Vance Cantrell] was Irish. . . . He had him a long gold chain with a big watch on it that had some dates and 'Dublin' carved into the back. . . . He brung that wife of hisn, Nell, from Ireland with him . . . " (19).

The culture that these immigrants brought with them into the Appalachian mountains resurrected the character of life along the borders between Scotland and England, and their reputation as border dwellers turned them into tight-knit warrior clans that feuded endlessly over matters of real or perceived violations of honor. Leadership was bestowed on those with the cunning and strength to enforce it. Justin Winsor describes them as possessing "all that excitable character which goes with a keen-minded adherence to original sin, total depravity, predestination, and election" (qtd. in Kephart xxi). These Southern mountaineers were a complex people with a complex history. Because of their isolation, the mountain people had simply retained the old speech patterns of the Scotch-Irish at the time of the American Revolution, and when the Scotch-Irish migrated into the Appalachians, they carried their speech with them (Cratis Williams 54). Among the frontiersmen who made this trek were such well known American figures as Daniel Boone and the ancestors of such well-known American historical figures as David Crockett, Samuel Houston, John C. Calhoun, "Stonewall" Jackson, and Abraham Lincoln.

When the Revolutionary War erupted between England and the colonies, the German settlers had no long ties or special love for the British. They generally supported the Revolution out of interest for religious freedom. The Scotch-Irish had a long-lived hatred of the British government and their tradition of political opposition made them excellent patriots. In lieu of wages at the Revolution's end, land grants were given to the war veterans

forming a special connection of their title of land with their supreme patriotic sacrifice (Eller "Appalachia in the American Revolution").

In the years prior to the Civil War, slavery in Appalachia was not a dominant institution because the land would not support a plantation/slavery economy. The mountainous terrain was more profitable as small, self-sufficient farms, and most mountain families could not afford to own slaves who required food, clothing and shelter. Ideologically, some white mountain people rejected slavery on ethical and religious grounds. This, however, was not the philosophy of the low country, and the crisis of the Civil War brought the underlying tensions both within the mountains and between the mountains and the low country to a climax.

Like societies everywhere in the United States, mountaineers themselves were split on the issues, and the entire structure of the mountain people was torn apart. For Appalachia the Civil War was a period of internal turmoil: community against community, county against county, family against family, and even brother against brother. As Granny Younger laments, "Now some men hereabout took up on one side, and some on the other. There was nary a slave in the county. So they done what they felt to do. It split some families down the middle. . . . There is a church in Abingdon that to this day has got one door for those who stood with the Union in the war and one door for Johnny Reb . . . "(*Oral History* 19). When the Civil War ended, the situation in the mountains was desperate. Food was scarce because both Union and Confederate soldiers had lived off the land, destroying the crops, the farms, the livestock, and the homes. There was also the loss of personal possessions, and many families and communities turned against one another.

The Reconstruction period in Appalachia, 1865 through 1875, generally seen as a valiant effort to reconstruct Southern society, achieved some social welfare including hospitals and asylums, a system of free public schools at state expense with compelled attendance and a democratization of local politics away from little oligarchies (Eller "Civil War and Reconstruction in Appalachia"). In the 1870s, however, when the Democrats returned to

power, many of the mountaineers were seen as traitors to the Confederate cause, and Appalachia entered a new era of neglect. Local political public officials, appointed by state governments that were of the Democrat party, reversed Republican decisions. New public school systems were gutted, taxes were lowered and the areas of social services and public needs were neglected.

Not all of the country, however, was ignoring the region. Appalachia's formidable geography had acted as a natural barrier for a hundred years, holding the mountaineers in and keeping outsiders out. This geographical limitation allowed the development of a rich folk culture, a strong sense of tradition, radical individualism, and distinctive speech patterns. But with the inclusion of the mountains in the Civil War, Northern speculators and former Union officers were turning a covetous eye toward the natural resources they had seen in the region. As a result of their Civil War experience, a great many Northerners began to have contact with the Southern mountains, and they were pleased by the great mineral and timber wealth, beautiful mountains, and a simple people not yet touched by the urban growth and technological developments already altering the North. While being neglected by their own state people, the Appalachian Mountains, along with their people, were being primed for exploitation by outsiders.

The first stages of the industrialization process had largely bypassed the mountains. Although railroads ran east-west, they had not invaded the Appalachian area, which on the eve of the Civil War had only one railroad. At this stage of industrial development, there was little need for the natural resources of Appalachia. However, from 1880 to 1916, such technological advancements as the Bessemer process for making steel and the conversion of locomotives from wood burning to coal burning created a demand for the coal of this region and the expansion of urban growth created a demand for the timber that the mountains contained. The coal-rich mines and large, virgin forests attracted the moguls from the eastern states. Smith herself comments on the "rape" of Appalachia in an interview with Herion-Sarafidis:

> People from outside came in and first they took the lumber and then bought up the mineral rights and stripped it for coal. . . . The land was really raped. And not for the benefit of the people who lived there. Everything was taken away from them . . . a lament, or even more of a wail over what has happened to the land and even more what has happened to the people. It is very sad.(12)

Not only did the Industrial Revolution exploit the Mountaineers when vast northern companies bought mineral rights and timber areas, but it also drew thousands of mountain people off the farm. Ivy Rowe, the heroine in Smith's *Fair and Tender Ladies* laments, "Everybody has took everything out of here now - first the trees, then the coal, then the children. We have been robbed and left for dead" (295).

When the basis of Appalachian industrialization, agriculture, railroads, coal mining and forestry/timber, collapsed in the late1920s, the Depression hit Appalachia earlier and more harshly than in other parts of America. The mountaineers faced years of hardship and starvation. Smith incorporates this in a letter that Ivy Rowe writes to her friend Geneva, "Now that the war is over they are laying men off left and right . . . and people don't know what to do with themselves. They have given up their land . . . and they have lived here so long they have forgot how to garden anyway, or put up food, or trade for goods, or anything about how they used to live. So they have got nothing now" (*Fair and Tender Ladies* 159).

When some of the "scrabble farmers" did return to their family farms, they further exacerbated the existing hardships. The number of farms increased considerably, and more and more people were attempting to live on smaller plots of land. The small acreage would not support the population, local market patterns had changed, and farm roads had been abandoned. When the expanding population overextended the limits of their subsistence, deterioration began. Returning from cities where they had lost their jobs because of the collapse of the industrial system and returning from mining towns that had been closed down, the mountaineers found the best lands already taken. Little opportunity was afforded for the mountaineers to find profitable farm land. However, instead of leaving the mountains and

forging onward, more and more people "dug in" along the creek branches and along steep hillsides. Subsistence farming began to take the place of woodland agriculture, and the prevalent farm imagery of marginal Appalachian farming of the 1930s grew more accurate (Eller "The Depression").

The mountaineers identified the mountains with homes and kindred. Abandoning their mountains would have constituted a betrayal to their families. Loyal Jones speaks of this attachment to place: "Our love of place, sometimes, keeps us in places where there is no hope of creating decent lives" ("Appalachian Values" 128). From an economic viewpoint, the poverty of the hillside farmer and branchwater people was so extreme that they did not have the necessary funds with which to emigrate. In fact, the rigors of mountain life suited these descendants of the Scotch-Irish, who had inhabited the Ulster estates that King James I, in 1607, had confiscated from the native Irish. These Scotch-Irish people had been hated by the native Irish because they were usurpers and because the Scotch-Irish were alien both by blood and by religion. The mountaineers' ancestors had seen even their king turn against them, and they themselves had come into conflict with the Crown and had been persecuted. The people now inhabiting the Appalachian mountains were their descendants, and they were a determined people used to hardships and quarrels. Now, instead of fighting with the Irish or the British Crown, as their ancestors had done, they were fighting the predicament that overpopulation of land and economic conditions had thrust upon them. Instead of coming out of the mountains when hardships prevailed, many stayed to eke out a subsistence from the thin soil of the highland slopes. The branchwater mountaineers lived in the branches, in the coves, on ridges and in other inaccessible places. These people experienced a double isolation: isolation as a geographical unit and a social isolation from one another. As Ivy Rowe writes in a letter to her sister, "And it aint nobody up here but usuns" (*Fair and Tender Ladies"* 13).

The New Deal, implemented by President Franklin Roosevelt in 1932, did nothing to change any of the structural problems of the depressed Appalachian area; it only shifted the

dependency of the mountain people from the coal industry to the federal government. For the people of Appalachia, the welfare state was set in place. The 1940s and 1950s witnessed periods of extreme poverty throughout Appalachia where opportunities were few. During the1950s, national journalists began coming to the area and writing about the region. In the 1960s various programs were introduced to assuage the problem of poverty; VISTA, Head Start and a spate of grassroots organizations were established in the Appalachian region. Horace Kephart perceived the mountaineers of that day facing a vast change in their lives:

> The feud epoch has ceased throughout the greater part of Appalachia. . . . Everywhere the highways of civilization are pushing into remote mountain fastnesses. Vast enterprises are being installed. The timber and minerals are being garnered. The highlander . . . is to be caught up in the current of human progress. (xxviii)

Despite being torn asunder by the Civil War, despite cholera epidemics, floods and poverty, despite being taken advantage of by industrialization the war spawned, despite the colonization of the South by Northern entrepreneurs, despite the scorn and ridicule heaped upon the Appalachian mountaineers, what has emerged is a stronger, more durable South. This region and its early inhabitants are the basis of Smith's fictional characters. The combination of Scotch-Irish and German ancestry, the hardships endured and accepted created the culture that permeates the mountaineer women of Lee Smith's fiction.

While the history and the culture of Appalachia are reflected in Smith's heroines, religion also plays a major factor in the characterizations of Ivy Rowe and Florida Grace Shepherd. At the center of rural Appalachian values and beliefs is religion. Since religious values so thoroughly permeate the culture of the Appalachian region, one has to understand the religion of the mountaineers to begin to understand the mountaineers themselves. Because Lee Smith is a product of her mountain heritage, religion has always been an interest to her. For Smith, God and nature were one, and for Smith's female characters, especially Ivy Rowe and Florida Grace Shepherd, their religion, or lack of a traditional one, is an influential

factor in their character.

As a child, Smith found God in her beloved mountains, and once, in her childhood playing, she even gave a tea party for God. Her "whole childhood was really full of God and wonders" (qtd. in Ketchin 45). In her youth Smith said she aspired to sainthood and, being such an avid reader, she devoured books about saints that made her feel trembly inside. She was enthralled with the holiness of Christmas and the pageantry that accompanied the religious celebration: the holly in the church, the candles, the carols and the Christmas pageant acted out again and again until she became too old to participate. Smith reminisces about staring at Missy, her Pekinese, for hours one Christmas Eve hoping to hear God speak through her Missy, because an old granny-woman had told her that God spoke through animals on Christmas Eve ("Lee's Biography").

As a teenager Smith became interested in the more extreme forms of spiritual expression, claiming one time at summer camp that she was absolutely sure she heard God speak to her and saw a vision (Ketchin 46). She attended revivals with her boyfriend, a member of a "wild" church where she was "saved" many times. Smith speaks of this as an intense time when she, as an religiously emotional child, felt the need to rededicate herself and be "saved," much to the embarrassment of her mother, a reserved Methodist.

Although an Episcopalian today, Smith still is intrigued by the more emotional manifestations of religious experience: "I have always been particularly interested in expressions of religious ecstasy, and in those moments when we are truly most 'out of ourselves' and experience the Spirit directly" (*Saving Grace* notes). The Holiness Movement, for example, believes in a literal interpretation of the Bible and uses snake-handling, taking of poison, and other extreme manifestations of faith in their services. Because of her interest in this radical form of Fundamentalism, Smith took the time to read the Bible in her preparation for developing the character of Florida Grace Shepherd in her novel *Saving Grace*. Smith also visited several serpent-handling congregations near her hometown of Grundy, and she became interested in their beliefs again when writing the

introduction to Shelby Lee Adam's book of photographs of people of eastern Kentucky, *Appalachian Portraits*. The handling of serpents and the beliefs of the holiness church are instrumental in her novel *Saving Grace*.

At the outset of religion in the Appalachian mountains, when this mountainous region was being settled, there were the traditional denominations of Presbyterians, Episcopalians, Lutherans and other formally organized religions. These descendants of persecution existed peacefully side by side. With the migration of the Scotch-Irish, Presbyterianism dominated. However, since traditional churches required an educated clergy and centralized organization -- impractical requirements in the wilderness -- locally autonomous, individualistic sects grew up stressing the fundamentals of the faith and depending on local resources and leadership.

As these people migrated deeper and deeper into isolated mountainous regions, they lost their traditional ordained ministers, and men who received the "calling" became self-ordained. It is this religion that has provided meaning to the lives of the branchwater people and has become embedded in their culture to serve a positive function. Religion shaped their lives, but at the same time, the mountaineers shaped their religion (Jones, "Mountain Religion: The Outsider's View" 125).

Because these people live a life where economics, nature and society present the mountaineers with a harsh existence, a belief in another life where they will receive their reward acts as a buffer to their austere world and the social stress to which they are subjected. The branchwater mountaineer is attracted to a religion that preaches a belief that hardships of this world are to be expected and must be endured and that happiness is to be saved for the next, and only for those who have been "saved." There is a clear demarcation between their world and the next. Their religion is a realistic religion that befits the Appalachian people. Loyal Jones explicates this element when he states: "My feeling is that we mountaineers have a pretty realistic view of ourselves. We don't fantasize a lot. . . . We were brought up on the Original Sin. We never believed that man could be perfect. We know that he fails, often, and we are not disillusioned when he does" ("Mountain Religion"27). Their religion stresses the

importance of "getting" religion and being "saved," that is, accepting Jesus as one's personal savior.

In *Appalachian Literature: At Home in This World*, Jim Wayne Miller states that, in southern Appalachia, religion constitutes a single folk religion so otherworldly in outlook as to be an obstacle to progress and social action. Along with its rich story telling tradition, the religious culture also holds family, community and land together over generations. It is a harsh religion, and a metaphor for their anguished struggles with issues of faith and doubt, of religious and aesthetic integrity. It is also a religion that engages in the snake handling, fire eating and other physical and life threatening practices. Rob Stanley Kingston states that the Southern person is a peculiar person and because the culture is under assault, the Southerner has become even more peculiar (qtd. in Covington xiii). The southern Appalachians found prejudice and scorn directed against them. They recoiled, threw up their defenses, and when their own resources failed, they called down the Holy Ghost by putting their hands through fire, drinking poison and handling snakes. Each time the members of the congregation handled the serpents, they struggled with life once more and survived once more the forces that traditionally oppressed mountain people: "It makes you feel different. It's just knowing you got power over them snakes" (qtd. in Covington 43). Scholars have attributed the start of serpent handling in Appalachia to the members of the Church of God Holiness, and their religious heritage can be traced to revivals conducted at Camuslang, Scotland, in the seventeenth century (Kimbaugh 13).

The handling of the serpents is the believers' way of confronting and coping with their very real fears about life and the harshness of reality as experienced in the mountains. It is only with the Holy Ghost that they find the sustenance to survive. Thus, they are assured of their own worth, even if only to God. They have never received this message from the outside world; they know they are only seen as the undesirable poor, the uneducated mountain folk, locked into their little pockets of poverty in a rough, hostile land. The Holy Ghost creates a mood of openness and spontaneity in their serpent-handling service. Their churches

have given these poor and powerless people an arena in which their frustrations and feelings can be acted out. For the time they are in their church, involved in their service and filled with the Holy Ghost, they can experience being powerful. Frustrated by the outside world that does not change and frustrated by the way powerful people of the country conduct transactions, they can nevertheless run their own show in their own church. They can feel important, loved, and powerful.

According to Kingston, snake handling did not originate back in the hills, but started around 1910 when people came down from the hills to discover they were surrounded by a hostile and spiritually dead culture: "Spread the word! We're coming off the mountains! We're starting just a trickle, but soon we'll be a branch. And the branches will run together to form a little river, and the little river will run together to form a great and mighty river, and we'll be swelling and rushing together . . ." (Kingston xiii).

George Went Hensley is credited with spreading snake handling from Florida to the areas of Tennessee, Kentucky, Carolinas, Virginia, Ohio and Indiana around 1912. It is difficult to compile a census or a history of snake handling churches. There are thousands of small Holiness churches in the rural areas of Appalachia, but no one knows the number of their congregations since membership records are not considered important. Although the local church usually has a name that indicates that it belongs to Jesus, they do not belong to any denomination, and they have no written doctrines nor creeds. Each domination has its local autonomy, and different denominations possess different dynamics. Because there are no trained ministers, oral tradition and shared leadership are important. Since Appalachian expressions vary in different localities, scriptural jargon and interpretations vary as well; there is a lack of consistency in responses and, as a result, their collective memory changes (Kimbough 3).

Holiness members live by a strict personal code of morality, and in the holiness churches attainment of personal holiness and being filled with the Spirit are the purposes and goals of life. However, a discrepancy between the congregation's morals and those of their ministers

have given these poor and powerless people an arena in which their frustrations and feelings can be acted out. For the time they are in their church, involved in their service and filled with the Holy Ghost, they can experience being powerful. Frustrated by the outside world that does not change and frustrated by the way powerful people of the country conduct transactions, they can nevertheless run their own show in their own church. They can feel important, loved, and powerful.

According to Kingston, snake handling did not originate back in the hills, but started around 1910 when people came down from the hills to discover they were surrounded by a hostile and spiritually dead culture: "Spread the word! We're coming off the mountains! We're starting just a trickle, but soon we'll be a branch. And the branches will run together to form a little river, and the little river will run together to form a great and mighty river, and we'll be swelling and rushing together . . ." (Kingston xiii).

George Went Hensley is credited with spreading snake handling from Florida to the areas of Tennessee, Kentucky, Carolinas, Virginia, Ohio and Indiana around 1912. It is difficult to compile a census or a history of snake handling churches. There are thousands of small Holiness churches in the rural areas of Appalachia, but no one knows the number of their congregations since membership records are not considered important. Although the local church usually has a name that indicates that it belongs to Jesus, they do not belong to any denomination, and they have no written doctrines nor creeds. Each domination has its local autonomy, and different denominations possess different dynamics. Because there are no trained ministers, oral tradition and shared leadership are important. Since Appalachian expressions vary in different localities, scriptural jargon and interpretations vary as well; there is a lack of consistency in responses and, as a result, their collective memory changes (Kimbough 3).

Holiness members live by a strict personal code of morality, and in the holiness churches attainment of personal holiness and being filled with the Spirit are the purposes and goals of life. However, a discrepancy between the congregation's morals and those of their ministers

often exists. The holiness ministers are often prone to behave immorally, followed by their abandoning their congregation. In *Saving Grace*, Reverend Virgil Shepherd, Grace's father and charismatic preacher and snake handler, lacks integrity and debases his gifts and position to pursue fame and notoriety. When the congregation of his church, *Jesus Name Church of God*, no longer supports Reverend Shepherd and when they have lost their faith in his ability to "save" them, he takes up with drink and loose women.

Snake handlers believe that the Holy Spirit has granted members of their church the power to heal the sick, perform exorcisms, speak in tongues, drink poisons and handle deadly snakes (Kimbrough 14). These basic tenets are based on the Scriptural references: Exodus 4:2-4 in the Old Testament of the Bible and Luke 10:19, John 20:30, Acts 28:3-6, 2 Timothy 2:6 in the New Testament, and the most noted reference Mark 16: 17-18:

> Believers will be given the power to perform miracles: they will drive out demons in my name; they will speak in strange tongues; if they pick up snakes or drink any poison, they will not be harmed; they will place their hands on sick people, and they will get well. (*New English Bible*)

Serpent handling for the mountain people remains a Jesus-commanded "sacrament" where the physical signs communicate spiritual reality. The ritual of serpent handling is the mountaineer's way of celebrating life, death and resurrection. By handling the serpent, they prove to themselves that Jesus has the power to deliver them from death here and now. In the name of Jesus, there is power over death, and the serpent handling ritual has proved this to them repeatedly.

The serpent represents life over death, and although many handlers have been bitten numerous times, contrary to popular belief, few have died. Handlers usually refuse medicine or hospital treatment if they are bitten. They revere and care for their elderly who have usually survived numerous snake bites. If one of the members should die of a bite, it is not that the one who died lacked faith. It is, rather, the congregation's belief that God allowed it to happen to remind the living the risk is totally real. The handling of the serpent is seen as a

supreme act of faith, and it reflects the danger and harshness of the environment in which most of these people live. The serpent is always handled live, and with fear, but it is never harmed nor killed. At the end of the summer months, the serpents are released to return to their natural environment to hibernate for the winter. Each spring different snakes, copperheads and rattlers, are caught for the services.

Minister and members of the snake-handling churches do not force the handling of the serpents on any who do not wish to do so. The snake is seldom handled in private, but most often in the community of believers and during a church service. In a typical serpent handling service, the "true believers" sit together. These are the members who have received the Holy Spirit. They have manifested at least one of the physical signs: they have been bitten by snakes and did not die; they speak in tongues or in ecstatic utterances; they experience the uncontrollable jerking of their bodies; they have drunk the "salvation cocktail," a mixture of strychnine or lye and water, and survive; they have laid their hands on the sick to heal, or they have passed their hands through fire with no effects of burned flesh. The service begins with singing that may last as long as thirty to forty-five minutes. Next, they pray aloud and together for the Holy Ghost to fall upon them during the service. Prayer is followed by singing, testifying and preaching by anyone who feels the spirit of God. Then, when God's spirit is felt within them, serpents are handled. The snakes may be handled while the congregation dances ecstatically, or the serpents may be passed around from believer to believer. There is much calling on the name of Jesus while the serpents are being handled, and once the "sacrament" is over, there is a great prayer of rejoicing and sometimes a dance of thanksgiving that no one was hurt. If someone has been bitten, there is prayer and laying on of hands for his or her recovery.

Although the symbolism of the serpent is found in almost all cultures and religions, everywhere in the world and in all ages, the ancient history and symbolic lore are unknown to the serpent-handlers of Appalachia. Symbolically, the snake suggests the ambiguity of good and evil, sickness and health, life and death, mortality and immortality, chaos and wisdom

(Photiadis 110). Because the serpent lives in the ground but is often found in trees, it conveys the notion of transcendence -- a creature that lives between heaven and earth. Because it sheds its skin, it seems to know the secret of regeneration and eternal life. Although the serpent is found in Genesis as temptation, it is also in Exodus when Moses and Aaron turn their staffs into snakes. Two entwined snakes in the ancient figure of the caduceus symbolize sickness and health and are the emblem of the medical profession. In early Christian art, the serpent is found wound around the cross or lying at its foot. John the Evangelist is often identified with a chalice from which a serpent is departing, a reference to the legend that when he was forced to drink poison, it was drained away in the serpent. Even early Agnostics were said to worship the serpent because it brought knowledge to Adam and Eve. However, for the Holiness congregations, their own tradition of the serpent is rooted in their literal acceptance of what they regard as Jesus's commandment at the conclusion of Mark's gospel. Jesus was the simple carpenter, a person with whom the mountain people can identify. Jesus worked with his hands, and so do they. Jesus was essentially uneducated, and so are they; Jesus came from a small place, he lived much of his life outdoors, he went fishing, he suffered and was finally beaten by the "Power Structure," and so have they been in the past and still are today.

Gaining insight into the centrality of religion in the culture of Appalachia is key to understanding Lee Smith as a writer. Religion for Lee Smith is both a balm and a torment. It has provided her with profound insights, but it has raised provocative questions. At St. Catherine's Episcopal School in Richmond, however, the institutionalized rituals of religion deadened all of the religious passion that Smith had earlier experienced during her childhood and adolescence. The deadening was a welcomed escape for Smith, for she felt her religious passion threatening to consume her. To be true to herself; she knew she either had to give it up or do a great deal more with it (Ketchin 47).

As an adult she pulled back from an all consuming religion: "I still believe in God; I've just never been able to find a way to act on that without it taking me over. It's something I

struggle with all the time" (qtd. in Ketchin 4). Smith still possesses a sense of her religion, and she does not believe religion is dying out, but becoming more influential (Ketchin 54). Always worried about doing the right thing, she describes herself as possessing an old-fashioned morality. Smith expresses the importance of church in the community and feels that the deep religious conflicts she experiences have been beneficial in her artistic visions. She links her religious feeling with her ability to write and create her strong protagonists, her Granny Younger, Ivy Rowe and Florida Grace Shepherd (Ketchin 4).

Smith sees religious faith as a prism through which human experiences can be interpreted. She considers her writing a lifelong search for belief, and she expresses a desire to one day return to the mountains where this expression can be fulfilled: "I still have the sense of it [religious passion], and probably some day I will have to find that again. I have a feeling that it's out there. I associate it with the mountains. At some point I'll have to move back to the mountains . . . At some point I'll have to throw myself into it all again" (qtd. in Ketchin 48). In *Saving Grace*, Lee Smith has Florida Grace traveling back to her childhood mountains of Scrabble Creek to find her spiritual redemption: "This is why I have had to come back now traveling these dusty old back roads one more time. . . . I have entered these dark woods yet again, for I've got to find out . . . (4).

Chapter Four

Smith's Creation of a Passionate Voice Merging Body and Spirit

In a literary work, someone has to relate the events, and according to Kilian Crawford in "Narrative Voice," that someone is known as the narrator or the "author's persona." Since written language is used as the main medium of communication in a novel and since no language is neutral, the diction that an author chooses reflects her attitude on the subject about which she is writing. The character develops from the personality and attitude of the narrator/persona as expressed by the narrator's choices of words and incidents. An author's persona can influence the reader's reaction by helping the reader feel close or distant from the characters. The point of view provides a perspective, a focal point, a way to identify the story teller and to think about how the story unfolds. This point of view provides the mental processes of the narrator: an attitude that underlies the telling. The narrator may also reveal a changed attitude through reflection or maturity.

The author can choose various points of views. The first-person point of view offers a singular perspective, and the narrator may or may not be a participant in the actual story. If the first-person narrator remains outside the perimeters of the story line, she resembles that of a third-person narrator. A first-person narrator displays characteristics of a particular personality and attitude expressed by the way she describes the events of the story. With the first-person narrator, the reader is exposed to only what that character thinks of the events and to what that character's attitudes are. The reader has only the first-person narrator's attitudes and "history" of occurrences. When the reader is allowed into the thoughts and feelings of the other characters, it is only through what the narrator perceives them to be thinking or feeling. Although first-person narration can create a closeness of reader and narrator, it can also lead to a biased view of events of the plot.

When an author chooses the third-person narrator, an outside force without any close identity provides a central consciousness. The author can select a narrator that is omniscient and moves about freely in developing the story, or she can chose one that is limited and

focuses on the movements and particular attitudes of a single character. In an omniscient narrator, the thoughts, attitudes and feelings of major characters of the text are explored, exposed and experienced. With the limited third-person, the author goes inside a character's mind and tells the reader how the character thinks and feels, describing events in terms the character would use. The reader then knows whom to "invest" or identify with in the story. The reader then sees through that character's perspective, but with the filter of the outside narrator.

For Smith a first-person narrative voice is the most comfortable perspective, and she most frequently uses a female narrator. The strategy gives Smith's characters dignity and removes stiffness from their dialogue. It allows her to bring a decency and dignity to her characters, and she makes them as memorable and as credible as any character in English literature. In her interview with Rebecca Smith in the *Southern Quarterly*, Smith justifies her frequent use of a female narrator: "I am a woman and I see from that point of view more easily" (23). If the reader expects a different language from her male characters, it is because the reader has seen the name and expects it to be male influenced. "But I don't have any particular difference in mind in my consideration of the kind of language to use" (23).

In the same interview, Smith reveals that in college she never studied narrative theory nor read the essays of the narrative theorists. Her literary education consisted of reading novels and poems -- looking at text, image patterns, the New Criticism. Smiths admits that she never has studied how to create a certain point of view: "I have absolutely no idea" (26). But in her stories Smith had already discovered the value of her mountains as the place, and now by "pinching" characteristics of real people she knew for her characters, she created her "voice." The voices she had grown up with in Grundy, Virginia, existed in her memory, and they now were born in her characters. Lee Smith believes that every writer has her own strengths and weaknesses: "Hearing the voice and getting it on paper is my strength. I can hear the storyteller telling the story and I try to write it down just like I hear it" (qtd. in Hunt 34). The rhythms of the Virginian Appalachian mountain dialect, that reflected the 17th and

18th century speech of northern England and Scotland, came freely to Smith, and the voices were "easy to do. There's always a human voice that's telling me the story" (qtd. in McDonald 36).

Smith's readers can readily accept her declaration that she is merely the vehicle for her characters' stories when they see how accurately she gives voice to the poverty-stricken daughters, wives and mothers who live in the mountain "hollers" she knew when she was growing up in Grundy. Her empathy and innate ability to recreate the events of these women's lives and the cadence of their voices are factors that help the reader understand and love her female characters, "those spirited women of humble background who are destined to endure difficult and often tragic times" (qtd. in McDonald 36).

In the essay, "Luminous Halos," Virginia Smith confirms Lee Smith's ability to confront seriously a woman's need for a passionate language in an original voice that merges body and spirit, not the spirit of the religious manifestation of the Holy Spirit, but rather the manifestation of a "soul spirit." If Lee Smith has never studied narrative theory, one has to question how she has been so successful in creating her poignant voices of Appalachia. She claims that she focuses on the here and now, and when she is writing she sinks into the time period and setting, allowing the mountains to exert a strong influence on its inhabitants and commanding their loyalties. According to the author, "The mountains totally shape the character" (qtd. in R. Smith19).

Smith involves herself with what she describes as "free writing." She makes notes, perhaps as many as five pads of paper full of notes, about each character and what is going to happen. She then goes back and works the important events into scenes. Smith has admitted to spending two or three months "dreaming" through the novel, making up and discarding (qtd. in R. Smith 20). From Smith's preoccupation and complete immersion in her characters, a voice emerges. Smith knows her characters intimately before she sits down to write the first words of a story. She is the medium through which her characters speak.

She knows exactly what her characters are going to do because, she says that "they tell her" (McDonald 36).

Psychologically, what comprises the voices of her female characters? What constitutes the makeup of this mountaineer woman to whom Smith gives such a merging of body and spirit that a passionate voice emerges? The narrative voice that Lee Smith creates is not one shaped by the gender factor of specific traits of male/female roles. When interviewed by Rebecca Smith, the author was questioned about the creation of her gender roles:

> Rebecca Smith: Kate Millet, in *Sexual Politics*, says that sex/gender is a status category, that relationship between the sexes . . . is a "relationship of dominance and subordination," that sexual dominion is the "most pervasive ideology of our culture" because it is a patriarchy. Do you think about gender roles in these sociological terms . . .
>
> Smith: No, not at all. ("A Conversation with Lee Smith" 20)

Psychologists Carol Gilligan and Judith Bardwick suggest that a woman's "voice" is shaped by a society that rewards men for achievement and women for affiliation and ties with other people. David McClelland theorizes in his article, "Wanted: A New Self-Image for Women," that a female's "voice" is a result of men thinking logically and women thinking dramatically and emotionally (11). However, none of these psychologists' theories account for the "voice" that Smith's heroine uses. Rather than advocating the "voice" theories of Gilligan, Bardwick and McClelland, Smith supports the "voice" theory of Phyllis Rose, a biographer and essayist about women authors. In her book, *Writing of Women*, Rose relates how her theory of "voice" emerged. In her search, Rose read whatever authors she could find on female psychology, Karen Horney, Helene Deutsch, Judith Bardwick. She discovered that women seemed more responsive, expressive, flexible, considerate, iconoclastic and more irreverent than man. Were these traits innately, inevitably, biologically a part of women's nature, or were they characteristic of any group of people privileged in some ways but excluded from power? "Partly with the help of Virginia Woolf in *Three Guineas*, I came to

think that much of what I valued as female nature was not nature at all but a style created by cultural circumstances and historical experiences" (Rose10). For Lee Smith also, her heroine is not determined by her biological nature of being female, but rather a creation molded by history, culture and religious experiences. Smith's Appalachian heroine narrates as a woman who has an affinity with nature and its cyclic patterns of life. She possesses a close mythic relationship to the natural world and expresses a love of family, home and the land. She has a well-defined sense of place in the community and family. In the family the heroine possesses a great deal of authority, responsibility, equality and power; her home cannot survive without her. (Eller, "The Idea of Appalachia").

Although to the "Virginia Slims" woman this may seem oppressive and restrictive, to the wife and mother from the Appalachian mountains, this yields a consciousness of being well-respected, and she experiences fewer identity problems in her branchwater setting than many of her more modern sisters in the towns and cities. The branchwater wife is able to nurture and to sustain the mountain culture, and she finds solace in the tasks and pleasures of her mundane life. When the mountain lifestyle hurls hardships in her path, she is a woman who is more responsive, more resilient and more caring. Smith's heroine might be a naive narrator, speaking in a voice that has less knowledge and experience than that of her author; she may be ignorant of the world beyond the hills and hollows of her native mountains, but she is alive to the complexities of the people and the moral issues that surround her. It was not until *Black Mountain Breakdown*, when Smith began to use the familiar mountain settings and characters who resembled people she had known in Grundy, that a specific "voice" emerged, a voice influenced by the history, culture and religious experiences of the Appalachia region.

Although uncouth and uneducated by other's standards, the Appalachian woman presents herself as a paradox: weak yet strong, victim yet survivor. The heroine triumphs over desperate conditions and hardships even though she appears powerless against the victimizing forces (Higgs 123). Granny Younger, Ivy Rowe and Florida Grace Shepherd are infused with

the characteristics of the early inhabitants who had experienced the history discussed in earlier chapters. Smith's narrative voices are women who seek to understand and receive acknowledgment of their wholeness (Ketchin 4). She elucidates the female psyche in rooted, particular landscapes of the hauntingly beautiful, yet economically ravaged Appalachian mountains. Smith sees the region exerting a strong influence and shaping its inhabitants and commanding their loyalties (Ketchin xiv).

Whether one listens to the "voice" of Granny Younger in *Oral History*," or Ivy Rowe, the heroine in *Fair and Tender Ladies* or Florida Grace Shepherd, the daughter of the itinerant snake-handling preacher in *Saving Grace*, one hears the narrative voice of a heroine speaking with a passionate language that merges the body and spirit in an original voice. Smith examines the complex interconnections that create the narrative voice of her heroines. She does not see the voice emerging as Kate Millet suggests or even Carol Gilligan, but rather Smith agrees with Phyllis Rose, who sees voice as an emergence from the influence of history, culture and religion.

Smith writes novels the way people write in their journals presenting the notion of women and women's freedoms and their ways of evolving. Smith tells a story in the same convoluted way the Southerns do themselves: intimate asides, gossipy digressions, personal references -- all in ordinary conversation. Her fiction is a "rich panoply of fully-lived life, vividly comic and darkly tragic, infused with sensual detail and a deeply spiritual appreciation of the natural world of the Appalachian mountains and hollers" (Ketchin 4). With her heroines Smith imagines a strong female. Lee Smith draws her women so thoroughly that by the time one has finished reading the story, the reader has made two new friends, the fictional character and the author, Lee Smith.

Chapter Five

Granny Younger, Ivy Rowe and Florida Grace Shepherd: Passionate Narrative Voices

Rooted in a particular landscape, the hauntingly beautiful, yet economically ravished Appalachian mountains, Granny Younger, Ivy Rowe and Florida Grace Shepherd share the values formed by their Appalachian history, culture and religion. Desiring to narrate her story, each of the three "fair and tender" heroines endeavors to speak in a unique voice that will resurrect the dignity of the Appalachian woman. Lee Smith provides these uneducated mountain women with such a voice. Each woman, telling her story in a different pattern, speaks as a first person narrator and draws the reader into a confidential relationship. Granny Younger narrates her story as a piece of oral history to a young college student who "invades" Hoot Owl Holler; Ivy Rowe tells her story through letters written to significant people in her life; Florida Grace Shepherd, in a flashback, offers her story of receiving grace and being saved.

Jocelyn Donlon in "Hearing is Believing" states that Southern communities experience a compelling need "to talk, to tell" (16). In *Oral History* Smith has utilized the personal narrative in the form of oral story telling, recounting individual life experiences in the voice of the first person. Although personal narratives belong to the tellers because they recognize in their own stories events that are story-worthy, oral performances or narrations also command real, warm-blooded listeners to receive, value and confirm the experiences of the teller. Storytelling and listening events thrive in the South "because of the self conscious privileging of orality, community, and intimacy in the region: through storytelling, members of a Southern community vigorously reaffirm their connection to one another" (Donlon 16). It is in the Appalachian setting of Hoot Owl Holler that the tale of the Cantrell family unfolds through "memorate," a narrative of personal experience containing a collective belief as its core (Donlon 31).

Oral History focuses on the Cantrell family. The story originates with the handsome young Almarine Cantrell, bewitched by the redheaded Emily and killed in a feud over moonshine, and concludes with the figure of Van Cantrell, the patriarch of this mountain lineage who "does AmWay full time, has three kids, a van and a bass boat and his parents living with them, and he can handle all of it" (3).

The past is presented in a recitation of stories, folklore and legends that pertain to Hoot Owl Holler and the Cantrell family. Jennifer Bingham, a young coed of the1960s, is the interloper in Hoot Owl Holler. A modern day descendant of the Cantrell family, Jennifer returns with tape recorder and microphone to complete a class folklore project, to tape an oral history. She previously has overheard her stepmother deriding the Cantrells' deeply held belief of a resident ghost in Ora Mae and Little Luther's house up in Hoot Owl Holler. Excited by the possibility of tape recording a ghost, she ventures to this isolated hollow and visits for the first time her mountain relatives down in Grassy Creek. The story that retells the Cantrell family history from the early nineteenth century to the 1940s evolves. Although Jennifer returns to her university having collected enough "banging, crashing and wild laughter" of the haunted house on tape to "satisfy even the most hardened cynic in class" (291) and to earn an A in her class, Jennifer ultimately fails in her responsibility of listenership, closing her ears to the story of her own ancestral community, a story so "wild and spirited no tape recorder . . . could hold it down" (Taliaferro 74).

After the reader is introduced to Jennifer and her project, the story flashes back almost one hundred years to the early history of the Cantrell family. This early history is retrieved by the first person narrator, Granny Younger, who evokes the past and symbolizes it in its richest sense. She is the embodiment of Smith's mountain woman, being the last wise woman of the clan. By virtue of age and attendance at most births and deaths in the holler, she knows everyone's story and personal history:

> But I am an old, old woman, and I have traveled a lot in these parts. I have seed

> folks come and I have seed them go. I have cotched more babies than I can name you; I have put the burying quilts around many a soul. I said I know moren you know and mought be I'll tell you moren you want to hear. (28)

She knows the root culture of the mountains, female mysteries of life and the legends of the past. Granny Younger is the repository of the spiritual life, the link to the past and a force of the present. She is the culture's envoy to the future, a culture still in touch with mysterious ways of knowing. "Sometimes I see the future coming out like a picture show, acrost the trail ahead" *(27)*.

Hoot Owl Holler community respects and defers to Granny Younger's knowledge, abilities and special powers. Paula Eckhard sees her "in essence acknowledging the layering of stories and experiences . . . Granny is the vessel into which individual stories are poured, and she gives them final shape and meaning"(122). Granny Younger is representative of those Appalachian women born into the "closely clustered hills of the Appalachians surrounded by symbols from birth" (Ganim 258). The inescapable mountains, the impenetrable terrain with their rocky cliffs and vertical gorges, give their women characters a particularly strong attachment to land and place; this attachment provides them with a foundation -- an identity and a sense of belonging.

Lee Smith presents Granny Younger as a strong female character who embodies the triumph of the human spirit and celebration of the female experience. She forges an important generational connection between the women and offers a revelatory look at the folk practices and mysterious associations with the female experience. Smith's creation of Granny Younger exemplifies what Carole Ganim terms "a kind of identification of body and mind, of nature and spirit, a paradigm of the female union between the concreteness of the physical world and the psychological, philosophical, moral and political expressions of this earth-based experience" (258). Smith's novel reinforces the "orality of the female traditions with the attendant stories, songs and magic that are passed from one generation to the next. . . . Smith searches out the 'foremothers' experience" in the Appalachian culture (Eckard 129).

Granny Younger's distinctive mountain voice guides the readers into the concept of what Appalachia really is and steers them away from converting the region into a stereotype of what they expect it to be.

In her journal, Jennifer Bingham writes down her impressions of Hoot Owl Mountain and the supposedly haunted cabin. She sees it as benign and idyllic: "The picturesque old homeplace sits so high on the hill. . . . Looking out from its porch, one sees the panorama of the whole valley spread out like a picture. . . . Meandering back down the rocky hillside" (8). However, Granny Younger has lived there and now knows a more sinister side, "They is something about Hoot Owl Mountain makes a body lose heart. If you laid down to sleep on that pretty moss, you mought never wake up again in this world. It's no telling where you'd wake up. I keep a buckeye in my pocket traveling Hoot Owl, I get right along" (24). She portrays a folk culture not kept in a museum, but as it is lived.

Although each narrator shares the same community history and participates in the same memory, each character has a different perspective and experience of these things. Smith herself emphasizes that "no matter who's telling the story, it is always the teller's tale, and you never finally know exactly the way it was" (qtd. in Arnold 254). In all, Smith utilizes nine voices, primarily women, in sequence to reveal Hoot Owl Holler's history and the Cantrell family sagas; however, it is Granny Younger's voice that is the seer, the one whose body and spirit merges as she tells her story in her own passionate language. "The way I tell a story is the way I want to, and iffen you mislike it, you don't have to hear it" (28).

Another literary technique Lee Smith has used to present a passionate narrative voice is the epistolaries of her semi-illiterate heroine Ivy Rowe in *Fair and Tender Ladies*. The sharp dichotomy between oral and written communication expressed in *Oral History* is replaced by an oral culture in its transition to its written counterpart.

Although the epistolary novel reached its peak in Europe in the 1700s with such works as Samuel Richard's *Pamela: or Virtue Rewarded*, Tobias Smollett's *The Expedition of Humphry Clinker* and Choderlos De Laclos' *Les Liaisons Dangereuses*, it has gained

popularity again in the past decades as a significant art form in diverse works such as Saul Bellow's *Herzog* and Helen Hanff's *84 Charring Cross Road*. While letter writing is customarily applied as a medium for the educated class and not for a class renowned for oral tradition and infamous for its illiteracy, Smith utilizes the epistle for its "potential as artistic form and narrative vehicle" (Altman 3). This new written art is as rich as the old oral tradition because it keeps the elements of oral narrative – particularly voice.

This epistolary novel chronicles the life of Ivy Rowe, a tenacious mountain woman who remains steadfastly dedicated to the ideal of perseverance, despite the many obstacles thrown in her path. This narrative device, the letter, is also the form of Ivy Rowe's art. Ivy's life as a semi-illiterate, but intelligent, Appalachian woman and the changes that disrupt her environment are depicted through her letter writing. The roughness of Ivy's spelling and the immediacy of Ivy Rowe's voice is pure Appalachia, and Smith strives to preserve the integrity of dialect and idiom. The oral traditions and illiteracy of the region are not replaced or corrected by Ivy's phonetically spelled words:

> Early Cook gave us Babes coffin for free. of coarse we culdn't of payed him a cent if we had to, and they berried Babe as quick as they was able, so quick it did not seem decent somehow. Nobody stood up by the coffin or toled any storeys. They berried Babe next to Daddy at sunset . . . but nobody built him a gravehouse . . . . (71)

A single voice narrates Ivy's life, and the changes that disrupt her environment are depicted through her letters. Ivy's mistakes are not distracting but enlightening. The oral traditions and Ivy's "illiteracy" of her Appalachian mountain region become the essence of her art.

Smith uses the epistolary form as a means for achieving a personal and cultural transformation. *Fair and Tender Ladies* begins with a letter in which the reader recognizes young Ivy's struggle with written literacy. Her first letters are full of colloquial speech and phonetic spelling, "And it ain't nobody up here but usuns" (13), "You can hear his bad hart

for yourself iffen you come over and put your ear up agin his chest" (14), "I love Silvaney the bestest. . . .She is the sweetest, all silverhaired like she was fotched up on the moon" (17). However, the novel ends with an elderly Ivy's prose writing worthy to be called poetry. "The hawks flying round and round, the sky is so blue. I think I can hear the old bell ringing like I rang it to call them home . . . oh I was young then, and I walked in my body like a Queen" (316). Ivy 's letters are a bridge between two divergent forms of artistic expressions: the spoken and the written story.

Ivy is the depiction of an Appalachian woman in transition from oral to written culture. Her letters demonstrate the power of writing to assist culture in transition. They are a communion with her inner self, her spirit revealed on paper. Through her art, she transcends limitations, and her spirit enables her to go beyond the expectations. In *Fair and Tender Ladies*, Smith demonstrates how oral storytelling becomes epistolary writing and then novels. She diagrams the transfer of a culture from a verbal to a written art form (Robbins, Dorothy Dodge 135).

Lee Smith, in an interview with Virginia Smith in the *Southern Review*, affirms that Ivy's passionate voice emerges as a confirmation for the life of women, her mother in particular, who spent their lives doing for others while being ignored by their culture, for women who were not heard when they did speak (784). Lee Smith's desire to create in Ivy Rowe an ordinary woman's everyday life influenced her to produce a sustained and powerful female voice. Diane Manuel calls Ivy's voice "the heart of her work" (26), and W.P. Kinsella sees, "Voice is everything. And what a voice Lee Smith has chosen for *Fair and Tender Ladies* "(9).

Lee Smith wanted to create a heroine who would have a heroic journey, but on the heroine's terms and on her own turf (V. Smith, "An Interview with Lee Smith" 786). Throughout Ivy's life she reaffirms through her letters that she is living her life the way she so desires even to the distress her decisions may bring to others who care deeply for her. When Ivy writes a letter to her old school teacher, Miss Torrington, she affirms, "No I am not going

to be married. I know what you have heard, and it is true. I have a boyfriend Lonnie Rash, but I am not going to be married anyway. And I am having a real bad time right now getting everybody to believe me, and stop bothering me about it" (113). Later when she is married to Oakley Fox and living back on Sugar Creek, she writes a letter to her sister, Beulah, hoping to restore their relationship: "I am writing agin because you did not answer which makes me feel like we parted on a sour note . . .and don't be mad at me or disappointed because I failed to marry Franklin Ranson as you hoped, or make a school teacher either as Mrs. Brown and Miss Torrington wished" (184). When Ivy is old and terminally ill, she writes a letter to her sister Ethel, still professing that life happens on her terms, "I am so happy that you all are coming for a visit. You will find me at home! I do not intend to stay here despite what the doctors are saying, it is no use in it, they know it as well as me. I do not plan to spend my last days laying up in a strange bed" (311). At the very end of the book and in her last letter to Joli, her daughter, she reiterates that her life is on her terms and on her turf: "I know I am worrying you by staying up here [Sugar Creek] by myself. I am sorry for it honey, but I can't do nothing else. It will not do you any good to try and hire anybody either, I will just run them off they way I run Martha, and I love Martha" (312).

Writing *Fair and Tender Ladies* was an emotional act for Lee Smith, a time when her mother was dying from a long battle with emphysema and her own son was very ill. The writing provided an emotional release for Smith and a total escape with Ivy as her role model. No matter what Smith threw in Ivy's path, Ivy would be "real tough." As Smith says, "Anything that I know is in that book . . . Ivy is not in any sense an autobiographical character . . . . She is much stronger . . . less lucky person" (qtd. in Herion-Sarafidis 7). Ivy Rowe embraced life the way it happened to her, pain, dreariness and all.

Although Smith denies that Ivy Rowe is an autobiographical character, she seems to be a reflection of Smith. The name of the river, "the Levisa River where Daddy taken us oncet" (*Fair and Tender Ladies 28),* is the same river that flowed behind Smith's childhood home in Grundy, and Smith has the older Ivy expressing a desire to read "every book that John O'Hara

ever wrote" (277), an author that Smith read exhaustively as an adolescent and without her mother's knowledge. Not only does Ivy Rowe meet the challenges her creator flings in her path, but also she provides the opportunity for Smith to come away from her writing stronger and calmer. Smith sees writing as an extension of herself, an expansion of her personality: "So in Ivy, I think that I was trying to create a role model for myself without knowing it at the time" (qtd. in Herion-Sarafidis 8).

The most forceful element, however, that the reader is made aware of in Ivy's voice is the reflection of Smith's own turmoil, experienced in her search for a religion that would inspire and affect her. *Fair and Tender Ladies* incorporates this struggle for its heroine also. For the people of Sugar Fork of Home Creek on Blue Star Mountain, religion is a serious matter. It is a norm to think about good and evil, salvation, heaven or hell. In a revival in Majestic, Virginia, the Reverend Sam Russell Sage, preaches to the congregation about death, salvation and damnation: "You may think death is far away, ah, but it is right here with us tonight, ah, death waits in the dark . . . oh he is so hungry, ah, . . . oh he is hungry . . . he don't care if your old nor young nor saved nor damned . . . he is out in the darkness, right now, ah, he is peeping in ah!" (99). Caught up in the passion of the revival, Ivy fears, "now will I go to Heaven, or burn in the flames of Hell? I was getting so scarred I could not breth" (99). In an invitation to be "saved," the "people were screaming out and going up right and left" (99). Her husband, Oakley Fox, belongs to the Primitive Baptist Church at Deskins Branch. Although Oakley's church is a more organized denomination than a revival meeting, Ivy is still not attracted to it: "They don't meet but twice a month, and so it goes on forever. They start with singing . . . and then there is preaching and then more singing and then more preaching, it will wear you out" (186).

Ivy struggles with the only religion she's been exposed to, her mountain religion. Smith explains: "It is a religion that Ivy can't accept as being available to her -- religion as it was taught to her in her mountain church was so antiwomen. . . . early primitive churches in the mountains taught salvation by grace alone . . . " (qtd in Ketchin 54). When Ivy is unable to

find a religion that suits her, she makes up her own. Writing becomes for Ivy a saving thing -- a religion by itself. It is only when Ivy is old, and she begins to read the little white Bible that her preacher-brother Garnie dropped when he had climbed the mountain back to Sugar Fork to "save" her, that she finds solace in the Bible, and then only in the writings of Ecclesiastes 3: "To everything there is a season." "I do not like Proverbs. . . . The Proverbs are mean-spirited . . . and the Song of Solomon is dirty. . . But Ecclesiastes is good and makes sense" (302).

The only person Ivy writes letters to concerning her love of Ecclesiastes is her deceased sister, Silvaney, who, as a young woman, had been committed to the Elizabeth Masters Home, a hospital for the mentally insane. Even after learning of Silvaney's death at the hospital, Ivy continues to write her letters. As Ivy explains to Joli, who is concerned about her mother writing letters to a dead Silvaney, "The letters didn't mean anything. Not to the dead girl, Silvaney, of course -- nor to me. Nor had they ever. It was the writing of them, that signified" (313). One wonders why is it just to Silvaney that Ivy expresses her spiritual side. Perhaps the reason lies in the idea that Ivy feels Silvaney a part of her own self. In the very beginning of *Fair and Tender Ladies*, Ivy as young girl, writes a letter to her pen pal, Hanneke, "So Silvaney is bigger and oldern me, but it is like we are the same sometimes it is like we are one" (17). At the very end of her life, and in her last letter to her daughter, Ivy expresses this very same feeling, "Silvaney, you see, was a part of me, my other side, my other half, my heart" (312). And why is Ecclesiastes "good," and "makes sense" for Ivy? It is because Ivy is able see how the different verses relate to her own life. She can see how the Bible speaks to her: "There is a time for war" - "I see him always Oakley always coming out of the black and smoking mine . . . and I see Lonnie the day he left for war" (315); "There is a time to dance" -- "I see Franklin the night we danced and danced in his father's house" (315); "There is a time to be born" -- "When Joli came she was little and perfect, sugar and spice and everything nice"(315). The passage makes sense to Ivy because she has had her time to do what Ecclesiastes has proclaimed. She is able to see religion in her everyday living, and

she is able to see God's word in action within her real world and not confined within the walls of a church structure.

As a prelude to writing *Fair and Tender Ladies*, Lee Smith also read the Bible all the way through. Smith, too, voices her concern about doing the right thing and the difficulty of figuring out in the real world what is right, what is good. Defining it as "old fashioned morality" (qtd. in Ketchin 48), she says, " I still believe in God, I've never been able to find a way to act on that without having it take me over. I'm scared I'll be taken over. I need to find a church somewhere, some way to be able to act on it more without feeling I'll be engulfed" (Ketchin 50). Smith also sees writing as a way to experience an intensity, a way of getting in touch with and staying true to herself: "I do feel, when I am writing at a fever pitch, that intensity you feel when you get saved. There's nothing else that makes you feel like that" (Ketchin 51). She recognizes the importance of the church in the community and feels, as an adult, a need to still find one that does not put down nor stamp out things she believes are basically good. "It`s something I struggle with all the time, Maybe I'll just die struggling with it and never get it reconciled. . . . And she [Ivy] dies without finding God in the traditional sense. And I might too" (Ketchin 51). In February of 1998, while corresponding with Smith's home page on the Internet, Mona Sinquefield provided the information that Lee Smith is now an Episcopalian.

In Lee Smith's ninth novel, *Saving Grace*, her protagonist Florida Grace Shepherd struggles with her religious convictions also. Smith admits that *Saving Grace* is a perfect example of a story and voice that possessed her much as Ivy Rowe in *Fair and Tender Ladies*. After attending the annual Flannery O'Connor Festival in Milledgeville, Georgia, Smith returned home to Chapel Hill, where she reread all the O'Connor works she could find. After submerging herself in a torrent of writing, she delivered the manuscript of *Saving Grace* to Putnam two years early. Smith concedes that Grace had been "speaking" to her for a while: "I got taken over by Grace. It was the most compelling narrative that had ever come my way" (qtd. in McDonald 37).

Because *Saving Grace* uses Florida Grace as a first person narrator, other characters in the book exist only in Grace's experiences. They are introduced as they enter Florida Grace's world and disappear as she moves on; nobody exists outside of Grace's experiences. They recur only in Grace's memory or in a reunion. There is no omniscient narrator and no dispassionate narrative voice. The personal narrative voice that Smith endows Grace with creates a sensation of intimacy with the reader so that Grace also speaks directly to her. Grace's belief in a personal God is essential, and it allows her to achieve "greatness" through a spiritual redemption here on earth with the reward being eternal salvation with Jesus in heaven. For Florida Grace Shepherd, her salvation does not come through the snake handling redemption of her father's church, *The Jesus Name Church of God*, but through her own recognition of what is true to her and what is her "saving grace."

Saving Grace is the story of Florida Grace Shepherd, "Florida for the state I was born in, Grace for the grace of God" (3), who pours out her story in a voice as "clear and sweet as mountain water" (Amazon.com Booklist). The novel incorporates snake handling, a prelude to religious ecstasy, as the preponderate religious belief of the people of Scrabble Creek, North Carolina.

Florida Grace is the eleventh child of Virgil Shepherd, a charismatic, part religious and part con man who is an itinerant serpent-handling preacher, and Fannie Flowers Shepherd, her devout, long suffering mother. Florida Grace's wide-eyed confession begins on the fringes of Christianity. It is a straightforward, amiable narrative of Christian faith and redemption. It is a cautionary tale of innocence, disbelief, debauchery, and witness. The novel is Florida Grace's personal odyssey of a little holiness girl who hates Jesus because he "made us take up traveling in His name, living with strangers and in tents and old school buses" (4). She longs to live in a brick house and to have a Barbie doll. Her preacher father is an illiterate follower of that mountain religion whose congregations demonstrate their faith by handling snakes, drinking strychnine and listening to voices that guide them.

The reader follows Grace from childhood into middle age, through a variety of southern towns, churches and lovers. The story begins with the family setting up life in Scrabble Creek, North Carolina, where Grace becomes aware of some of the modern amenities of the 1950s. Her father, however, continues to live in a world wholly determined by Divine Providence, and he believes living an austere life is just one more test of faith. The Reverend Shepherd turns a blind eye to the family's poverty and suffering with faith that God would provide: " 'I cannot think of no better plan for them than to foller the plan of God,' Daddy said. 'These children may not have new clothes on their back nor new shoes on their feet, but they are going to Heaven with me. These children are on the road to salvation' " (9). Even Grace's mother is mesmerized by her husband's trust in the providence of the Lord, " 'You've got to trust more in Jesus, Gracie. You've got to give over to Him. Hasn't He always took good care of us? The Lord will provide' " (3).

Although Grace is awed by her father when the "anointing" is on him in *The Jesus Name Church of God* and he is handling rattlesnakes, drinking poison, healing, saving souls, and apparently on one occasion raising one of the members of his congregation from the dead, Grace herself is deeply skeptical of her father's faith. There is a painful disparity between what she is told is "saving grace" and what she herself feels about salvation, "But I had never been anointed, and prayed that I never would be" (35). Everything Grace experiences, her sense of who she is, her sexuality, her family loyalties and her all-exhausting struggle with the role of religion in her life is measured against her father's intense spirituality. Grace is cut off not only from Jesus, but also from herself. Every decision she makes, everything she yearns for becomes a betrayal, an exile she suffers. This is the religious culture in which Lee Smith places Florida Grace Shepherd, and the one force that acts as her impetus for survival is her complex cultural legacy. However, for Florida Grace, it is the breaking out of this pattern that not only brings about her estrangement from her family, but also brings about her salvation.

In her book *Reviving Ophelia*, Mary Pipher explains that adolescence is a time when a girl searches actively for meaning and order in the universe. It is a time of religious crisis and

the exploration of universal questions. "What happens after death?" "What is the purpose of sacrifice?" Although the adolescent girl is deeply religious, she may also experience a crisis in her faith. However, a girl who stays true to herself, as certainly Florida Grace does, manages to find a respect for the part of herself that is spiritual; she will make choices that will improve her true self and her own self-image will be enhanced (72-3).

Florida Grace narrates her story in a flashback when she, a middle-aged grandmother and a "fallen" woman, returns to Scrabble Creek. She promises to tell the reader, "I mean to tell my story, and I mean to tell the truth. I am a believer in the Word, and I am not going to flinch from telling it, not even the terrible things, not even the part about Lamar nor how Mama died nor the true nature of Travis Word nor what transpired between me and Randy Newhouse" (4). Then unfolds, for the reader, a tale of incest, suicide, betrayal, infidelity and despairing rage against God.

It is not until the end of the novel that Grace, a 38 year old grandmother and twice divorced woman, finally reconciles herself to her long dormant faith. It begins with a baby's cry that Grace hears in the parking lot of Uncle Slidell's Diner, "I stopped dead in my tracks as suddenly I heard it, very faint - a baby's cry. . . . If you have ever been a mother, you cannot stand to hear such a cry" (247). Not being able to locate the baby's cry, Grace follows the crying into Uncle Slidell's Christian Fun Golf Course, a Christian-theme miniature-golf course. It is at Hole Number 10, "The First Christmas," Florida Grace Shepherd hears the baby Jesus cry out to her: "The baby cried like he was hungry or like his little heart would break. . . . Dirty snow dripped into His face as He lay in Mary's lap, but the glory of God shone all around as He held out his chubby little arms to me, still crying" (248).

Her faith now alive, Grace leaves Creekside Green and returns to Piney Ridge, the home of Travis Word, her first husband. As she secretly watches Travis return home from work, she discovers she has the gift of second sight:

> It was given to me to see Travis Word's whole life as days of duty stretching in a long unbroken line into the future, to that evil day when he would end it abruptly

> and for all time, end it himself in that very toolhouse by putting his staple gun to his head, oh it would be awful. I saw it as clear as anything. The gift of discernment is a gift you do not want to have. (263)

Knowing she can never go back to her old way of life with Travis Word, Grace journeys on to her childhood home in Scrabble Creek, North Carolina. It is here she reunites with the serpent-handling congregations her father originally founded, "That baby is crying again, you know I left him outside crying in the dirty snow but I am coming now, I really am coming Jesus"(272). In spite of her father's lack of integrity -- "Honey, it was a dark day when we fell in with him . . . I know he was your daddy, but he was a bad 'un" (256) -- and in spite of his misuse of his gifts and position in searching for fame and notoriety -- "Why, he took advantage of everybody around here, not to mention what he did to your mother, poor sweet thing" (256) -- God still uses Reverend Shepherd as a vessel of and conduit for grace - Florida Grace Shepherd's "saving grace."

Allowing her character Florida Grace Shepherd to speak for herself, Smith does not give Grace access to a handbook of pat answers she can pick up and apply. Gregory Blake Smith in "The Snakes of God," from *The New York Times Book Review* sees the voice of Grace as compelling and supple (9). The critic continues, "As any reader of *Oral History* or *Fair and Tender Ladies* knows, Ms. Smith possesses a fine talent for creating narrative voices, whether the ungrammatical eloquence of a hill-country healer or the educated affectations of a Richmond gentleman, Grace speaks to the reader with an innocence that is all the more effective for her childlike insistence on her own evil" (9). The character of Florida Grace Shepherd is one of the most complete protagonists in contemporary literature, one who remains entirely sympathetic. Vulnerable but gritty, naive but wise beyond her years, Florida Grace tackles the question of belief head on and examines her religious faith in its most radical manifestation: a fundamental holiness religion. Florida Grace Shepherd, though unsaved in the eyes of her father, is a believer and in the end she comes to a better understanding of what grace is and how it is used in being "saved."

Grace wrestles with life, family and spiritual salvation. Smith has placed her heroine in a world populated by very real, very flawed people, and treats her character with more sympathy than theological vigor. Smith has clothed the spirit with the flesh, and Grace in remaining true to herself, is a truly saved soul. Richard Vernon finds *Saving Grace* to be autobiographical and this is a testament to its strength, "It is a world in which grace is strangely abundant, and reconciliation, if not redemption, a genuine possibility. Lee Smith is a vital force and great talent in her own right" ("In the Real World of Flawed People" *Sojourners on Line*). *The Atlanta Journal and Constitution* sees *Saving Grace* as a novel of the spirit in the language of the flesh (forward *Saving Grace*).

In Ketchin's *The Christ-Haunted Landscape*, Lee Smith speaks of a spiritual encounter as a principal factor in her decision to write about religion. "And about religion. I mean, Jesus has actually spoken to me. It happened to me. When I was young, about thirteen. I heard voice and it said, 'Lee.' I think that's why I must write about it [religion], we all must write about it" (53).

Chapter Six

Fulfillment of Smith's Objectives

Inspired by William Faulkner, Flannery O'Connor, Eudora Welty, and most especially James Stills, Lee Smith creates and presents to her reading audience, characters who merge body and spirit to speak in a passionate narrative voice. Smith's characters have confronted the hardships and travesties their ways of life have thrown in their paths, and, molded by their history, culture and religious experiences, they have emerged as truly unique Appalachian heroines. Her characters speak in a language that possesses the rhythm of their native dialect; the voices resonate with dialogue that is idiomatic, highly imaginative and rich with metaphors. Smith's heroines are eccentric, but always believable; their dimensions emanate from her ability to slip into other people's hearts and minds, to provide the reader with something to love in each unique creative character. The weakness and vulnerability of her characters make them seem realistic, and everyone of her characters is the kind of person one can still meet in southern Appalachia today (McDonald 38).

Smith desires to counteract the degradation of the "Appalachian mountain concept" by giving her characters dignity and individuality. The heroines suffer hardships, but Smith does not allow her protagonists to dwell on the deprivations. Although her women are not the belles of the old South, they still celebrate the important things of life: family and community. The voices that emerge in Granny Younger, Ivy Rowe and Florida Grace Shepherd validate the women whose lives have been spent doing for others -- accomplishing Smith's objective. Smith's perceptions about the life, feelings and untapped potential of her characters leave the reader with a stronger understanding of the hard lives these Appalachian mountain heroines lived. Their history, culture and spiritual experiences influence what they have to say to the world. With her first person narrator, Smith allows Granny Younger, Ivy Rowe and Florida Grace Shepherd to reveal the "voice that had been in her head and in her ears and on the tip of her tongue for years" (McDonald 33).

The heroines' lyrics tell the reader how their history, culture and religious experiences of the mountains have shaped them. Their voices are a blending of their body and spirit, and the passions their voices now possess are ones that are guaranteed to be heard and cherished as truly significant and worthy of respect. Over the mountain tops, through the wooded hollows and deep into the rocky, vertical crevices, voices of these tenacious Appalachian mountain women ring out in a passionate song. Women who have spent their lives doing so much for others will now be heard and remembered.

Works Cited

Altman, Janet. *Epistolary: Approaches to A Form.* Columbus: UP of Ohio State, 1982.

Amazon.com: Books, Music & More! *Devil's Dream* Review. *Kirkus Review.* 1 Apr. 1992. http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/ASIN/0345382919/qid=905175219/sr=1-19/002-1843.

- - - . *Saving Grace* Review. *Booklist.* 1 Apr. 1995. http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/ASIN/0345403339/qid=905175219/sr=1-57/002-1843.

Arnold, Edwin. "An Interview with Lee Smith." *Appalachian Journal* 11:3 (Spring 1984): 240-254.

Buchanan County Community Arts. "In Her Own Words." http://www.beca.org/fotl/leesmith/154.html (Dec 1997).

- - - . "Latest Release." http://www.beca.org/fotl/leesmith/154.html (Dec 1997).

- - - . "Lee's Biography." http://www.beca.org/fotl/leesmith/154.html (Dec 1997).

Burton, Thomas. *Serpent Handling Believers.* Knoxville: U of Tennessee P., 1993.

Busch, Frederick. "Voice of Hoot Owl Holler." Rev. *Oral History*, by Lee Smith. *New York Times Book Review* 10 July 1983:15.

Canin, Ethan. "The Courage of Their Foolishness." Rev. of *Cakewalk*, by Lee Smith. *New York Times Book Review* 11 Feb. 1990: 11.

Card, Orson Scott. *Characters and Viewpoints.* Cincinnati: Writer's Digest. 1988.

Covington, Dennis. *Salvation on Sand Mountain.* Reading: Addison-Wesley, 1995.

Dale, Corrine. "The Power of Language in Lee Smith's *Oral History.*" *Southern Quarterly* 28:2 (1990): 21-34.

Donlon, Jocelyn Hazelwood. "Hearing is Believing: Southern Racial Communities and Strategies of Story-listening in Gloria Naylor and Lee Smith." *Twentieth Century Literature.* 41 (22 Mar. 1995): 16-36.

Eckard, Paula Gallant. "The Prismatic Past in *Oral History* and *Mama Day*." *Melus* 20 (01Sept. 1995): 121-136.

Eller, Ronald. "Appalachia in the America Revolution." History 580 Lecture Notes. http:www.uky.edu/RGS/AppalCenter/ellerfull.htm (May 1998).

- - - . "Civil War and Reconstruction in Appalachia." History 580 Lecture Notes. http://www.uky.edu/RGS/AppalCenter/ellerfull. htm (May 1998).

- - - . "The Depression in Appalachia." History 580 Lecture Notes. http://www.uky.edu/RGS/AppalCenter/ellerfull.htm (May 1998).

- - - . "The Idea of Appalachia." History 580 Lecture Notes. http://ww.uky.edu/RGS/AppalCenter/ellerfull.htm (May 1998).

Ganim, Carole. "Herself: Woman and Place in Appalachian Literature." *Appalachian Journal*. 13 (1986): 258-274.

Gilligan, Carol. *In A Different Voice*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1982.

Green, Carol Hurd, and Mary Grimby Mason, eds. *American Women Writers: From Colonial Times to the Present*. Vol. 5. New York: Continuum, 1994.

Herion-Sarafidis, Elisabeth. "Interview with Lee Smith." *Southern Quarterly*. 32:2 (Winter 1994): 7-18.

Higgs, Robert, Ambrose Manning, Jim Wayne Miller, eds. *Appalachia Inside Out*. Knoxville: U of Tennessee P, 1995.

Hill, Dorothy Combs. "An Interview with Lee Smith." *The Southern Quarterly*. 28:2 (Winter 1990): 5-19.

Holliday, Robert Kelvin. *Tests of Faith*. Beckley: Fayette Tribune, 1996.

Hunt, V. 'Interview with Lee Smith." *Southern Quarterly* 32:2 (Winter1994): 31-36.

Jones, Loyal. "Appalachian Values." *Appalachian Journal* 1 (Autumn1972): 125-128.

- - - . Mountain Religion: The Outsider's View" *Mountain Review*. 2:3 (May1976): 43-46.

Kephart, Horace. *Our Southern Highlanders: A Narrative of Adventure in the Southern Appalachians and a Study Among the Mountaineers.* Knoxville: U of Tennessee P, 1977.

Ketchin, Susan. *The Christ-Haunted Landscape.* Jackson: UP of Mississippi, 1994.

Kilian, Crawford. "Narrative Voice." 1997. Crawford_Kilian@mindlink.bc.ca (7 January 1998).

Kimbrough, David L. *Taking Up Serpents.* Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 1995.

Kinsella, W.P. "Left Behind on Blue Star Mountain." Rev. of *Fair and Tender Ladies*, by Lee Smith. *New York Times Book Review.* 18 Sept. 1988: 9.

"Latest Release -- *News of the Spirit.*" Rev. of "*News of the Spirit,*" by Lee Smith. maint. *Buchanan Community Arts.* http://www.beca.org/fotl/leesmith/154.html (Dec. 1997).

MacDonald, D.R. "All the Lonely People." Rev. of *Me and My Baby View the Eclipse*, by Lee Smith. *Book World: The Washington Post* XX .9 (4 Mar. 1990): 9.

MacKethan, Lucinda H. "Artists and Beauticians: Balance in Lee Smith's Fiction." *The Southern Literary Journal* XV.1 (Fall 1982): 3-14.

Manuel, Diane. "Voices from Virginia's Heartland." Rev. of *Fair and Tender Ladies*, by Lee Smith. *Christian Science Monitor* 25 Nov. 1988: 26.

Maurer, B.B., ed. *Mountain Heritage.* Parsons: McClain, 1980.

McCauley, Deborah Vansau. *Appalachian Mountain Religion.* Chicago: U. of Illinois P, 1995.

- - - . "The Study of Appalachian Mountain Religion." *Appalachian Journal* 12.4 (Winter 1989): 138-152.

McClelland, David C. *Power: The Inner Experience.* New York: Irvington, 1975.

- - - . "Wanted A New Self-Image for Women." in Robert J. Liton, ed., *The Woman in America.* Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1965.

McDonald, Jeanne. "Lee Smith at Home in Appalachia." *Poets and Writers Magazine* November/December 1977: 32-41.

Miller, Danny L. *Wingless Flight*. Bowling Green: Bowling Green State U. Popular Press, 1996.

Otto, John Solomon. "Reconsidering the Southern 'Hillbilly.' " *Appalachian Journal* 12.4 (Summer 1985): 324-330.

Owsley, Frank. "Plain Folk and Their Role in Southern History." *The South: Old and New Frontiers*. ed. Harriet C. Owsley. Athens: U. of Georgia P, 1969. 36.

Photiadis, John D., ed. *Religion in Appalachia*. Morgantown: WVU, 1978.

Pipher, Mary. *Reviving Ophelia*. New York: Ballantine, 1994.

Plumley, William et al, eds. *Things Appalachian*. West Virginia: Morris Harvey College, 1976.

Pollitt, Katha. "Southern Stories." Rev. of *Cakewalk*, by Lee Smith. *New York Times Book Review* 22 Nov. 1981: 24.

Robbins, Dorothy Dodge. "Personal and Cultural Transformation: Letter Writing in Lee Smith's *Fair and Tender Ladies*. (Women Writers: Margaret Atwood, A.S. Byatt, Rosellen Brown, Lee Smith, Wanda Tinasky)." *Critique* 38 (01 Jan. 1997): 135-145.

Robbins, Kenn. Rev. of *Me and My Baby View the Eclipse*, by Lee Smith. *Bloomsbury Review* 11.2 (Mar. 1991): 13.

Rose, Phyllis. *Writing of Women*. Middletown: Wesleyan UP, 1985.

Sinquefield, Mona. "Lee Smith Reply." Personal e-mail (13 Feb. 98).

Smith, Gregory Blake. "The Snakes of God." Rev. of *Saving Grace*, by Lee Smith. *New York Times Book Review* 09 July 1995: 9.

Smith, Lee. "A Conversation with Lee Smith." Interview with Rebecca Smith. *Southern Quarterly* 32:2 (Winter 1994): 19-29.

- - - . *Cakewalk*. New York: Putnam, 1981.

- - - . "Christmas Memories." maint. *Buchanan County Community Arts*. http://www.beca.org/fotl/leesmith/154.html (Dec. 1997).

- - - . *Devil's Dream*. New York: Putman, 1992.

- - - . *Fair and Tender Ladies*. New York: Putnam, 1988.

- - - . *Family Linen*. New York: Putnam, 1985.

- - - . *Fancy Strut*. New York: Harper and Row, 1973.

- - - . "Far from the White Columns and Marble Generals." maint. *Buchanan County Community Arts*. http://www.beca.org/fotl/leesmith/154.html (Dec. 1997).

- - - . Interview with Virginia Smith. *Southern Quarterly* 26:4 (Fall 1990): 784-795.

- - - . *The Last Day the Dogbushes Bloomed*. New York: Harper and Row, 1968.

- - - . *Me and My Baby View the Eclipse*. New York: Putnam, 1990.

- - - . Narrative. *Appalachian Portrait*. by Shelby Lee Adams. Jackson: U. of Mississippi, 1993.

- - - . *Oral History*. New York: Putnam, 1983.

- - - . *Saving Grace*. New York: Ballantine, 1995.

- - - . "Southern Exposures." maint. *Buchanan County Community Arts*. http://www.beca.org/fotl/leesmith/154.html (Dec. 1997).

- - - . "The Springs of My Own Language." maint. *Buchanan County Community Arts*. http://www.beca.org/fotl/leesmith/154.html (Dec. 1997).

- - - . "Terrain of the Heart." maint. *Buchanan County Community Arts*. http://www.beca.org/fotl/leesmith/154html (Dec. 1997).

Smith, Rebecca. "A Conversation with Lee Smith." *Southern Quarterly* 32.2 (Winter 1994): 19-29.

Smith, Virginia. Interview in *Southern Quarterly* 26.4 (Fall 1990): 784-795.

Smith, Virginia. "Luminous Halos and Lawn Chairs: Lee Smith's *Me and My Baby View the Eclipse*." *The Southern Review* 27.2 (Apr. 1991): 479-485.

Taliaferro, Frances. "Review of *Oral History*." *Harpers* July 10, 1983: 74-75.

Tilton, Jeff Todd. *Powerhouse for God*. Austin: U of Texas P, 1988.

Williams, Cratis. "Who Are the Southern Mountaineers." *Appalachian Journal* 1 (Autumn 1972): 48-55.