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**“It Was The Writing of Them, That Signified”: Reshaping Reader
Perceptions of Appalachian and Disabled Identities
in Lee Smith’s *Fair and Tender Ladies***

Senior Paper

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By *DANA SCHLANGER*

Thesis Director
DR. EVAN GURNEY

Thesis Advisor
DR. ERICA ABRAMS LOCKLEAR

A seventy-five cent packet of letters that Lee Smith discovered at a flea market in Greensboro, North Carolina was the seed for her 1988 novel *Fair and Tender Ladies*. The packet, Smith tells, contained a woman's entire lifetime of letters. In a 1989 interview with Virginia A. Smith, Lee Smith remarks, "I just got real interested in the idea of somebody's letters being a sort of work of art. You know, letters over their whole lifetime. Is it art because there's a critic somewhere who perceives it as art? Or is it art because it just is?" (V. Smith 62-63). This theme manifests prominently throughout *Fair and Tender Ladies*, in which the artistry of protagonist Ivy Rowe's letters becomes at times indistinguishable from the communicative necessity the letters fulfill. An epistolary novel set in Southern Appalachia, the novel follows the life of Ivy Rowe from age twelve until her death, encompassing letters only Ivy has penned to others. Through these letters readers follow Ivy's journey from a young girl just learning to read and write, through her negotiations of her Appalachian identity, her early experiences of death and loss, and her navigation through colonial forces that impact her physical and cultural landscape.

It is significant that readers witness Ivy's story through the epistolary form that Smith provides. Scholar Sara Webb-Sunderhaus notes that for her own Appalachian mother, "Writing was how she maintained relationships with the people she loved" (185). *Fair and Tender Ladies* demonstrates this trend clearly and in fact is the singular vehicle through which we as readers witness Ivy's maintenance of her relationships—with characters both dead and alive. As Webb-Sunderhaus elaborates, "There are many different types of texts; while not all are valued widely, all are valuable to the people who use them" (185). Accordingly, just as the letters are valuable to Ivy for communication, self-expression, and self-exploration, the epistolary form is likewise imperative in guiding reader interpretation. According to Ivy, her letters have no audience

besides their addressees, and she is therefore free to express herself in a most intimate fashion (although, as I will address, there are a selection of Ivy's letters that are read by others without her knowledge and consent). Thus, the letters, which create intimacy between Ivy and her addressees, also create intimacy between Ivy and readers themselves. This intimacy is also fostered as a result of Smith's use of dramatic irony. Early in the text, Ivy often leads readers to certain understanding and truths without having such awareness or understandings herself. Therefore, adult readers who have perspective to understand such revelations that Ivy does not yet comprehend likely begin to develop an empathetic understanding towards Ivy. Smith entrusts readers with access to Ivy's most vulnerable thoughts and consequently embeds within readers the responsibilities that come with being witness to her story: letters, Smith demonstrates, are texts worthy of interpretation and analysis.

The epistolary form is crucial to our interpretation of the novel in numerous ways. It not only refutes common narratives of Appalachian illiteracy, but it also makes readers privy to an Appalachian character's reactions to and understandings of colonial activity that they could not otherwise access. Thus, the epistolary form enables readers to reconceptualize dominant narratives of Appalachian dependency. An important component of that reconceptualization hinges upon the realization that colonial forces essentially defined—and often still define—Appalachia as disabled. These forces were typically Northern, and their conceptions of proper literacy and culture sometimes differed dramatically from what they found in the Mountain South. A careful investigation of Ivy's navigation through these systems reveals to readers how such judgments have served to justify Appalachian colonialism. Instead of seeing extraction, both of natural and cultural resources, as a positive thing, Smith's epistolary form forces readers

to confront the reality of colonial forces through Ivy's experiences and on Ivy's terms: Ivy is no longer a theory or a stereotype of Appalachia, she is a real person.

In order to examine Smith's work through the lenses of post-colonialism and disability studies, I will provide definitions for major terms that I will frequently use throughout this project. Appalachia's colonial period existed alongside the Progressive Era, in which, during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, patriotism was emphasized in an effort of civilian betterment. Some particular aims of civilian betterment included improved sanitation, diet, literacy, and religion, and these efforts were largely carried out by Progressive Era missionaries. I will refer to colonialism by using an amalgamation of definitions that are discussed within Helen Matthews Lewis's seminal collection, *Colonialism in Modern America: The Appalachian Case* (1978). In one description, Lewis writes that Appalachian colonialism was a "process through which dominant outside industrial interests establish[ed] control, exploit[ed] the region, and maintain[ed] their domination and subjugation of the region" (2). This system, she continues, "place[d] [Appalachian people] ... in situations of dependency and powerlessness" (4). Lewis's collection functions to critique the Culture of Poverty model, which, at the time of the text's publication, was "perhaps the most widely assumed model applied to Appalachia" in addressing the region's poverty (Lewis and Knipe 13). Lewis and Knipe problematize this model, asserting that its implementers "focus on the values of the Appalachian and say that these must be changed" and "often disregard the roots of such values" (15). The alternative approach posited in the collection is the Colonialism model, which, as Roger Lesser explains, redirects attention from "Appalachian character" to the "exploitative conditions institutionalized in the region" (qtd. in Lewis 15). We see both of these models at work throughout *Fair and Tender Ladies*.

In applying the lens of disability studies to Appalachian colonialism, I make use of Dr. Jay Dolmage's groundbreaking work *Disability Rhetoric* (2014). Dolmage quotes Douglas Baynton, who writes that "disability has functioned historically to justify inequality for disabled people themselves, but it has also done so for women and minority groups.... [T]he *concept* of disability has been used to justify discrimination against other groups by attributing disability to them" (26). Baynton's premise is foundational to my argument as I discuss the ways in which the concept of disability was attributed to Appalachia to justify colonial activity, and specifically the ways that colonists and missionaries treated and perceived Ivy, Silvaney, and Appalachians in *Fair and Tender Ladies*.

I will begin to delve into Smith's work by first discussing Ivy's negotiations with various missionary forces that enter her life. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, dichotomous perceptions of Appalachia emerged which represented the region as denigrated on the one hand and romanticized on the other. Local Colorists, whose writing was largely responsible for generating these perceptions, comprised of writers who furnished quasi-ethnographic literature about the region, slowly constructed and manipulated an image of Appalachia that was soon to take hold in national understandings of the region, and which was thus instrumental in fueling missionary activity in Appalachia. Will Wallace Harney (1832-1912), considered to be the first Local Color writer of Southern Appalachia, contributed foundational ideologies to the dichotomous perceptions of Appalachia as backwards, ignorant, and stuck in time, while simultaneously existing as a place and people to be romanticized. In his 1873 piece "A Strange Land and Peculiar People," Harney writes, "In addition to the geological and botanical curiosities the mountains afford, my companion had been moved alternately to tears and smiles by the scenes and people we met—their quaint speech and patient poverty"

(282). He further romanticizes the landscape as he attests, “Over all this sweet rural scene of mountain, valley, river and farm, and over the picturesque camp, with stock, tent and wagons, now brightened by the grace of a young girl, the twilight lingers like love over a home” (279). The perceptions of Appalachia as possessing “patient poverty” within a “picturesque” landscape persist throughout the time period in which Smith’s novel takes place (1900 to the mid 1970s), and even continue on into today. In *Fair and Tender Ladies*, Smith portrays Harney’s dichotomous representation of Appalachia as denigrated and romanticized through the missionary characters of Mrs. Brown and Mister Brown respectively: Mrs. Brown sees the region as blighted, whereas her husband seems mesmerized by its quaintness.

William Goodell Frost (1854-1938), who was the third president of Berea College and came from a family with a strong missionary background, also contributed significantly to negative, stereotypical images of Appalachia that still persist today. Presented in the fashion of early ethnography, Frost, in his 1899 piece “Our Contemporary Ancestors in the Southern Mountains,” constructs what would come to be foundational Progressive Era ideologies that depicted Appalachia as a backwards and stagnant society requiring the rescue and intervention of modernized outsiders. He specifically outlines the dichotomy between “mountain whites” and “Northern whites,” the former requiring “the intervention of intelligent, patriotic assistance” of the latter, for which “there could not be a clearer call” (Frost 1, 16). Frost evidences Appalachia’s need for intervention with the assertion that Appalachia is “an anachronism” and a relic of “the eighteenth century” (1). Further, he even indicates that “Appalachian America may be useful as furnishing a fixed point which enables us to measure the progress of the moving world!” (8). Frost’s contribution to the image of Appalachia as an utterly stagnant society was foundational in endorsing and justifying missionary work that entered the region. Specifically, as

Frost outlined a dichotomy between modernized Northerners and pitifully antiquated Southern Appalachians, Northern missionary work in the region came to be seen as appropriate. Ivy confronts a variety of characters that materialize in her Appalachian landscape under missionary motives, including but not limited to Mrs. and Mister Brown, as well as Miss Torrington.

Ivy conveys in her life-long narrative, an array of things, both cultural and physical, which are sometimes stolen and sometimes erased from her Appalachian landscape. We first witness an instance of physical and cultural theft by an outsider when Mrs. Brown, Ivy's missionary teacher, stops Ivy from sending a letter to a prospective Dutch pen pal, Hanneke, because she deems the letter "too long and not appropriate"¹ (Smith 14). Ivy, who has written the letter under Mrs. Brown's instructions, does not understand Mrs. Brown's censure of her opening letter and admits to Mrs. Brown, "I did not know you would read my letter either" (Smith 14-15). However, we can understand Mrs. Brown's perception when we consider it through the lenses of missionary and colonialist criticism. According to Mrs. Brown, the frank expression of Ivy's letter, much of which provides clear markers of poverty, would perpetuate negative stereotypes and elements of Appalachian identity that Mrs. Brown, as a missionary, aspires to reform and correct. Through Smith's employment of dramatic irony in this passage, she demonstrates that Ivy, however, is not yet aware of outsiders' negative perceptions of Appalachia.

In this letter, Ivy includes descriptions of her Appalachian "Chores" and "Culture too," and provides details of many elements of her life on the farm at Sugar Fork (Smith 9). She goes on to describe her immediate family members, including a sort of origin story of her parents' marriage and sketches of her siblings. One prominent marker of poverty that Ivy supplies is her family's use and consumption of corn in food items and toys:

¹ Early in the novel "misspellings" occur frequently as Ivy learns to master conventional spelling and writing standards.

We grow nearabout all we eat, and mostly the corn wich will work you to death. So I cant go to school sometimes in the spring when we plant it or later on you have got to get out there and hoe it to beat the band, and the side of Blue Star Mountain is so steep youve got to hill it good or it wont grow atall. (Smith 9)

Ivy also tells of making “corncob people” for playing “Town” (Smith 12, 11). Elizabeth Engelhardt, Appalachian food scholar, discusses deeply ingrained class-based distinctions between corn and wheat in her essay “Beating the Biscuits in Appalachia: Race, Class, and Gender Politics of Women Baking Bread.” She explains that wheat was viewed favorably over corn by Progressive Era missionaries, because corn, which was a native crop and a fundamental ingredient in Appalachian cooking, came to represent Appalachia as not only “stuck in time,” but fixed in the era of colonial America: corn “had become a nostalgic symbol of America” (Engelhardt 35). Accordingly, we can understand one layer of Mrs. Brown’s horror at Ivy’s first letter. Engelhardt indicates too that northern Progressive Era missionaries introduced wheat to Appalachia because they viewed wheat as a more civilized, progressive, and modern crop than corn. Furthermore, Ivy also evidences corn’s role in preventing her from attending school since she must stay home to work in the fields; Mrs. Brown interprets this necessary work as a barrier between formal education and perceived ignorance. Thus, Mrs. Brown likely perceives Ivy’s relationship with corn as indicative of her lower class status, epitomizing purported Appalachian ignorance, and further proof of her need for redemption.

When Mrs. Brown suppresses Ivy’s narrative voice in her original letter to Hanneke, Ivy responds to this suppression not with silence but instead through the adoption of an alternative repository for unhindered narrative. First, Ivy tries to connect with Hanneke after Mrs. Brown rejects her original letter by crafting a truncated, revised version. However, when Hanneke never

responds to this letter, Hanneke then becomes a repository for letters that Ivy can send to no one else. In her original letter to Hanneke, Ivy expresses exuberance at the opportunity of having a pen pal, and, even though she knows that it is an imagined image of Hanneke, she writes, I “wish for wooden shoes and a lace cap like yours and such pretty long white stockings, you look like a little Queen” (Smith 3). However, when Hanneke does not respond, she shifts from being “a little Queen” to an “Ice Queen instead” (3, 19). Ivy writes:

My dear Hanneke,

I hate you, you do not write back nor be my Pen Friend I think you are the Ice Queen instead. ... I know you are rich with all your lace and those fine big cows. I know you have plenty to eat. I know I am evil and I wish evil for you too. Mister Brown told us one time that God is good, but He is not good or bad either one, I think it is that He does not care. I hope that the sea will come in the hole in the dike and flood you out and you will drown. I will not send this letter as I remain your hateful,

Ivy Rowe. (19-20)

Significantly, Mrs. Brown is the only character in the novel’s “fictional audience,” to use Dr. Erica Abrams Locklear’s term in her 2011 book *Negotiating a Perilous Empowerment: Appalachian Women’s Literacies*, that reads Ivy’s long opening letter (208). However, Ivy’s hateful, even cathartic unsent letter to Hanneke is read by actual readers of the novel, or, as termed by Abrams Locklear, the non-fictional or “real audience” (208). Through this unsent letter to Hanneke, Ivy speaks to readers as she challenges the use of religion to justify colonization, and questions its advertisement as a panacea.

If we read Mrs. Brown as representative of the part of Northern colonialism that denigrates Appalachian culture for its “stagnancy,” we can read Mister Brown as representative of the part that fetishizes it for its “quaintness.” Ivy experiences personal and cultural theft in the presence of Mister Brown when she visits the Browns’ house to play with their niece, Molly. Ivy conveys in a letter to her family, “sometimes when I say things, Mister Brown writes them down in his notebook and then I feel like whatever I have said isn’t mine anymore, it’s a funny feeling” (Smith 55). Ivy demonstrates, in this passage, a growing (but still naïve) awareness of the impacts and ethics of colonialism in Appalachia. She recognizes that her words are in danger of being stolen, yet she doesn’t quite understand why.

Although her portraits of Mister Brown generally depict him as an aloof man, his “wild white hair sticking out around his head like dandelion fluff” his character is disturbingly predatory (Smith 54). Mr. Brown’s actions are specifically characteristic of Local Color writers who came to Appalachia as pseudo-anthropologists, and whose “ethnographies” have subsequently perpetuated pervasive stereotypes of Appalachia as stuck in time and quaint. When Ivy writes that what she says “isn’t mine anymore,” she signifies the extractive nature of Local Color writing. Ivy expands upon an earlier remark she makes of Mister Brown as a preacher who “does not preach,” articulating in this letter to her family, “...Mister Brown is a writer I think not a preacher at all, he walks the mountain for pleasure, carrying a walking stick and a notebook, and does not come home all day long” (Smith 7, 54). Mr. Brown does not physically extract Appalachian resources like coal or timber, but he takes Ivy’s words and reduces them to romanticized snapshots for his own personal Appalachian scrapbook.

In an instance of dramatic irony Ivy also conveys in her letter an account of Molly’s father which hints at the Brown’s cultural theft and colonization of Appalachia, when he says

that the Browns are “mining fools gold” (Smith 54). Ivy reasons that “they are not mining at all so far as I can tell, except for Molly and me in the creek with our seve” (54). As readers, we may be humored by Ivy’s innocent response, but Smith’s employment of dramatic irony in this instance serves crucial importance in reader understanding of Ivy’s experience of colonialism. Without Ivy conceptualizing it, readers are likely to understand that by equating missionary endeavors with the activity of mining fool’s gold, Molly’s father is essentially painting Appalachia as a lost cause, their “character” unable to be rectified. This perspective of Appalachian character hearkens back to the Culture of Poverty model criticized in Lewis’s collection, *Colonialism in Modern America: the Appalachian Case*.

We later see that Miss Gertrude Torrington, Ivy’s teacher when she moves to the town of Majestic, views the Appalachian region, and by extension, Ivy, in a manner similar to the way in which Mrs. Brown views Appalachia. However, while we can read Mrs. Brown as coming from a well-intentioned but misled perspective, Miss Torrington’s treatment of Ivy and Appalachia are more threatening and even abusive, and Ivy begins to perceive and internalize negative perceptions of Appalachia while under her instruction. Whereas Mrs. Brown ambiguously asserts that Appalachian culture is “not appropriate,” Miss Torrington directly denigrates it by asking Ivy, “[W]hen will you learn to drop these backward customs? ... For you are fast becoming a lady” (Smith 115). Ivy demonstrates increased awareness of outsider perceptions when she reflects that, indeed, “...I am a town girl, a smart girl, and almost a lady” (Smith 115). Eventually, Ivy’s internalization of negative outsider perceptions, in turn, leads to her first discourse dilemma. While walking in town, Ivy encounters Granny Rowe and Tennessee selling ginseng, when Granny says, “*Lord God, how ye doing honey,*” and Smith makes clear reference to Harney’s 1873 piece “A Strange Land and Peculiar People” when Ivy writes that “...all of a sudden they

seemed to me strange people out of another time, I could not breath” (117). As Dr. Erica Abrams Locklear notes in her 2011 book *Negotiating a Perilous Empowerment: Appalachian Women's Literacies*, “Ivy knows that Miss Torrington would never approve of a greeting like ‘Lord God, how ye doing honey,’ and Ivy’s initial reaction...illustrates that Ivy has successfully learned Miss Torrington’s demeaning judgments about mountain people” (200). As Ivy begins to internalize negative perceptions of Appalachia, and as she acquires greater literacy, readers are likely to become sympathetic to the resulting identity conflicts that Ivy endures.

Miss Torrington’s character additionally goes on to demonstrate the presumptive moral obligation that is sanctioned by divine providence in missionary work, which is problematized when her actions reveal a sinister undertone. Marcia Clark Myers, in her 1993 essay “Presbyterian Home Mission in Appalachia: A Feminine Enterprise,” acknowledges that “Appalachian home mission work was, like Freedmen’s work, largely carried out by the ‘northern’ Presbyterians,” and “Once they became equipped to serve, Christian women felt a divine call to do so” (253, 254). As Miss Torrington declares to Ivy, “Your mother has abdicated her duty it seems,” continuing, “I feel that you have been given to me by God as a sacred responsibility.... I am perhaps espeshally suited to help you fulfill your destiny, Ivy” (Smith 116).

However, although Miss Torrington proclaims her own adherence to duty in contrast to Ivy’s mother, Maude’s, apparent abdication, during a drawing lesson, Miss Torrington lurks behind Ivy and kisses her on the neck. Ivy tells Silvaney, “I could not breath, I could not think what to do,” and Ivy immediately jumps up out of her chair and flees the room (121). Miss Torrington’s assault reveals a sinister undertone to the religious justification of missionary activity in Appalachia: no longer borne out of the desire to fulfill Christian moral obligations,

this episode illustrates that missionary activity can assume a posture of desire in and of itself, as it connects to a romanticized vision of Appalachia that missionaries find desirable and pleasurable. Consequently, Appalachian natives are vulnerable in two ways: they are condemned by progressives for quaintness but then also abused by those who fetishize it. The kiss to Ivy's neck is even vampiric, illustrating the extractive nature of missionary activity in its connection to and perpetuation of colonialism, and ultimately depicts a cultural hypocrisy. Consequently, Smith's depiction of Miss Torrington's sexual assault may be interpreted as foreshadowing the rape—i.e., seizure—of physical and cultural Appalachian resources, which we see ensue with the introduction of extractive industry.

Indeed, colonialism in Appalachia, of course, bore more than just cultural effects. The effects of extractive industry involved the systematized siphoning off of physical Appalachian resources, like coal and timber, resulting in the physical alteration of Appalachian land and the sacrifice of Appalachian bodies. As Dr. Jill Fraley explains in *Missionaries to the Wilderness* (2011), “The wilderness was a place without God, a place to be tempted by devils, and a direct contrast to civilization,” and extractive industries thus justified their activity in Appalachia as efforts that would civilize Appalachian land (Fraley 29). After spending her late teens at Geneva Hunt's boardinghouse in the town of Majestic, Ivy eventually follows her sister Beulah to live in Diamond coal camp. Ivy is at first dazzled by the utopic façade of the coal camp, and she details her excitement in a letter to Silvaney, writing, “The company will buy you *everything* if you live here, and take it right out of your pay so you do not have to worry about a thing. It seems like a giant play party town to me, or like paradise” (Smith 155). However, Ivy is soon disenchanted as she witnesses black coal dust opaque on the windows of their houses, completely saturating the streams, and the continuous threat of death. In a letter to Geneva, Ivy observes how times have

changed since she was a child, noting, “I thought I was coming over here to raise my baby on this mountain like we were raised, but it is not so” (Smith 181). She goes on to write, “I am glad I have got a little girl. Now, that mine has come to look like a big old mouth, swallowing boys whole” (181). Indeed, Oakley’s brother Ray Fox Junior and her coal camp neighbor Rush Gayheart both die in a mining accident while Ivy is living at the camp.

Additionally, Ivy illustrates that the coal camps are accepted as sites of imminent danger and death when she tells that coffins are sold alongside goods like flour and lipstick at the company store (Smith 170). “Somebody will come in the store buying lipstick one day, then the next day they’ll be dead. This is true,” Ivy contends in a letter to her older brother Victor (170). In her letters from Diamond, Ivy notes that the effects of colonialism broach beyond the less tangible realm of cultural effects that Mrs. Brown, Mister Brown, and Miss Torrington enact upon Ivy herself. By definition, extractive industry occupied a key facet of Appalachian colonialism, and it created physical and material deficits within the fabric of Appalachian society. Moreover, Fraley notes that extractive industry went hand-in-hand with missionary activity in Appalachia, claiming that “the industrialists and missionaries were close companions, with industrialists extensively funding missionary efforts to Appalachia—and enjoying the profits made available to them by proliferating stereotypes of the Appalachian people as backward, ignorant, and unable to make decisions about their land for themselves” (39). Thus, as Ivy recounts the true devastating nature of extractive industry, she offers crucial insight and perspective into its realities and consequences, and she leads readers to reconsider extractive industry in a more threatening light. Extractive industry is no longer righteous but instead a capitalist enterprise which relied on missionary activity and thus the perpetuation of harmful Appalachian stereotypes. Furthermore, as we see with Silvaney in particular, other characters in

the novel (excluding Ivy) regard her as unable to make decisions not about land, as Fraley discusses, but about her own body.

The perception of Appalachia as dangerous has also served to perpetuate missionary activity in the region, and we see that this perception effects irreversible damage in Ivy's life. Throughout the colonial period sustained in this novel, Ivy and Silvaney both experience the effects of colonization, yet in significantly divergent ways. Missionaries view Ivy as a beacon of great promise and hope, a subject of their expedition who will fulfill their vision of Appalachia. Conversely, Silvaney embodies quite literally everything that missionaries deem wrong about Appalachia; she, unlike Ivy, is an impairment to their mission because she is disabled, a subject who must be solved, and she is ultimately solved by being deleted when she is institutionalized against her family's will. According to Marcia Clark Myers, one missionary by the name of Miss Florence Stephenson once asserted:

God has given the women of the Presbyterian Church the opportunity of making the future history of the Mountain Whites. Shall they remain as they are? Shall their false doctrines, their ignorance, their degradation, remain as a dangerous element in the nation? Or shall they be educated and evangelized and thus become a force to spread the gospel throughout this and other lands? (qtd. in Myers 254)

Notably, in this episode Stephenson's rhetoric disconcertingly mirrors rhetoric used against people with disabilities. The perception of Appalachia as dangerous interacts with what Dr. Jay Dolmage outlines in his book *Disability Rhetoric*, as the myth of disability as pathology. He explains that "the only proper medical way to view disability is as something to be fixed or eradicated" (37). When we consider Stephenson's rhetoric and Dolmage's explanation of her appeal, the Browns' treatment of Silvaney, Ivy's disabled sister, becomes all the more tragic.

Moreover, while Ivy is an essentially willing and malleable missionary subject, Silvaney, on the other hand, is not capable of fulfilling missionary expectations of Appalachian transformation at all. Dolmage extends upon the myth of disability as pathology as he elucidates the related “kill-or-cure” myth (39). He explains, “Just as a loaded gun shown in the opening scenes of a movie will eventually be fired, a disabled character will either have to be ‘killed or cured’ by the end of any movie or novel in which they appear” (39). Whereas Ivy is essentially “cured” according to missionary forces, Silvaney, unable to be “cured,” unable to be “civilized,” is killed when the Browns forcibly remove her from her home, rendering her invisible through institutionalization.

Although Ivy protests the Browns’ devastating actions, her plea is ultimately ineffective despite its powerful eloquence. In a letter to Mrs. Brown, Ivy demonstrates incredible intelligence and poignancy as she holds the Browns to the same standard that Mister Brown holds her to earlier in the text. Ivy declares:

...I thogt how Mister Brown used to push his eyeglasses back on his head and say, Girls, girls, search for the truth, for the truth is more presious than rubies, more dear than love. And Mister Brown read to us that death takes toll of beauty, courage, yuth, of all but truth. So I will come rigt out and say what I think, it is as follers, I think you have done a grave wrong to have brung old Doc Trout up here to sware out a warrant on Silvaney, and that little old stove-bellied hateful Sargent Pope. ... She is no longer VILENT, yet this is what Doc Trout wrote on the warrant to send her away. ... So although you have done what you think is best, it is not best, it is wrong. (Smith 75-76)

The Browns’ justify Silvaney’s institution because they perceive her as violent, fearing that she will remain, as Stephenson proposes, “a dangerous element in the nation,” and thus threatening

to their missionary cause (Myers 254). Ironically, however, the Browns' seizure of Silvaney is the true act of violence, as they extract her body from her home against her family's will.

At the very beginning of *Fair and Tender Ladies*, Ivy offers in her opening letter to Hanneke a telling profession about Silvaney. Ivy writes,

...Something is wrong with Silvaney, she had brain fever as a baby, now she will never be right in the head. It don't matter, she's so sweet, but she scares easy, sometimes she will put her apron up over her head and start in crying and other times she will get to laughing and she can't stop, you have to pour a gourdfull of water down over her face. Momma says she run a fever for days and days and it has burned out a part of her brain. So Silvaney don't go to school to Mrs. Brown but you can't tell it just to see her, she is the prettest thing. So Silvaney is bigger and older'n me, but it is like we are the same sometimes it is like we are one. We have slept in the same bed all of our lives and done everything as one, I am smart though I go to school when I can and try to better myself and teach Silvaney, but she can't learn. (Smith 11)

We learn here, in revisiting Ivy's very first letter, that Silvaney is the culmination of the various things that Ivy loses to colonialism. Ivy loses one thing after another, from this very letter to Hanneke, to her language, and finally Silvaney. But Silvaney, Ivy reveals, is part of Ivy's person. She is real, not merely material or even abstract. Indeed, as Ivy remarks to Victor when he reveals that Silvaney has died institutionalized, "Whatever I was doing, whatever befell, I always thought Silvaney was right there looking over my shoulder some way, I can't explain it, and that one day I would go get her and bring her home. I have felt like I was split off from a part of myself all these years, and now it is like that part of me has died, since I know she will never come. I feel like she has gone to a foreign land forever" (Smith 206). With the loss of Silvaney,

we are confronted with the question: where does this kind of logic stop? It doesn't stop, Smith shows us. Importantly, Silvaney's death does not stop Ivy from writing her letters. In fact, Ivy responds to Silvaney's death by continuing her correspondence, wherein Ivy writes letters addressed to Silvaney but keeps them for herself, and she illustrates that there is something about writing a letter with someone in mind, even without the intention of ever sending it.

If we further evaluate Silvaney's disabled identity we see that the Browns displace her autonomy, rendering Silvaney a voiceless character. As Ivy articulates to Mrs. Brown, "...you yourself was not here to see her eyes when Doc Trout clicked to the mules and they started off, how she starred back at me and Momma and did not speak" (Smith 75). Dolmage offers insight into the Browns' actions, explaining, "...those without the ability to speak and those without the ability to 'control' their bodies have been omitted from considerations of rhetorical capacity" (24-25). The Browns view Silvaney as a character incapable of autonomy, but Ivy elucidates that although Silvaney "cant learn," she understands. Indeed, Ivy contends, "I believe she knowed what was hapening, and gone [to the institution] of her own accord" (75). However, although Silvaney may know what is happening, and although she may have gone on her own accord, it's likely that if she protested, her protests, like Ivy's would remain overruled.

Ivy additionally elucidates a crucial understanding about disabled people in her opening letter, telling Hanneke that Silvaney can't learn, but she understands. She recounts, "Do ye reckon John Arthur will make it through the winter, Stoney said to Granny Rowe it was a week ago Monday I heerd him myself, anybody culd of heerd him, that had ears. Which means Silvaney who got all wrought up something awful, she run out back of Stoney Branhams store and cried, she knows a lot more than you think"(Smith 10). Ivy reveals to readers what the Browns fail to apprehend, or refuse to consider: Silvaney, although she is "diffrent from all,"

falling outside normative parameters, is still sentient (76). Before she is forcibly extracted from Sugar Fork, Silvaney has a home, and as Ivy implores, “She needs to be at home Mrs. Brown, up here on Sugar Fork where they is people to love her like she is, and where she can come and go as she will” (76). Ivy’s letter to Mrs. Brown, although ineffective in reclaiming Silvaney, is crucial to reader understanding and interpretation of Ivy’s story. Ivy’s painful portrait of Silvaney’s removal, and her sincere demand that Silvaney belongs and can only exist at home, is crucial to evoking sympathy. While Mrs. Brown’s decision is final, readers have the opportunity to reconsider and reject the Browns’ justification for Silvaney’s institutionalization.

Early in the novel in an unsent letter to Hanneke, Ivy grieves that she will never have a “Pen Friend,” her sweet misnomer for a pen pal (Smith 19). Yet without calling it such, Ivy comes to lack anything but a “Pen Friend” throughout her life. Her relatives and friends become her “Pen Friends,” and most of her deepest relationships are forged through the medium of letters. Furthermore, the entire window through which we as readers know and view Ivy is through the letters she writes: Ivy has complete agency, complete authority as *author* of the narrative she pens to others, and thus complete authority over the narrative that readers receive. Indeed, her letters are didactic: the love that Ivy expresses to Silvaney in her letters causes us to love Silvaney, too, or at the very least, to sympathize with her and view her treatment as unjust. And love, as we learn from Ivy’s relationship with her sister, is not only unconditional, but also unstoppable. Nothing *ever* stops Ivy from writing to her sister, not even Silvaney’s death. As the novel’s synopsis so aptly affirms, “Ivy Rowe . . . never strays far from home, but the letters she writes take her across the country, over the oceans, and through the barrier between life and death.”

We can read Ivy's continued correspondence with Silvaney as a process of affirmation verging on canonization: Ivy rectifies Silvaney's value as immeasurable, as non-contingent upon her being alive nor dead. In her penultimate letter, addressed to her daughter Joli, Ivy attests:

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. (Smith 364)

Although she asserts that the letters didn't matter "to the dead girl Silvaney," it might be, moreover, that Silvaney's death for Ivy was simply not an option. Ivy unendingly professes in letters to Silvaney, "you [are] my love and my heart" (133). And as evidenced through Ivy's stubborn will, she refuses to let her "self" die. Thus, through the act of continued correspondence, Ivy by extension refuses to let Silvaney die, too. When we consider Ivy's action within the larger scope of wrongs committed against Appalachians and against people with disabilities, it becomes clear that Ivy is instructing readers that it is *crucial* that they not only listen to but also validate the stories of the oppressed. Therefore through her continued correspondence, Ivy indicates the imperativeness of not only keeping her sister alive, but also of making her story told. In Ivy's final letter, which is written to Silvaney, her sentences become fragmented and she returns to using unconventional spelling, like we see in her very first letter. In these fragmented phrases, Smith motions back towards the fragility of Ivy's story, which may not have been written had Smith not encountered the packet of seventy-five cent letters at the Greensboro flea market. Indeed, there is tenuousness in Ivy's story when we marvel at the daughters whose decision it was to relinquish their mother's lifetime of letters for seventy-five cents. In her final letter, "Through" is spelled "throg" again, as in, "All throg my sickness I

have been dying to write I am dying to _____,” she trails off. And in her last sentence, Ivy finally pens herself into the canonical sphere beside Silvaney (364). She writes:

“oh, I was young then, and I walked in my body like a Queen”

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