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Appa-LAY-Shuh: Environmentalism and Challenging Appalachian Stereotypes in Ron Rash's  
Serena

Senior Paper

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“Appalachian” can seem like an intimidating word to pronounce, especially for those with no experience of the area. Even more intimidating is the fact that the way one chooses to emphasize the last two syllables can distinctly change the way that you are viewed by people from the Southern part of the region. Appa-LATCH-uh, with its guttural and strong tongue stops is the chosen pronunciation of the majority of locals.<sup>1</sup> Conversely, in the Southern Appalachian Region, the pronunciation Appa-LAY-shuh carries negative connotation of outsiders who literally controlled perceptions and definitions of Appalachia for centuries. Some Appalachian authors have struggled to escape these outside perceptions and among these Ron Rash flourishes in his depictions of the Southern Appalachian region and its people, both throughout history and into modernity. As one of the most popular and well known Appalachian authors of our time, Rash has a unique power in his ability to affect perceptions of Appalachia in his readers. This is extremely significant in his most popular novel by far, *Serena*. Although the novel is set in the mountains of Western North Carolina immediately before and after the stock market crash of 1929, there is a clear parallel with modern Appalachia. Within *Serena*, Rash challenges Appalachian hillbilly stereotypes and depicts the complexity of gendered stereotypes in Appalachia in order to defamiliarize preconceived notions of Appalachia. Rash presents the clash between outsiders and locals in the fight for the creation of the Great Smoky Mountains National Park in a way that directly connects to modern Appalachian environmental issues, including logging within national parks, fracking, and mountaintop removal.

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<sup>1</sup> Sharyn McCrumb “Pronouncing Appalachia.mp4.” Online video clip. *Youtube*. Uploaded by Ross Sauce. 28 April 2010. Web. 18 November 2015. See also: John Alexander Williams’ *Appalachia: A History*.

The story within *Serena* is told through three interwoven narratives, each of which offers a focus and viewpoint that works in different ways to destabilize traditional stereotypes of the Appalachian narrative. The opening perspective is that of Pemberton and Serena Pemberton, timber barons who own part of the Boston Lumber Company, as they arrive back in Western North Carolina from Boston, immediately before the stock market crash. The Pembertons come to the mountains with their already formed ideas of Appalachia and proceed to project these ideas onto the people, regardless of their real experiences and interactions. They step off the train to find Rachel Harmon, an Appalachian girl pregnant with Pemberton's child, and her drunk father waiting for them. Rachel provides the next narrative voice throughout the story of *Serena*, giving the perspective of a young Appalachian mother as she struggles to survive in an increasingly industrialized Appalachia. Rachel's experiences provide an emotional case study of the Appalachian experience, particularly elements like poverty and employment, that are so often stereotyped. The tensions between the Pembertons and Rachel Harmon are discussed in the third narrative strand by the Snipes' logging crew, a group of Appalachian men who provide commentary on both the actions of the Pembertons towards Rachel and the environmental events that take place throughout the story. These men represent not only the community of local Western North Carolinians, but they also demonstrate a keen awareness of the stereotypical ideas that the Pembertons and others project onto them. These three perspectives work together to confront and defy what is traditionally presented as the Appalachian hillbilly stereotype, as well as bring the issue of the power hierarchy within Appalachia to the forefront of the discussion of Appalachian environmentalism.

### **The Construction of an Appalachian Stereotype and Defying this Stereotype in *Serena***

The general attitude of post-Civil War America towards Appalachia was immensely complicated. On one hand, the American Missionary Association turned to Appalachia to proselytize and dole out charity after failed attempts in the Deep South. On the other hand, an entertainment industry, mostly literary, was built around spreading fantastic and facetious portrayals of Appalachia across the country. As Ron Eller writes in his canonical text *Miners, Millhands, and Mountaineers: Industrialization of the Appalachian South, 1880-1930*, "between 1870 and 1890, over two hundred travel accounts and short stories were published in which the mountain people emerged as a rude, backward, romantic, and sometimes violent race who had quietly lived for generations in isolation from the mainstream of American life" (XVI). Because there was a fine line between travel accounts and short stories, with many authors mixing fiction and fantasy into their non-fiction presentations of Appalachia, the influx of these texts proved incredibly problematic in its effect on American perceptions of Appalachia. Eventually, these texts molded the prevailing attitudes of Americans towards Appalachia by simultaneously othering and homogenizing the people who lived in the large area defined as "the Appalachian region." A large part of this othering and homogenization occurred and is still occurring through the image of the impoverished Appalachia and the ignorant, violent hillbilly figure. The inverse of this overly-simplistic negative image of the backwards hillbilly is the figure of the rugged, brave frontiersman, a positive throwback to early European Americans and their nation creation. While this appears to be imagery that is admirable, in fact it too reduces a large and varied population of individuals to a facile, flat caricature. If the depiction of Appalachia as desperately backward and in need ever began to ebb, it was revived and re-distributed by Lyndon B Johnson and his declaration of the war on poverty. Derogatory texts like Jack Weller's 1965 *Yesterday's People: Life in Contemporary Appalachia* were published that relied upon the tired narrative of

Appalachians as people out of sync with the rest of America and the world. It remained acceptable in the study of Appalachia to rely on the fact that the people were ignorant, isolated, and most significantly, less developed than those studying them.

Certainly early texts depicting Appalachians as ignorant, backward, and violent play a role in current perceptions of mountain people, but popular culture has had, and continues to have, a significant influence in the presentation of an Appalachian narrative. From television shows like *The Beverly Hillbillies*, to subtle put downs of Appalachians, like Stan Smith from *American Dad's* statement “We’ve failed as parents, even by Appalachian standards,”<sup>2</sup> the hillbilly has become an easy and comfortable target for mockery. Here is a power hierarchy inherent in comedy centered on putting down Appalachians. Appalachians are obviously worse than “normal” Americans and they are thus the ultimate symbol of ignorance and backwardness that can be found in present-day America, and this way of thinking has led to Appalachia being considered the American “third-world.” David S. Walls and Dwight B. Billings explore some of the main models of examining Appalachia in their 1977 article “The Sociology of Southern Appalachia.” Interestingly, the three different formal models used by academics to trace Appalachian “poverty and underdevelopment” were first “developed in the context of underdevelopment in the third world” and then “applied by analogy to the Appalachian case” (Walls and Billings 132).

Although there is a current resurgence in Appalachian Studies and celebrations of Appalachian culture, like through literature, these centuries old stereotypes are nearly impossible to shake. Ron Rash manipulates these stereotypes in *Serena*, including the Pembertons as an example of what mountain people see as the archetype of the outsider, and ultimately the

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<sup>2</sup>“Son of Stan.” Dirs. Chris Bennett and Brent Woods. Writ. Seth Macfarlane. *American Dad*. Season 6, Episode 2. Fox Broadcasting Company, October 10 2010. *Netflix*. 18 November 2015.

characters he creates easily overshadow the flat hillbilly figure of the past. Anthony Harkins explores the hillbilly image in his text *Hillbilly: A Cultural History of an American Icon* and in particular he notes that the connection between the hillbilly and early American colonists is at the heart of the stereotype. After discussing the positive attributes that have historically been projected onto American revolutionaries and those who conquered the frontier he writes that:

Each of these [positive] features could be defined by its negative flip side in order to evince the anachronistic incompatibility of such values to twentieth-century America. The pioneer spirit could also reflect social and economic backwardness; strong kin connections might mean inbreeding, domestic violence, and bloody feuds; rugged individualism could also be interpreted as stubbornness and an inability to adapt to changing conditions; closeness to nature could stand for primitiveness, savagery and sexual promiscuity; and purity and common sense might actually indicate ignorance a reliance on unscientific and dangerous childrearing, medical, dietary, and religious practices. (6-7)

Careful analysis of *Serena* reveals that the text rejects each of these attributes and as a result, the entirety of the hillbilly stereotype.

“Social and economic backwardness” are at the heart of the story Rash tells in *Serena*, however, those who are socially and economically backward are actually the outsiders to Appalachia, instead of the local mountain people (Harkins 6). From their first appearance at the opening of the novel, the Pembertons and their business partners disrupt local society by acting in ways that they wrongly think the Appalachians will accept and respect. The Pembertons are confronted by Rachel Harmon's, father, Harmon, in the train station and Serena encourages a fight. First, she antagonizes Harmon by comparing his daughter to a farm animal, saying that he

would “not find a better sire to breed her with” than Pemberton (7). Then she simply tells Pemberton to get his knife and “settle it now” (8). The argument turns into a physical fight and Pemberton eventually kills Harmon in what Pemberton claims is self defense. While the fight occurs, the scene is observed in silent judgement by “gangly mountaineers” who watch “expressionless from an adjacent livestock barn” (7). Pemberton takes their silence as approval and he thinks that “at least some good might come from what had happened” because the men would “respect him, and Serena, even more” now that he had killed a man (10-11). It never enters his mind that the men silently watching their boss kill a drunk man, in front of the man’s pregnant teenage daughter, might be judging him negatively.

The element of poverty that is essential to the hillbilly caricature is put into context in Rash's mountain characters, as their economic troubles can largely be traced to the Pemberton’s and the Boston Lumber Company, who get rich by providing horrible living conditions and low wages. When Serena sees that the only building with electricity in the logging camp is the dining hall, she says that “it’s best that way...not just the money saved but for the men. They’ll work harder if they live like Spartans” before she goes to her own home to take a hot bath (17). The Boston Lumber Company’s commitment to economic growth at the cost of Appalachian lives is seen again in a later scene, in which Snipes’ logging crew is working a treacherous section of mountain. Rash writes that “Snipes and Campbell hadn’t believed the trees worth the bother to harvest. To do so would be slow going and particularly dangerous since they’d be working in close proximity to one another. But Pemberton insisted” (184). Snipe’s crew ends up losing one of their members when a branch snaps off and impales him on this section of mountain. Even the actions that the Pembertons’ think benefit the Western North Carolinians, like Serena’s introduction of a Mongolian golden eagle to kill the vicious timber rattlesnakes that kill many of

the loggers in the hotter months, eventually results in the company housing being infested with rats that the strongest poisons cannot get rid of.

That facet of the hillbilly infamously associated with the Hatfields and the McCoys and, of course, *Deliverance* is closely connected to family bonds, expounded upon by Harkins as “inbreeding, domestic violence, and bloody feuds,” is also portrayed in an interesting non-traditional way in *Serena* (Harkins 6). As seen in the opening fight scene between Harmon and Pemberton, the violence in the novel is most often begun by the outsiders, with the locals forced to stand by silently because of the desperate job climate in Great Depression-era America. It is hard to believe that anyone watching the fight would not want to prevent it, since it concludes with a pregnant teenage girl watching the father of her child kill her own father. But because the workers are dependent upon Pemberton for their jobs, they have no other choice, since intervening and being injured or fired would result in the loss of income and thus harm to their own families. The first introduction to Harmon, as a drunk and scruffy troublemaker, is explained away through Rachel Harmon’s narrative, which paints her father as a man heartbroken and traumatized after he is left by Rachel's mother.

In contrast to the gruff exterior hiding a gentle man in Harmon, Serena's beautiful face covers a cruel and ruthless mind. The depth of her mercilessness only escalates as the story continues, eventually culminating in her murder of an old widow woman as she attempts to track down Rachel. Meaning that again, in *Serena* the hillbilly stereotype is being fulfilled more by the outsiders than by the actual mountain people. Rachel Harmon, who is consistently juxtaposed against Serena, has to force herself to kill a raccoon that is stealing her eggs, thinking it's "what you had to do on a farm" (83). Rachel is made uncomfortable by the raccoons' vaguely human



hands; this young Appalachian woman is clearly a challenge to the stereotypical portrayal of Appalachians as barbarous and bloody.

“Stubbornness and inability to adapt to changing conditions,” another critical element of Harkin's definition of the hillbilly stereotype, can also be considered a larger overarching theme within *Serena*, especially as the tensions between the outsiders and the locals grow (6). The Western North Carolinians, in their stubborn dislike of the logging that both gives them a livelihood and destroys their home, on the surface seem to react in a stereotypically stubborn way. In reality, both narratives by Rachel Harmon and focused on Snipes’ logging crew reveals that the locals have a better understanding of the land and a better relationship to nature than do the Pembertons. When Rachel Harmon goes into the woods to gather ginseng, nature is depicted as active and alive, with “trees seeming to gather themselves closer together” (81). This is a very different view of nature than is seen in the narrative dominated by the Pembertons, since those sections seem focused on connecting the depressing natural world left after logging with ominous signs of destruction and death. It becomes obvious as the novel progresses that the locals are right to be stubborn and to try and prevent the change that the Pemberton’s are bringing.

One of the most corrosive elements of the hillbilly stereotype is what Harkins highlights as “primitiveness, savagery, and sexual promiscuity” (Harkins 7). The portrayal of Appalachians in this way is most evident in pop culture in the source of the well-worn joke “paddle faster I hear banjo music:” *Deliverance*<sup>3</sup>. In stark contrast to the brutality of *Deliverance*, the only sexual activity scene that readers encounter is between Serena and Pemberton. Outside of that scene,

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<sup>3</sup> This phrase references the dueling banjos scene in John Boorman’s 1975 film *Deliverance*, which has become one of the most common and inaccurate reference points in popular culture for Appalachia. It is defined by urban dictionary as a “common exclamation when in or around hillbilly infested areas.”

Rachel Harmon does remember the times that she met with Pemberton but only, it seems, to reveal to readers that she made a mistake. Rachel thinks about how “she’d ignored the warning looks of not only Joel but also Mr. Campbell, who’d shook his head *No* at Rachel when he saw her going to the house with the tray one noon” and “had just smiled back at the hard stares the older women in the kitchen gave her each time she returned” (43). Though Rachel is now saddled with Jacob as the consequences of these interludes with Pemberton, it seems significant that in these remembrances she appears naïve and oblivious to the fact that Pemberton is using her and would never actually marry her. Rash may be inviting readers to question Rachel’s maturity and her ability to truly consent given the immense power imbalance at play in this “relationship.”

The section of Harkin's definition of the hillbilly stereotype that is most commonly represented in popular culture is what he terms "ignorance, reliance on unscientific and dangerous childrearing, medical, dietary, and religious practices" (7). In *Serena*, Rash challenges each of these categories and depicts Western North Carolinian characters as being multi-faceted individuals who make the best of their circumstances. Rachel Harmon, despite being incredibly young and alone, proves to be a loving and fearless mother. At one point, when Rachel and her son Jacob are both seriously ill, Rachel is forced to carry him into town to get help. When a family takes her into their home and calls a doctor he says, ““You cut up your feet pretty good but nothing deep enough to need stitches. That was almost a mile walk and you sick as him, and barefoot to boot. I don’t know how you did it. You must love that child dear as life.”” Rachel responds ‘I tried not to...I just couldn’t find a way to stop myself’”(97). This is a statement of the depth of Rachel’s strength and love but it also can be read as a commentary on child mortality and the toughness of life in the mountains. Rachel’s relationship with Jacob is immensely

important to the narrative and not only because Rachel faces death over and over again for her child. Jealousy over Rachel's ability to provide Pemberton with a son leads Serena, and by extension Galloway, to make decisions that further the drama and the plot.

Serena's return to the camp after her nearly fatal miscarriage also reveals the status of medical advancement in the more isolated and remote mountain towns, as Rash writes that the men "watched in wonder...especially men whose mothers and sisters and wives had died from what Serena survived" (214). Though this does fit in with Serena's oft-discussed strength of will, it is more revealing of the reality of the lives of the everyday Western North Carolinians in this desperate period of American History. Even the character of Doc Cheney, who will go on to misdiagnose Serena's later miscarriage as indigestion, shows the willingness of those in the medical field to travel and live in distant Appalachian towns. The fact is that Pemberton had to offer Doc Cheney a car and house to get him to stay in the logging camp. Pemberton also owned the train that rushed Serena down the mountain, he paid the man who drove the car, which Pemberton also owned, to meet them at the train station to take them to the hospital, and he paid the man who called the hospital to tell them the Pemberton's were coming. This privilege would be beyond imagining for the average Appalachian man, who had to watch his wife and child die, possibly knowing that with access to proper medical care they could survive. While overturning the mass-marketed hillbilly caricature, Rash does not deny the historical realities of living in Appalachia that were parodied to originally create the hillbilly stereotype.

Rash challenges the idea of ignorance from a religious standpoint, as well. McIntyre, the preacher who calls Serena the Whore of Babylon because she wears pants and preaches fire and brimstone, is actually a source of comedy for the other mountain people. The stereotype would be that the ignorant hillbillies would be so afraid of Judgement Day that they would blindly

follow whatever the preacher said and believe extreme things along the way. In reality, the other workers mock McIntyre, laughing at his comments about Serena wearing pants and pointing out the logical flaws in his thinking. It is made clear from McIntyre's introduction that he is not a figure of religious authority in the camp since "Stewart, who along with McIntyre's wife and sister made up the whole of the lay preacher's congregation." McIntyre states that Serena is "the whore of Babylon in the very flesh" and proclaims that "it's in the Revelations. Says the whore of Babylon will come forth in the last days wearing pants." When Ross, another member of the crew, cleverly replies that he's never read that in Revelations, McIntyre, to the hilarity of all, says that that's because "it's in the original Greek." Again, Ross again has a witty comeback, saying that McIntyre's ability to read Greek is "amazing for a man who can't even read English" to which McIntyre says that he cannot read Greek but he has "heard from them what does," at which point the conversation draws to a close with Ross repeating "Them what does" while shaking his head (30-1). The other members of the crew do not, despite McIntyre's unintentionally humorous fire-and-brimstone preaching, abandon him when he suffers a crisis of faith and a mental break, instead encouraging his wife and his one follower in ways that could help McIntyre recover. These interactions, both comedic and complex, between people who are able to maintain different beliefs alongside supportive relationships truly dismantles not only the fundamentalist religious aspect of the hillbilly caricature, but also the overly-simplistic stereotype as a whole.

A close examination of the characters and situations within *Serena* shows that despite the difficulties of living in Appalachia, most of the mountain people bear very little resemblance to the popular hillbilly figure. With his three-pronged narrative style, Rash allows readers to see directly from the perspective of Rachel Harmon, get Pemberton's thoughts on the Appalachians

through indirect discourse, and see the social interactions of Snipes' logging crew. Through these voices, readers gain a deeper understanding of the complex power hierarchy at play in Appalachian society and this ultimately allows them to empathize with the Appalachian characters regardless of any former hillbilly misunderstandings.

The struggle between Rachel and Serena also polarizes readers, making them cheer for young and desperate Rachel to somehow win over cruel and ruthless Serena. The indirect discourse style of narration in Rachel's sections allow an emotional connection to form between the reader and Rachel's character. It is important to examine the ways in which Rachel rewrites traditional stereotyping of Appalachian women, and the significance of the battle between Rachel and Serena, as symbols of Appalachians and Outsiders.

### **Confronting Specifically Gendered Appalachian Stereotypes**

Rachel Harmon and Serena Pemberton challenge stereotypes of women in Appalachia, even those of women who reside in Appalachia without being from there. A surface reading of the tension between them initially only seems to further the plot and interest readers. But upon closer inspection, we see that, the battle between Rachel and Serena represents of the seemingly eternal battle Appalachians have against outsiders with negative intentions. When readers cheer for Rachel to triumph over Serena, they are in turn invited to cheer for all of the disenfranchised Appalachians at the bottom of the power hierarchy to win over the Outsiders who oppress them. In particular, the environmental devastation that Serena joyfully enacts is a direct reflection on both the historical implications of industrial destruction in Appalachia and the modern struggle against fracking, mountain removal, and extractive industry. Framing *Serena* historically allows for the novel's significance in modernity to emerge, while continuing the deconstruction of hillbilly stereotypes.

Around the turn of the twentieth century, writers like Grace MacGowan Cooke and Emma Bell Miles used Appalachian literature to give agency to female characters, especially in the early years when a few female Appalachian authors were able to capitalize on the hype surrounding Appalachia and make a living writing about it. The novels that these, and other, women wrote had a large, mostly negative, effect on the burgeoning national perceptions of Appalachia. Whether the authors intended to or not, their limited fictionalized accounts of the mountains were integrated by the American public into their understanding of the reality of Appalachia. With *Serena*, Rash continues earlier conversations about women's agency in Appalachia and in doing so, comments on the complications of presenting strong female characters in a time with limited female empowerment. Rash places Rachel Harmon and Serena Pemberton in opposition to each other in a way that challenges and complicates previous depictions of women in Appalachian literature. Read metaphorically, their opposition may also be interpreted as representative of the struggle between local Appalachians and capitalistic outsiders, as well as confronting traditional images and tropes surrounding mountain women. Literature about Appalachia from the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries depicted what became a stock representation of the Appalachian woman, one that became cemented in the American consciousness as the female version of the hillbilly figure. In particular, as Danny L Miller writes in *Wingless Flights: Appalachian Women in Fiction*: "all of these [outside early] writers presented the mountain woman in a typical way: she was pretty in youth, but married young, bore a houseful of 'youngens,' led a life of endless drudgery often tinged with 'unaccountable' melancholy, became old at thirty-five, and ended her life sitting on the front porch of her log cabin with a corncob pipe in her mouth and a black sunbonnet on her head" (23). This obviously derogatory depiction of Appalachian women denies their individuality and

homogenizes their experiences. Rash specifically challenges some aspects of this stereotype through different characters: Rachel Harmon acts as the pretty young woman, but she is not married, while the Widow Jenkins and Galloway's mother are realistic representations of older women near the end of their lives. Widow Jenkins and Galloway's mother are vastly different in their personalities and moral systems. Widow Jenkins sacrifices her life to keep Rachel and Jacob safe from Serena and Galloway, while Galloway's mother helps her son track Rachel and Jacob to kill them. These women are a far cry from the flat stereotype that Miller writes about, and in this way Rash again manipulates preconceptions of Appalachian women who are disenfranchised from their own agency by the hillbilly stereotype.

Currently, academics can examine the female characters of Appalachian literature through the knowledge of their place at the bottom of the patriarchal and capitalistic hierarchy. Sally Maggard, a prominent scholar in Appalachian studies, discusses the complexities of both historical and literary explorations of Appalachian women and their place in her article, "Will the Real Daisy Mae Please Stand Up? A Methodological Essay on Gender Analysis in Appalachian Research." In it, Maggard writes that "analysis of gender [in Appalachia] involves more than paying attention to a category (females) that was previously overlooked or omitted in our scholarship. It requires thinking about gender as one of several systems of inequality which structure the central features of society and shape the course of social change" (137). The systems worked together to make it very difficult for women to break out of their roles successfully or safely.

A prominent example of the patriarchal system is James Still's 1940 novel, *River of Earth*, the first novel written by an Appalachian to receive national critical acclaim. The novel follows the Baldridge family as they struggle to survive and as they move from their country

home to the coal camps. Alpha, the matriarch of the family, does not want to move away from the farm because even though they are struggling, she (rightly) knows that if they can have a garden they can keep managing to squeak by on their own. They eventually move to the coal camp anyway and life becomes even worse for them. Maggard goes on to write specifically about this move, saying that it "stripped away the bottom line of [Alpha's] economic security. Even in the worst of times when they were on their own land, [she] knew [she] could feed [her] children." (141). Early Appalachian literature is full of women like Alpha who are strong-willed and smart but, despite these traditionally "unfeminine" qualities, were forced into a gender role that left them at the bottom of the hierarchical heap.

Rachel Harmon, in *Serena*, joins a line of fictional Appalachian women who provided entertainment and drama by struggling against their gendered bonds, but takes a separate path from those women who eventually, satisfying the audience, fell into their place. In his book about Appalachia in film and television, J. W. Williamson writes

a few mountain women in the earliest silent movies were known to pick up a gun, and shoot it, too, and some would cross-dress and go about successfully as men, at least temporarily. Strong backwoods women with weapons have regularly been in movies ever since, fighting back against whatever threatened them –with guns especially. *Never mind for the moment how such women typically ended up in those movies.*" 225, emphasis mine

The ending of these fictional women is the crux of the matter, as Williamson comments above. If a fictional woman argues in words or actions for more equal rights, or even just points out gender inequality, is that negated by an ending in which she follows tradition and gives up her struggle? Questions like these, while sometimes valid, are reliant upon conceptualizing gendered



oppression as a blanket issue, one that equally impedes and disrupts all women. Rash challenges this essentializing concept simultaneously with his defiance of traditionally gendered Appalachian stereotypes.

It is impossible to discuss or deconstruct gendered Appalachian stereotypes without acknowledging the power hierarchy that disenfranchises them. Elizabeth Englehardt is writing specifically about Grace MacGowan Cooke's *The Power and the Glory*, one of the early Appalachian novels read in a feminist light, when she writes “the experiences women have in their traditionally organized families also prop up this system of inequality...Women and children...who are ‘expenses’ are in jeopardy of falling through the cracks in a male-privileging system --at the mills, in the town, in their homes” (23). This statement holds true for the hierarchy within *Serena* as well, however, Rash flouts convention in the novel with multiple characters. Rachel Harmon, for example, is clearly impoverished and at the mercy of the system but by being unattached to any men but her son Rachel is able to access agency, while still highlighting the patriarchal, capitalistic nature of the power hierarchy. The novel opens with Rachel's father's death, as well as with a statement from the Pembertons that Rachel has no hold over them and will receive no help from them. This contributes to the hardships she faces throughout the story, but those hardships sculpt her into the powerful woman she becomes. In the end, she is the one who fends off Galloway, Serena's henchman who has come to kill her as she tries to escape, and she is the one who starts anew in Washington state. The novel closes, not with her marriage as is somewhat typical in novels with strong Appalachian young women, but instead with Rachel walking to her job in Seattle, under the shadow of an unfamiliar, snow-covered mountain. Rachel straddles the divide between the fictional young women of early Appalachian literature, eventually bowed by society's expectations, and more progressive

representations of gender roles in Appalachia, and in this way Rash continues to revise long held tropes about women in Appalachia.

Serena is also a woman in Appalachia, despite not being native to the area, and she, like Rachel, presents a more real, more complex version of gender and gender stereotypes than is usually seen in the local color novels of the past. When one of the crew says "we've not seen the like of her in these hills before," it can almost be read literally as there are very few accounts of women, fictional or otherwise, coming to Appalachia purely to profit (202). In presentations by the local color movement, women from outside Appalachia came to the mountains for a peek into another world, to provide charity work, and to possibly make a profit on the accounts they could then write (Englehardt *Tangled Roots* 17). In literature, at least, Serena stands alone, amongst a crowd of male capitalists and female volunteers. Even though they are directly opposed to each other throughout the novel, Serena and Rachel both confront long-held ideas about women in Appalachia.

While Rachel and Serena do seem to be juxtaposed with one another, Rash does not present them as binary oppositions. Serena is definitely not a good person, and it would not be an overstatement to say that she is evil, but there are moments, especially concerning her miscarriage, that make her relatable or accessible for readers. Rachel too is not purely perfect; she has moments of vanity, looking at herself in the mirror and thinking she has not aged like her peers, and pride, when despite her desperate straits she refuses to do what Serena told her and sell her father's knife. Though they are both women, Rachel and Serena have dramatically different experiences of gendered oppression and their struggle draws attention to the fallacy of considering gender alone as unifying. Even the older Appalachian women in the story criticize Rachel, instead of supporting their fellow Appalachian woman. In the novel, Rash depicts gender

in Appalachia as being much more complex than the stereotypes. Ultimately, Rash presents these two characters for readers to grapple with on their own.

Rachel's connection to the earth and nature is, from the beginning, one of the symbols of her growing agency and its ultimate potential. Rachel (and Jacob) are inexorably tied to the physical landscape of Appalachia, which makes their eventual forced withdrawal even more significant. When Rachel is in the woods, Rash writes "the ferns felt like peacock feathers as she moved through them. They made a whispery sound against her dress, and the sound seemed to soothe Jacob because his eyes closed....She separated the berries from the ginseng plants and placed them in the broken soil, covered them up and moved on to the next plant" (79). As she walks into the woods with her infant to collect plants and sow seeds, she is a literal mother earth figure, representing Appalachia in its pre-industrial state. When she walks miles barefoot to get medical help for herself and her son, she takes strength from feeling the ground beneath her feet, even as it cuts them. Rash writes, "she was barefoot, something she hadn't realized until that moment, but glad of it, because she could feel the pebbly dust and packed dirt, feel how it anchored her to the world" (95). Even at her lowest, when she is running for her life from someone physically more powerful than herself, she looks at the dry earth in a train yard, a symbol of industrialization and modernization, and thinks "Next year I'll plant me a garden...no matter where we are" (294). Her connection to the land and the fact that she draws agency and power from it clashes with Serena's violent clear-cutting for profit.

Ultimately, reading Rachel as a mother earth figure and a hopeful one for the future of Appalachia implies both the possible regrowth and revitalization. Of course reading her character in this way also highlights the necessity of keeping the mountain people who care about the land in the region in order to protect it. Particularly within the overall context of environmental

devastation in *Serena*, Rachel's forced abandonment of Appalachia is representative of the long-term effects that industrialized development and extractive industry have on residents and the local economy

### **The Creation of the Great Smoky Mountains National Park and the Issues of Appalachian Environmentalism**

The larger story of the Pembertons and Rachel is framed by the creation of the Great Smoky Mountains National Park. The creation of the Park, in reality, had almost as much drama associated with it as is depicted in *Serena*. As Ron Miller discusses in *Miners, Millhands, and Mountaineers: Industrialization of the Appalachian South, 1880-1930*, pre-industrial logging in Appalachia was environmentally sustainable and stimulated the subsistence-based economy of the time (86). Industrializing Appalachia was taken over by capitalists from outside Appalachia, buying up land and making farms smaller. Smaller farms meant that Appalachians were more reliant on non-farm work to make a living, which gave the outside capitalists labor for the logging and mining on their Appalachian land. As Michael Ann Williams writes in the essay "'When I Can Read My Title Clear': Anti-Environmentalism and Sense of Place in the Great Smoky Mountains," "most local people, both Cherokee and non-Indian, participated in the timber boom only as laborers. For the first time many were earning cash wages. Although they temporarily had more money than ever before, many were ultimately left poorer by the boom-and-bust economy of the timber industry" (88). This concept is equally applicable to the loggers in *Serena*, who earn a wage in the short-term but through their logging destroy their long-term ability to thrive in the Appalachian environment.

While the creation of the Great Smoky Mountains National Park is not the dominant story in *Serena*, it does feature prominently. The tensions between the Boston Lumber Company and

the pro-park faction work within the larger narrative to further highlight the detachment that outsiders have towards Appalachia. While the Boston Lumber Company has purely capitalistic intentions, the individuals making up the pro-Park faction believe that they are doing what is in the best interests of North Carolinians and Americans as a whole. Unfortunately, there are no real representatives of Appalachia in this faction. Horace Kephart's character is an outsider who uses his cabin in the woods to get drunk and take a break from society. Webb, the newspaper man who is one of the major voices in the pro-park faction, and his wife are well enough off that they go to the Biltmore Estate for a party, again divorcing those with real ties to Appalachia but low income from the decision making process, populated almost exclusively by wealthy outsiders.

Regardless of their intentions, the outsiders depicted in *Serena* do not care about the consequences their actions in Western North Carolina have on the people actually living there. When the pro-park group meets with the Boston Lumber Company and an argument begins, Serena states that the pro-park group has "already run two thousand farmers off their land...We can't buy their land unless they want to sell it, yet you force them from their livelihood and their homes"(137-8). Secretary Albright replies that it is "an unfortunate aspect of what has to be done...but...it's ultimately for the common good of all people in these mountains" (137-8). Serena does not say this because she actually cares about the people removed from their land; the mountain people are just objects for Serena to use in her defense of her own opinion. In fact, the Boston Lumber Company is not only responsible for many deaths in the process of logging, but Serena herself has also personally murdered. Secretary Albright also speaks for mountain people instead of letting them speak for themselves in a way that again exposes the outsiders place at the top of the power hierarchy in Appalachia.

*Serena* does depict some of the more unsavory and lesser known reasons behind the creation of the Great Smoky Mountains National Park. While today it is the most visited National Park in the United States, it was originally created as a way for the government to make money through controlled logging. Williams explores a variety of the ulterior motives that the government and the other park supporters had in his article about Anti-Environmentalism, including local business who sought to profit from increased tourism that the park was sure to bring. In "creating" the park, the government bought or took land through eminent domain from the local people living there. Some people were able to stay on their land as tenants by accepting a lower price for it from the government, however these individuals had strict rules about how they could now interact with nature that severely altered their previous ways of life (Williams 91). After incorporating the land, the government then burned many of the buildings, before spending large amounts of money to make a more accessible and tame "wilderness" for people to visit. As Williams writes in his article about the reactions of the local people to the park, "if the creation of the park could preserve, or rather reinvent, wilderness, at the same time making it tamer and more accessible, promoters believed it could also better the lives of the people in the region by bringing business to the Smokies. Less consideration was given by the majority of the park promoters to those whose families had lived for generations within the proposed boundaries of the park" (90). The local mountain people were on the periphery of the discussion, despite the fact that it was their land that was being taken and manipulated, while the outside visitor to Appalachia was (and still is) the intended audience of the National Park. It is worth remembering that, as Williams writes, "in the southern mountains, commerce and tourism developed hand in hand" and the case of the Great Smoky Mountains National Park falls closer to these industries than it does conservation (88).

The violent destruction of the natural world consistently frames all the narrative voices within *Serena*. Even when the drama of the plot overwhelms the overall narrative there are still constant reminders of the vast damage being done to Appalachia by the cognitively dissonant Pembertons. Especially significant are the moments that directly connect the environmental consequences of the Pemberton's greed to the Western North Carolinians who will remain after the Pembertons have moved on. In Joshua Lee's 2013 article "The Pembertons and Corporate Greed: An Ecocritical Look at Ron Rash's *Serena*," Lee explores the Pembertons and their own personal attitudes towards the destruction, in all forms, that they wreak while in Appalachia. Lee writes that "the Pembertons take advantage of the Great Depression and general humanity's desperation for survival to thrive by destroying the very things that define and permit the existence of human culture and habitation" (58). This disregard for life informs all of their decisions about the land and their interactions with the local Appalachians.

From the very beginning, when Pemberton first brings Serena to the top of a ridge to survey their holdings, the vision of the Pembertons obviously clashes with the grotesque reality of their actions. The first glimpse both readers and Serena have of the land owned by the Boston Lumber Company is one in which "the camp, was surrounded by a wasteland of stumps and branches. To the left Half Acre Ridge has been cut bare as well. On the right, the razed lower quarter of Noland Mountain. As it crossed the valley, the railroad track appeared sewn into the lowland like stitches" (13-14). After happily looking over their holdings, the Pembertons warmly embrace and kiss, before driving back down the mountain, past a "creek clogged with silt...a wide sprawl of mud and dirt...[and] A caboose that served as the doctor's office...its rusting wheels sunk into the valley floor" (15). In the case of *Serena*, it is not the "ignorant" Appalachians who are unable to reconcile with reality and see the devastated landscape as what

it is; it is in fact the Pembertons and the other outsiders. The stories of Snipes' logging crew, as they act as voices of reason, highlight the emphasis on the outsider by supporting readers' perceptions of the Pembertons as evil with their commentary on their own lived experiences. The men figure out possible locations that Rachel and Jacob could be hiding but they do not tell Galloway because, as Ross says, "maybe there's nothing I can do to stop them but I damn well won't help them. I can give that girl a few more hours' head start" (285).

Logging is not the only method through which the Pembertons and the Boston Lumber Company throw off the natural balance in Appalachia and make it more difficult for the people who live there. Serena's ingenious idea to import a Mongolian Golden Eagle to kill the timber rattlesnakes that threaten the loggers, and therefore the Pemberton's profits, results in an immense rise in the rat population of the logging camp. When the logging crew discusses the situation, Ross says "I used some of that Paris Green in my stringhouse and it's the stoutest poison going. Them rats ate it like it was no more than salt on popcorn" and Snipes replies "The thing to kill them is snakes...but that eagle has done upset what the Orientals call the yen and the yang" (158). Obviously these Western North Carolinians are aware of the need for natural balance, as well as the eagle being at fault for the upset, but again, the Appalachians are forced to deal with the consequences of the outsiders' actions. The Pembertons and their business partners also go hunting multiple times, purely for entertainment, leaving multiple deer carcasses and a bear to rot in a field instead of using it for food or even "tan[ning] the hide" (74).

The end result of the Pembertons and the Boston Lumber Company's timber harvesting is also presented from the perspective of Snipes' logging crew as they cut down the last tree on the mountain. Rash describes the clear cut land as "resembl[ing] the skinned hide of some huge animal" (333). The men drink from the muddied stream as the severity and finality of their



actions dawn on them. Although they reminisce and mourn the "sweet" water that "used to be think with trout" and the game, "Deer and rabbit and coons...squirrels and bear and beaver and bobcats," they do not deny their own responsibility. Ross admits, "I had my part in the doing of it." and Henryson responds "we had to feed our families." Ross replies "Yes, we did...What I'm wondering is how we'll feed them once all the trees is cut and the jobs leave....Trouble is they ain't going to let us stay in [the park] with [the animals]" (334-5). The men go on to compare the land to France after World War One and mention the building up of the Second World War, highlighting not only the physical devastation but also the psychological destruction of logging at this scale.

Throughout the novel Snipes' logging crew provides amusement and validation for readers and their emotions in response to the actions that forward the plot. The men's reaction to the landscape feels like the final piece of a puzzle commenting upon the connections between environmentalism and power in Appalachia that has been pieced together throughout the novel. Though they recognize that they did not feel as if they had much of a choice, they also finally understand that the issue of employment is a short-term solution that creates a long-term problem. This final logging scene makes evident the connection between the power hierarchy that forces Appalachians to the bottom and continually disenfranchises them from long-term solutions to their problems and the environmental degradation for the profit of outsiders. It closes with McIntyre's statement, "I think that is what the end of the world will be like" (336).

### **Conclusion**

In *Reading Ron Rash*, John Lang provides background about Ron Rash and his life and provides close analyses of all of Rash's works, including short stories, novels, and poetry. In his analysis of *Serena*, Lang directly connects the Pembertons and the Great Depression, both

immediately before and after the stock market crash, with the economic crisis of 2008, writing, "the Pembertons...embody some of the worst features of the years preceding the Great Recession that began in the United States in 2008" (85). Later, he writes that "Even though western North Carolina is not itself a coal-mining region, it is impossible to read Rash's descriptions of the environmental destruction caused by clear cutting the forests without envisioning the consequences of mountaintop removal in Appalachia" (85-6). This environmental subtext is significant to both academic and non-academic considerations of the novel.

*Serena* proves to be Ron Rash's most popular novel and has resulted in awards and translation into multiple languages. Hoping to capitalize on the novel's success, the movie rights were purchased by 2929 Production Company and a film directed by Susanne Bier, starring well-known actors Jennifer Lawrence and Bradley Cooper has been created.<sup>4</sup> Unfortunately, the movie proves to be a disastrous failure, specifically because all of Rash's stereotype-altering subtext has been. Rachel Harmon and the other Appalachian characters are moved to the periphery so Pemberton can be framed positively in the age-old story of man against the wilderness. Serena's character loses not only her power and intelligence, but also her identity outside of being Pemberton's wife, resulting in her ultimate immolation of herself after his death-by-panther. Even Rachel's crescendo in agency, the beating of Galloway in a train car, has been taken away from her and given to Pemberton, while she has become a pretty face with greasy hair, minimal lines, and no personality.

By relegating Appalachians to the fringes in a narrative that can be read as a radical call for defensive environmental action to protect Appalachia, the creators of the film destroyed the poignancy of the story and the ability for the audience to connect with the Appalachian

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<sup>4</sup> "Serena (2014)." *Internet Movie Database*. Web. 18 November 2015

characters and root for them against the Outsiders who oppress them. The failure to translate an epic, revolutionary novel into film may seem inconsequential, but in fact, the failure of this film that tries to take advantage of Appalachia in order to lionize the outsiders who both historically and currently are destroying it is actually extremely important as a signal for possible changing American attitudes. The people in charge of the script changed it and tried to cater to American exceptionalism and the media presentation of Appalachia with its predisposed imagery of the hillbilly. While the novel, which portrays realistic Western North Carolinians as empathetic and complex, succeeds, the film attempts to oversimplify the already oversimplified hillbilly stereotype and it fails atrociously. Hopefully, we are moving towards an American consciousness that wants to be presented with engaging reality instead of overwrought stereotype. As Williamson writes in his text about presentations of the hillbilly and Appalachia in film, "salvation based on stage freedom is often an illusion" (260). He cites Dollywood, suggesting that "while the success...pumps cash into Sevier County, the locals act the fool for more damn tourists, only reassuring those "better others" that urban values are supreme and urban power is secure" (260). Moving from an illusory and false staging of Appalachia towards a realistic and complex presentation of the mountains in modern society will, I think, ultimately be beneficial for everyone.

*Serena* is both a story of one young woman's survival in the face of adversity and the story of Appalachia's past and continued survival against those who come into the region seeking profit and leave destruction in their wakes. There are many moments and statements in the novel that are relevant to the current exploitation of Appalachia by extractive industries. At one point, Snipes says "most folks stay in the dark and then complain they can't see nothing" (185). *Serena* acts as a light into the darkness that is ignorance about Appalachia and gives readers a platform

from which they may see modern issues, as well as historical ones. While the destruction in the novel is clear cutting, all the statements condemning the resulting apocalyptic landscape are equally applicable to the results of fracking, mountaintop removal, and other detrimental effects resulting from coal mining. The section of the novel in which Snipes' logging crew cuts down the last tree ends with the following passage: "Ross finished the last of his moonshine and raised his gaze to take in the gray and brown valley floor, the scalped ridges of Noland mountain. 'So what happens when there ain't nothing left alive at all?' he asked" (159). I propose that Ron Rash's *Serena*, through an undermining and rewriting of the traditional Appalachian hillbilly stereotype and specifically the character of Rachel Harmon, poses this question to modern readers about modern Appalachia.

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