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# **“A Wound So Deep and Ragged:” The Vulnerable Body of Appalachia in Ron Rash’s Short Stories**

Senior Paper

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Sitting at a table in the corner of the Grey Pheasant, a restaurant depicted in the fictional pages of Ron Rash's short story "Honesty," main character Richard watches as his date, Lee Ann McIntyre, pulls her hair back from her neck. Lee Ann, unaware of the fact that Richard is married and was persuaded by his wife to go on the date in order to write an article about it, reveals "A welt long and thick as a cigarette...But it wasn't a welt. It was a scar, a scar that hadn't healed right, or maybe covered a wound so deep and ragged it could never heal right" (*Chemistry* 108, 116). As the rest of the story unravels Lee Ann's past and focuses on Richard's understanding of her life, Lee Ann's scar not only stands out as a defining moment in the plot of "Honesty," but also as indicative of a recurring, pervasive theme in Rash's fiction: the traumatized body. A large majority of Rash's characters are, like Lee Ann, subjects of various manifestations of violence, with their bodies, minds, and histories existing as trauma sites.

Though this trend is apparent in Rash's entire body of work, the condensed nature of the short story form intensifies the significance of these traumatized bodies, inviting a closer analysis of each singular instance of trauma. This in mind, Rash's short story collections *Chemistry and Other Stories* (2007) and *Burning Bright* (2010) provide a rich literary landscape within which to examine Rash's plethora of psychologically, socially, and physically traumatized characters.

Although the contemporary nature of Rash's fiction has limited the scope of critical attention to his writing, scholars have already begun to observe and discuss the role of violence in his work. Rash scholar Thomas Bjerre addresses Rash's violent themes in his essay "The Rough South of Ron Rash." In working to classify Rash's work

within a cultural/geographical literary demographic, Bjerre focuses on “Grit Lit” scholar Brian Carpenter’s definition of the “Rough South,” a demographic Carpenter describes as “mostly poor, white, rural, and unquestionably violent” (Bjerre 99). Bjerre then spends the rest of the essay constructing his argument that Rash’s work sits firmly within this tradition, as Rash “fills his work with characters firmly embedded in the Rough South” and “illustrates his concern with working-class characters and their struggles, with poor whites and their violent conflicts” (Bjerre 99,100). When working to determine the function and effect of Rash’s frequent incorporation of traumatized bodies, the notion of a “Rough South” provides a crucial lens through which to consider how bodies, violence, and landscape intersect in Rash’s work. However, Bjerre’s placement of Rash’s “rough” fiction within a vaguely Southern landscape glosses over the fact that Rash’s fiction inhabits and focuses on a very specific southern demographic: rural Appalachia. Born in Boilings Springs, SC, and spending his entire life in the Appalachian foothills and Western North Carolina, Rash rarely, if ever, sets his stories beyond the rural landscape of Western North Carolina and southern portions of the Appalachian mountains. Rash’s personal and literary intimacy with the Appalachian landscape and the hardship the region faces has led many critics to praise his work for its “fierce and primal connection to place, to the land through which he came to know the world, and to his strong ties to family and the ‘blood memory’ of his ancestry” (Wilhelm 1,2).

In other words, it may be more appropriate to consider Rash as fitting within a “Rough Appalachia,” rather than “Rough South,” tradition. This distinction is made not to deny the universality of Rash’s work, nor to limit Rash as a strictly “Appalachian author,” but rather to contextualize the intersection of body, violence, and landscape

within the framework of a specifically Appalachian brand of trauma. While the Rough South may be a region of violence and poverty, Rash's themes of violence, trauma, death, loss, loneliness, and separation seem colored with the distinct regional experience of a disadvantaged, exploited, and scarred Appalachian landscape. His stories, and their violence, rotate around the trauma of an area that has been frequently subjected to pervasive stereotyping, media misrepresentation, economic disadvantage, ruthless industrial progressivism, extractive industry, and the vast network of effects these forces carry in their wake.

However, Rash's short stories do not simply exist as a narrative lamentation of the trauma experienced by his landscape. There is a particular function and purpose to the way in which Rash encapsulates and displays this Appalachian brand of trauma, and it lies in the human essence of his work. Rash's short stories are rife with an array of complex, realistic, vulnerable, yet unquestioningly resilient characters who manage to embody the hardship of an Appalachian rural lifestyle without playing into stereotypes often constructed about those living in this region. Rash then takes the specifically Appalachian brand of trauma- it's scarred landscape, exploited people, and troubled history - and projects it onto the traumatized bodies of these distinctly Appalachian characters. Rather than simply mentioning the epidemic of substance abuse in Appalachia, he provides us the shivering, sickly bodies of addicts and misplaced parents in "Back of Beyond." Rather than describing the dangers of the logging industry and the damage it does to the landscape, he has a logger's leg in "Blackberries in June" sawed into and subsequently amputated: cut off from its body, just like the trees. Rather than stating that Appalachia is vulnerable to threatening exploitation by outsiders, he has Lee

Ann sitting at a table in a fancy restaurant, showing her scars and talking about a man trying to kill her to a journalist who wants to use her for his own career. In essence, these characters are vulnerable, and their vulnerability, when considered in combination with their embodiment of Appalachian rural lifestyles, mirrors the distinct vulnerability experienced by the Appalachian region and landscape.

In addressing and displaying the trauma faced by the Appalachian region in such a way, Rash's stories work to capture the realities of the region and those living within it while avoiding the oversentimentalization that has plagued public concern for Appalachia for so long. By projecting the trauma, hardship, and reality of Appalachian experience onto the human bodies of his characters, Rash fashions an Appalachian trauma that, essentially, walks and talks. This is crucial in that it serves to combat the generalization and "othering" of Appalachia and its experience by way of complicating, nuancing, and humanizing its plight. The Appalachian region becomes a bodily, human being, allowing his readers to more intimately understand and empathize with its hardship and struggle. Ultimately, Rash creates a path towards empathy that provides a crucial first step towards healing Appalachian trauma and correcting a public narrative that has for so long forgotten the diversity, nuance, and eclectic richness of the region.

### **Bodily Violence and Personal Injury**

When we consider Appalachian trauma in all its forms (environmental, cultural, social, economic) through the lens of violence, it is especially important to look to the space where acts of violence most frequently manifest themselves: on the body. Rash's character's bodies often exist as sites of violence. Lee Ann in "Honesty" has the thick scar along her neck, the woman in the waiting room in "Not Waving but Drowning"

holds her teeth in her hand as blood trickles out of her mouth, Charlton in “Blackberries in June” has to amputate his leg, characters in “Back of Beyond” and “The Ascent” are emaciated and sick from drug abuse, and so on. The violence that each of these characters is subjected to takes many forms. Some of the traumas are accidental (Charlton’s leg), some intentional (Lee Ann’s scar), and the origin of some are left ambiguous (the waiting room woman’s teeth), leaving the reader to speculate about how they occurred. This functions to diversify both cause and intention behind bodily injury, positing it as neither the exclusive result of negligence or aggression, but as a phenomenon with a multiplicity and spectrum of causation.

Rash’s depictions of violence upon the body are especially powerful, however, in his illustrations of how bodily violence not only originates from, but subsequently affects, almost every aspect of his characters’ lives. Lee Ann tells Richard in “Honesty” that her scar came from her ex-husband’s attempt to kill her, explaining that he “swore he would kill me when he got out [of prison],” and “that’s why I need a knight in shining armor...to get me away from here, away from North Carolina, someplace where he can’t find me when he gets out” (*Chemistry* 116). With this revealed information, the scar becomes not only a representation of a singular instance of bodily harm, but also of a physically and psychologically traumatic relationship that still haunts Lee Ann, even after the perpetrator has been imprisoned. Her inability to escape or forget her trauma is emphasized when she later tells Richard that her ex “still sends me pictures he draws...Pictures of me with just my head, no body. My eyes are open in those pictures. My mouth too. I’m screaming” (*Chemistry* 118). In another example, if we consider the miscarriages that take place in Rash’s story “Not Waving but Drowning” as a type of bodily trauma, then we again see

Rash reveal the widespread impact of such trauma, as the narrator contemplates:

“Something happens to a couple after a miscarriage, you cry together, you talk to the counselor and preacher...but there’s still a part of that pain you can’t share...You carry that pain inside like a tumor, and though it may shrink with time, it never disappears, and it’s malignant” (*Chemistry* 81). Similarly, when Charlton loses his leg in “Blackberries in June,” his wife tells her sister-in-law, Linda, that “I got three young ones to feed and buy school clothes for, and a disability check ain’t going to be enough to do that” (*Chemistry* 66). It is later revealed that Linda will most likely have to give up her and her husband’s dream house that they’ve been working on for years in order to help Charlton’s family survive after the injury. In each of these examples, Rash establishes a connection between bodily harm and other modes of trauma, be it psychological, relational, or economic, in his characters’ lives.

In revealing physical violence in this fashion, as a force that reflects upon, causes, and encapsulates such varying aspects of his characters’ inner and outer lives, Rash “shows deep understanding of social and psychological mechanisms leading to the inevitable violence and death and its consequences” (Bjerre 103). This multi-faceted depiction of physical violence not only makes the issue of violence more complex, but this complexity further strengthens the connection between Rash’s characters’ trauma and the rural Appalachian region. In an article analyzing personal injury and trauma statistics in rural vs. urban Appalachia, Dr. Levi Proctor et al posit that “trauma is a disease with identifiable causes and profound financial, social, personal, and psychological impacts (213). We can see, in the similarities between Proctor et al and Bjerre’s language, that violence both in Rash’s fictional world and in the real Appalachian society is not a

spontaneous, random occurrence, but the result of, and contributor to, the psychological and social milieu it is born within. This nuancing of the concept of physical injury, both in relation to the bodies of Rash's characters and the body of Appalachia, is important in that it resists oversimplification, denying the reader the ability to view the injury in isolation from the web of cause and effect that it exists within.

The web of economic, environmental, and social conditions that make rural Appalachia susceptible to injury also play a hand in preventing the region from being able to heal such injuries. When developing Appalachian injury as a regional epidemic, Proctor et al concentrate on the lack of proper healing systems as one of the reasons personal injury and trauma are so rampant in the rural Appalachian area. Low population density, distance and sparsity of trauma centers, insufficient roadways, and dearth of funding contribute to a "lack of [the] resources" needed to create and maintain "successful management of traumatic injuries," which "requires prompt and efficient transport, evaluation, and treatment of injuries" (Proctor et al. 213). Thus, while the same injuries may occur across the general Appalachian region, "injuries incurred in rural areas are often more severe and have poorer outcomes, including higher mortality rates, than those occurring in urban areas" (Proctor et al. 216). In fact, "smaller rural counties" have a trauma-based mortality rate that is 27% higher than in larger urban counties (Proctor et al. 216). Thus, the specific geographic and social conditions of rural Appalachia cause the region's trauma to be particularly exacerbated by its inability to heal from said trauma.

This aspect of physical injury is also reflected in Rash's works, considering that what the large majority of Rash's physically wounded characters have in common is that the violence upon their body does not, and most likely will not, disappear. It is

permanent, and the characters are forced to live with their scars, their missing teeth, their amputated leg, and for the rest of their lives carry a reminder of the trauma they faced. Rarely does Rash present an injury that has fully healed. His stories often center around the moment of injury, the waiting period before the injury may or may not be healed, or death. Even wounds that have technically “healed,” such as Lee Ann’s, “hadn’t healed right, or...could never heal right” (*Chemistry* 116). This reading of Rash’s permanently physically maimed characters, while reflective of the region’s lack of resources to properly heal from physical injuries, can also be broadened to apply to the more general discussion of Appalachian trauma. The permanence of Lee Ann’s scar and Charlton’s amputated leg is not simply a commentary on poor trauma systems, but could also be interpreted as an embodiment of the entire region’s inability to heal from, ignore, or forget the trauma it has been subjected to. Appalachia, just like Rash’s characters, must wear its scars as a reminder of its own vulnerability, past and present.

### **Substance Abuse**

One particular form of personal and regional trauma that Rash focuses on in his fiction is the use, abuse, and proliferation of drugs in the area, particularly methamphetamine. Many of Rash’s stories, such as “Back of Beyond,” “The Ascent,” and “Deep Gap,” center almost entirely around meth use and its effect on the user, the user’s family, and their community. The issue of substance abuse has been labeled as “a major concern in Appalachia,” and its effects can be seen in the fields of public health, public perception of Appalachia, and in the personal and familial lives of those living with addictions in the region (Dunn et al. 251). In a similar vein to Proctor et al’s explanation of the conditions that lead to poor trauma systems, Dr. Michael Dunn et al, in

the essay “Substance Abuse” for the collection *Health and Well-Being in Appalachia*, write that “In pockets of rural Appalachia, poor economic prospects, high unemployment rates, limited transportation networks, long distances to medical facilities..[have] influenced the community’s ability to cope with the production, distribution, and use of drugs, illicit and otherwise” (Dunn et al. 251). Thus, Dunn proposes substance abuse in the area as a product of societal conditions that make it difficult for the region to resist, or cope with, the influx of drugs into the area. This idea is mirrored by character Danny in “Back of Beyond,” as he states “It ain’t all my fault....There’s no good jobs in this country. You can’t make a living farming no more. If there’d been something for me, a good job I mean” (*Burning Bright* 38). In both Danny and Dunn’s sentiments, we see substance abuse posed as a trauma that stems from other traumas. The poor economy, loss of jobs, and the disappearance of local farming opportunities have made it all too easy for individuals to turn to meth use, and all too difficult for them to escape that path once they are on it. This outlook on Danny’s addiction is supported by his parents, with his mother repeating three times in a conversation with main character Parson that “It ain’t his fault,” and even shifts the blame onto herself, pondering “Maybe I done something wrong raising him, petted him too much since he was my only boy” (*Burning Bright* 30, 31). Danny’s father, rather, blames the substance, saying “That stuff, whatever you call it, has done made my boy crazy. He don’t know nothing but a craving” (*Burning Bright* 29). Regardless, each of the characters seem hesitant to place the blame for the family’s struggles on Danny himself, even though he has forced his parents out of their home, sold most of the items in their house and on the farm, and ultimately ruined their lives.

These characters' reactions to Danny's problem function to position him as a victim, causing his character to exist as a depository for traumatic societal forces outside of his control. However, a reading of Danny as a blameless victim, or simply a receptacle for the Appalachian trauma that caused the drug epidemic, is complicated by main character Parson, Danny's uncle. Parson calls Danny a "damn thief," and upon visiting his old family farm, where Danny and his family live, feels only "the burn of anger directed at his nephew" (*Burning Bright* 20,27). Furthermore, after hearing Danny's mother defend him with her repeated "It ain't his fault," Parson replies "Enough of it is," and then forces Danny to take a bus to Atlanta, where Rash gives no indication that his addiction will heal, or even that Danny will survive (*Burning Bright* 31). In considering Danny as an embodiment of the Appalachian drug epidemic, Parson's view then shifts some of the blame onto the region itself, encouraging Danny, and thus rural Appalachian drug addicts, to take responsibility for their own actions. However, this reading is further nuanced by Parson's questionable integrity. Throughout "Back of Beyond," Rash incorporates frequent references to Parson's pawn shop profiting off of the meth addicts selling their things to buy drugs, directly stating that "It would be a profitable day, because Parson knew they'd come to his pawn shop to barter before emptying every cold-remedy self in town" (*Burning Bright* 19). Even worse, Parson takes advantage of these people's desperation, offering one woman twenty dollars for a butter churn that he knows he can sell for at least \$100. Perhaps most upsetting, the story makes clear that the woman knows the churn's real value but relegates herself to accepting anything for it. As such instances build throughout the story, Parson's blaming of the addicts is undermined by not only his lack of compassion for them, but also his position

as a beneficiary of their disease. When we apply this observation to the context of Appalachian trauma and history, the dynamic between Parson and Danny begins to feel eerily familiar to exploitative relationships with various cultural outsiders (such as Local Color writers and extractive industries) who profited off of the hardship of the Appalachian people without accepting any blame for their traumatic circumstances.

Not only does Rash use the relationship between Parson, Danny, and Danny's parents to complicate the causation and liability of substance abuse, but he also uses them to embody the *effect* drug abuse has on the region and its inhabitants. If Danny exists as a sort of depository for the Appalachian trauma that caused the drug epidemic, then Danny's parents' bodies come to represent the feeling of loss and displacement that follows, or is the direct effect of, substance abuse. Literally forced out of their homes by Danny's drug use, they tell Parson that "It's just better, easier, if we're out here" (*Burning Bright* 28). Their appearances, however, contradict this statement, as Parson notices "Ray was sixty-five years old but looked eighty, his mouth sunk in, skinny and feeble...they both looked bad-hungry, weary, sickly. And scared" (*Burning Bright* 29). Considering the hints in the story to the prevalence of addicts in the region- as we see with Parson's commentary on his clientele- Danny's parents can then be read as an embodiment of an Appalachian people and culture worn thin and frail by rampant drug use. Furthermore, Danny has been selling various tools, furniture, and items from the farm to support his habit, as Parson recalls "times when Danny pawned a chainsaw or a posthole digger or some other piece of the farm" (*Burning Bright* 29). His parents' bodies, as well as their land and lifestyle, are literally disappearing due to their son's drug habit, mirroring a similar loss of culture and lifestyle in Appalachia as the region

struggles to cope with the increase in substance abuse.

Furthermore, Rash seems to leave little room for hope in “Back of Beyond,” as the entire story ends with Parson knowing it will be okay if he opens his shop late, because “Whatever time he showed up, they’d still be there” (*Burning Bright* 43). With “they” referring to the addicts, this sentiment echoes the permanence of trauma that we see in many of Rash’s vulnerable injured bodies. It seems to hint that the problem is not going, and perhaps will not go, away. However, Rash’s portrayal of the substance abuse problem is not pointless, nor entirely hopeless, as substance abuse is not only “a major concern in Appalachia,” as Dunn et al writes, but also a solidified tenet of the new Appalachian stereotype (Dunn et al. 215). Rash’s addicted characters, as well as their families, work to resist the oversimplification of meth use that often occurs within stereotypical labeling. By complicating his characters, not crafting them as blameless nor solely responsible for their own addiction, Rash again encourages readers to think differently about Appalachian trauma, viewing the drug epidemic as a complicated web. If his readers cannot point their fingers at a singular cause for Danny’s problem, then it makes it much more difficult for them to singularly diagnose the Appalachian problem. This functions to deconstruct and humanize the stereotype surrounding Appalachian drug use, as well as create a better understanding and awareness of the very real problem that exists and harms the region today.

### **Cultural Violence and Stereotyping**

Rash’s deconstruction of the stereotype surrounding drug abuse in Appalachia is just one tenet of Rash’s more pervasive project of dismantling the public’s reliance on Appalachian stereotypes as a whole. Rural Appalachia has long been regarded as a region

dwelling in the habits and confines of a past civilization, with its people clinging to ways of life lost or forgotten by the modern American society. This perception can be traced back to the late 1800s, and can be witnessed in the writing of William Goodell Frost, then-president of Berea College and an educator largely known for promoting the needs of Appalachian America. Frost writes in his essay “Our Contemporary Ancestors in the Southern Mountains” of “our eighteenth-century neighbors” “who are living to all intents and purposes in colonial times!” (Frost). He speaks of the mountain dialect, diet, labor, and trading systems as historical artifacts that would seem at first “rude and repellent,” but posits that such a culture is useful in its existence as a point by which to measure the progress of the modern man (Frost).

Considering Frost’s position as president of a college specifically designed to provide higher education to the Appalachian population that may not have been afforded such opportunities previously, his article was presumably written with the noble intention of expressing the needs and value of the Appalachian culture and people. However, Frost’s work, like that of many missionaries that would influx into the region over the next century with the intent of educating the “poor mountain white,” was a double-edged sword. The propaganda and media presence of missionaries, combined with the flourishing of Local Color writing, began to develop and promote the mold for a dichotomous Appalachian stereotype that took root in the American consciousness and has continued to be a pervasive force in perception of Appalachia today.

Depictions of Appalachia in past Local Color writing and media representation commonly fell in one of two categories: the first, a rugged, independent, fiercely protective pioneer building a life from the dirt through hardwork and determination; the

second, an illiterate, violent, toothless, incestuous mountain redneck drinking moonshine and scraping together a life through mischief and debauchery. While these images may be less prominent today than they were in the 20th century, they still linger in public perception of Appalachia, or have transformed into the “white trash,” trailer-park-dwelling, meth-using depiction of people in the region. The dependence on these stereotypes is not just found in literature, however, but has become prominent in the American entertainment industry as well. Shows like *Beverly Hillbillies* and the more recent *Buckwild* aired on national television networks, the Hatfield & McCoy feud has become a staple in dinner theater comedy, and cartoonists like Paul Webb and Al Capps reached fame for their depictions of “Mountain Boys” and “L’il Abner.” *Deliverance*, a widely popular movie with a plot based on Atlanta men being stalked and terrorized by backwards country-folk in the woods, was even praised by the National Film Registry as being “culturally, historically, and aesthetically significant” (“Cinematic Classics”).

Such stereotypes are not only offensive and largely inaccurate, but have had very real, disastrous effects on the rural Appalachian culture and landscape. The “othering” of Appalachia by way of such public perception spawned attitudes towards the region that made it easier for capitalistic, “modern” industrial and cultural forces to take advantage of the people and land in the region under the guise of helping, civilizing, or progressing the area. William Schumann writes in his essay “Place and Place-making in Appalachia”:

Whether defined by the intensity of poverty, the dominance of energy interests, or the persistence of unorthodox lifestyles, each of these Appalachian stories operated on the principle of marking regional difference from a larger, more cosmopolitan United States. In fact,

Appalachia has been defined by its distance from mainstream ideals and the practices of American modernity since the nineteenth century.

(Schumann 2)

This view of Appalachia resulted in unfair land negotiations, disastrous labor conditions, assimilation-based education techniques, and a general disrespect for the lifestyle and humanity of the Appalachian people. In essence, the tendency to classify Appalachia as a homogeneous landscape and community defined by its difference from “modern” American culture opened the pathway for cultural trauma and created long standing tension between Appalachian natives and “outsiders.”

This tension and its effects on the Appalachian people and environment are a frequent source of physical and emotional trauma in Rash’s fiction. If we look again to Local Color writing and the exploitation of the Appalachian culture in the media as a sort of cultural violence or aggression, the relationship between Richard and Lee Ann in “Honesty” can then be read as a fictional expression of that very real, very damaging dynamic. Readers first meet Lee Ann through the lens of Richard, the main character and narrator in the story, as his wife, Kelly, urges him to go on a date with a woman she finds in a newspaper ad so that he can write an article about it for the *Carolina Tempo*. The woman, who we learn to be Lee Ann MacIntyre, dubs herself in the ad as “Hopelessly Lonely,” carrying on to write that she is looking for “A knight in shining armor” who “likes children” and “understands the hardships of life” (*Chemistry* 108). Kelly comments that the ad had “no mention of whether she still has any teeth,” and that the woman probably has “three or four” kids. She even orders Richard to call and tell Lee Ann that he is taking her to the upscale restaurant The Grey Pheasant, because “knights in shining

armor don't take their dates to Wendy's or Waffle House" (*Chemistry* 108). The language of the ad and Kelly's commentary in mind, a knowledge of common Appalachian stereotypes leads readers to align Lee Ann with classic depictions of Appalachian poverty, thus placing Kelly amongst those who perpetuate such stereotypes.

Furthermore, the fact that Kelly is urging Richard to write about his evening with Lee Ann for publication in a public paper exists as a broader metaphor for anthropologists responsible for writing articles that grossly misrepresented and capitalized on the struggles of Appalachian people. This representation is expanded by Lee Ann's complete and utter vulnerability throughout the encounter. Throughout the story, she remains wholly unaware of Richard's true intentions, even after learning that he has a wife and asking him why he came on the date, inquiring "Was it some kind of joke?" Richard then lies to her, saying "I was unhappy with my marriage. I wanted to be with someone else awhile," and thus Lee Ann never learns of his intentions to exploit her life and write the article (*Chemistry* 118). This situational vulnerability is reinforced by the more pervading vulnerability of Lee Ann's entire life, as readers learn of her ex-husband that is threatening to kill her, and her dependency on the "knight in shining armor" figure to help her escape. Thus, in both the predatory-journalistic scenario with Richard, as well as in her revealed backstory, Lee Ann's trauma and vulnerability become reflective of an Appalachian history tormented by threatening outside influences and the exploitation of their culture by people trying to profit off of it.

The vast social gap between Richard and Lee Ann, perhaps signified best by Kelly's commentary that "you're giving her a free meal at a restaurant where they wouldn't even let her waitress," seems to narrow, however, by the end of the story

(*Chemistry* 111). Richard, struggling himself under the oppressive and manipulative thumb of his wife, comes to learn not only of the horror that permeates Lee Ann's life, but also of the subtle similarities their lives share. He realizes this as Lee Ann is "telling me about the upper part of the county where she had grown up, where I went trout fishing some days when I tired of pretending to be a writer. She knew the places I fished, and that seemed to make me more credible" (*Chemistry* 115). This intersection between their seemingly opposite lives comes to a climax towards the end of the story as Richard holds her in the car and then walks her to her trailer door, thinking that "I could almost believe, for a brief moment, that had we met at a different time and place we might have even fallen in love" (*Chemistry* 119). This realization in Richard, partnered with his decision to not write the article and his noting his own comfortable life in which "all that was required of me was that I look in the mirror from time to time," seems to actively combat the predatory-journalistic scenario we are set up for at the beginning of the story (*Chemistry* 119). Though Richard's transformation may be miniscule, and though each of them continue to resume their separate lives, the depiction of Lee Ann and the slight altering of Richard's understanding of her functions to dismantle the idea that Appalachian poverty exists as a definable trope to be captured and publicized by writers who do not understand the reality of those individuals. Even though Richard is from the same region and shares certain experiences with Lee Ann, he appears to recognize both his relationship to her as a social outsider and his inability to understand the complexities of her life, and thus Richard, as well as readers, come to reject her position as an Appalachian stereotype and the ability to capture accurately a life that is not one's own.

However, while this realized connection may function to make readers of Rash

realize their own connections to the people of Appalachia they were previously othering, Rash again nuances the relationship in the fact that Richard does absolutely nothing to actually help Lee Ann out of her threatened, vulnerable position, instead opting to romanticize their encounter. Thus, Rash personifies this cultural trauma in a way that addresses both obvious, aggressive stereotyping as well as negligent, unhelpful romanticization. As readers are aligned with Richard, due to narration as well as his position in the encounter, this realization functions to encourage us *not* to be Richard, and to not use the understanding Rash provides us to romanticize Appalachia, but perhaps rather to actually combat the forces that are threatening the region.

### **Landscape**

The final, and perhaps the most widely discussed, form of Appalachian trauma that Rash infuses into the vulnerable bodies of his characters is the natural Appalachian landscape. The theme of nature and the natural world is one of the most prominent themes across the spectrum of Rash's work, and is frequently noted in Rash criticism. Randall Wilhelm, in his introductory essay to *The Ron Rash Reader*, states at the very beginning that "to begin to understand the many threads running throughout Rash's work, it is illuminating to look into the natural world from which he comes" (Wilhelm 1). He continues to posit that "for Rash, the Appalachian landscape performs as a type of conduit, a place of conjuring where the ghosts and mysteries of the past live on both in memory and imagination, which he fuses together in tightly crafted works of art that 'raise the dead' and give them human voice" (Wilhelm 2). This relationship between the human and the natural, if the two can be separated, has been emphasized by Rash himself in many interviews. He states in an interview with Joyce Compton Brown that "I truly

believe that the more we know of one place, the more we're going to make that place universal, because if you go far enough and deep enough into it, you're going to realize what its essence is, and this essence is going to be human, to involve what it means to be a human being, what defines us" (Compton Brown 345). In Rash's fiction, he illustrates that this avenue between intimacy with landscape and the discovery of human nature runs both ways, as the further readers delve into the vulnerable bodies and minds of Rash's characters, the more intimately they are able to understand the vulnerability and trauma experienced by the natural Appalachian setting, and what effect this has had on the region's inhabitants.

Trauma to the Appalachian landscape, much of which is the result of extractive industry, has left the mountains and surrounding land as physically scarred as Rash's characters, often in irreversible ways. Michael S. Hendryx writes in his article "Health and the Physical Environment" that "the region is faced with a number of serious environmental health threats" of which he includes coal plants, coal mining, logging, and the more recent threat of fracking (Hendryx 50). The coal industry in particular, while providing jobs to a large portion of the Appalachian people, has had a devastating effect on the Appalachian landscape and the overall health of the region. The air quality levels in Appalachia are "among the worst in the nation," and the process of mountaintop removal, which requires clearing all vegetation, blasting the mountain, and dumping the excess into the surrounding valleys, has been labeled "devastating" for "nearby communities" as it contaminates water, causes flooding, threatens the biodiversity of the region, and irreversibly damages the tops of mountains (Hendryx 51). When cut off, the tops do not grow back. The effect that extractive industry has had on the Appalachian

people and region is discussed by Ronald Eller in his powerful keynote speech to the Society of Appalachian Historians in 2012. In it, he stresses the importance of “confronting the complex structural challenges of an extractive economy that has drained the region of its physical and human wealth, and of an extractive political system that has benefitted the few at the expense of the many” (Eller). In his statement we can see that extractive industry has not just harmed the physical environment in Appalachia, but has infiltrated its culture and economy in a similarly traumatic fashion.

As Eller broadens his discussion from the dangers of extractive industry to the importance of the Appalachian landscape as a whole, he states:

How we use the land affects how we see ourselves, how we relate to each other, the values that we pass on to our children, and the meanings that we give to life. Rich, vibrant landscapes can give us hope and confidence for tomorrow; desolate landscapes limit future possibilities and can leave us constrained by hopelessness and despair. Preserving the Appalachian bio-system is at the very core of preserving an Appalachian identity for our children’s future. (Eller)

As Rash’s fiction works to embody the trauma to the natural landscape in the vulnerable bodies of his characters, the story “Not Waving but Drowning” provides a poignant commentary on Eller’s idea of preserving the region for “our children’s future.” The story is framed by a couple sitting in the waiting room, fearing that the wife is having a third miscarriage. While the husband sits and waits for the news, he reminisces on the day they conceived this child, a day in which they sailed over a lake made by Duke Power flooding the region during the construction of a dam. He narrates that “Eighty feet down

were farmhouses ...barns, woodsheds, even mailboxes. Everything was there but the people.” Later he ponders the idea that maybe “there were still people down there, people who didn’t know they were buried under eighty feet of water” (*Chemistry* 79). As the story continues and readers can begin to assume the couple is likely infertile, their inability to conceive a child, partnered with the image of a flooded landscape and drowned village, lends itself to an almost apocalyptic reading, one that suggests there may be no future.

The intersection between landscape and body is not exclusive to land destruction, however. As we can see with Rash’s story “Into the Gorge,” Rash also incorporates the trauma of land being taken from Appalachian natives, even if this land is being preserved by the National Parks service. The story opens with a depiction of Jesse’s great aunt, who “had been born on this land, lived on it eight decades, and knew it as well as she knew her husband and children” (133). This serves to solidify Jesse’s familial connection to the land, making the scene of him being arrested for trying to harvest ginseng his father planted even more poignant. Furthermore, Jesse is sixty-eight years old, and frequently throughout the story laments his “arthritic knees” and his weakness and exhaustion, referring to himself as a “creaky rust-corroded machine” (*Burning Bright* 136, 146). His body, then, exists in sharp contrast to the young, healthy park ranger from Charlotte, who catches Jesse with the ginseng and mocks him as they walk through the woods. Jesse’s body is old and disappearing, just like the land he inhabits and the way of life so attached to that land. This feeling of disappearance is reinforced by Jesse’s thoughts as he is being led by the park ranger, as he reveals “the world, the very ground he stood on, felt like it was evaporating beneath him” (*Burning Bright* 140). In these and many other stories,

Rash incorporates the loss of land as a major theme in his fiction, and a major force in his characters' lives, often one that reflects upon, causes, or exacerbates the trauma to their lives and bodies.

### **Empathy**

Analyzing how Rash embodies cultural and physical violence in the vulnerable bodies of his characters is not complete, however, without examining the effect these bodies have on the reader, and what function this effect may have in regards to promoting Appalachian healing. Xavier Reyes, in the conclusionary chapter "Corporeal Readings" of his work *The Body Gothic: Corporeal Transgression in Contemporary Literature and Horror Film*, discusses at length the use of grotesque, maimed, or disfigured bodies in literature. He argues that "to involve readers or viewers viscerally, to actively engage them in a self-aware game, relies on the embodied nature of the human and on our ability to experience fictional mutilation vicariously" (Reyes 166). In other words, readers' ability to have an instinctual, gut reaction to fiction, or to cultivate their own self-awareness from it, requires that the author give the reader the tools for establishing empathy with, in this specific case, the pain being experienced by the characters. Rash's primary tool for doing so lies in the innate human quality of his characters. He makes them relatable through his emphasis on the everyday extremes of their lives, their complicated relationships and backstories, and his creation of them as fallible, often times contradictory human beings. Randall Wilhelm comments on this trend in Rash's characterization, stating that "Rash's characters are often dynamic individuals, bending the world to their will while simultaneously crashing against the constraints of their own bodies. No matter how close a character approaches myth, the

indelible marks of human suffering are always visible” (Wilhelm 18). This commentary from Wilhelm emphasizes that while, yes, Rash’s characters may edge closely to “myth,” or symbolism, there is something inarguably human about them. This strengthens our empathetic connection to the characters, as we can recognize such “indelible marks of human suffering” and call upon our own experience as humans to more completely understand the hardship of these characters.

However, Rash takes this notion of empathy one step further, as his readers are not only experiencing an empathetic connection with Lee Ann, or any of Rash’s other characters, but also with the region and trauma that these characters embody. This is accomplished through his characters definitive connection to their landscape, a particularly Appalachian concept in itself. Fred Waage, renowned scholar of Appalachian studies, writes in his article “Exploring the ‘Life Territory:’ Ecology and Ecocriticism in Appalachia” that the connection and interdependency of people and their landscape is particularly apparent in the Appalachian region. He argues that “the illusion that we are exempt from dependency on a particular space and its finite possibilities is easier to sustain in some places than in others...On land laboriously invested, where families and communities are deeply rooted, human culture and physical space are deeply entwined. The Appalachian mountains and their outlying land have been such a space” (Waage 135). This sentiment seems to mirror Eller’s earlier insistence on the need to preserve the Appalachian landscape in order to promote hope and a healthy future for the region. This symbiosis, or interdependency, is also widely apparent in Rash’s fiction, as his characters are intrinsically connected to the Appalachian landscape in their embodiment of its hardship and struggle.

All of this in mind, the self-awareness that Reyes mentions stemming from a visceral, empathetic response to literature is, in the case of Rash's fiction, both a self and regional awareness, causing us to feel the plight of the area and become aware of our relationship to it. In considering how, in the past, an "othering" of Appalachia and a lack of understanding both caused and perpetuated much of the trauma rural Appalachia has faced, this awareness is no small feat. It is not simply a clever rhetorical or literary trick, but should be understood as a way of Rash reclaiming the narrative and perception of his homeland. When readers meet Lee Ann, when we meet Danny, Charlton, Jesse, and each of the traumatized characters that walk through Rash's fiction, we meet rural Appalachia, and we meet it without the filters of stereotype, romance, pity, exploitation, or various intentions of outside influences. At the intersection of body, violence, and setting, Rash presents the vulnerable body of rural Appalachia, with its deep and ragged wounds, as a region to be listened to, conversed with, understood, and empathized with. It is from within this position of empathy that readers can then take their own steps to promote a healthy image of Appalachia, reject the forces that threaten the region, and begin to consider how to aid in healing the region's trauma.