

Savanah Alberts
Pearl S. Buck Writing Competition

Hootin' and Hollerin': The Portrayal of Appalachians in Popular Media

“How could a bunch of hillbillies possibly buy a mansion like this?” In the first line of the first episode of the first season of *The Beverly Hillbillies*, premiering in 1962, the narrator immediately establishes our lovable Clampett family as lesser than the viewer. As the camera backtracks and follows the family to their home in an undisclosed (but presumably southern, probably Appalachian) state, the viewer is inundated with stereotypical vocabulary, accents, and speech patterns that imply that the Clampett family is less intelligent, less powerful, less capable, less educated, and generally lesser than the viewer, the narrator, and the residents of their new home in Beverly Hills. It is so impossible to imagine them in a position of power that the result is a popular comedy show that aired for close to a decade.

Thus the Appalachian dialect, though widely portrayed in television, film, comic strips, and literature, is very much a symbol of how some folks are oppressed. With these depictions, both older and modern, showing them as unintelligent, uneducated, and generally ignorant solely due to their dialect, the stereotype of the "hick" or "redneck" has become one of the main perceived characteristics of Appalachia. Often, authors from outside the region have a negative opinion of its citizens, and use their prose or films to reflect this. Appalachian characters are shown to speak more slowly, and exhibit features that are characteristic of the dialect, including a-prefixing (eg. “we were a-fishing in the pond”) and ‘incorrect’ verb conjugation (eg. “we was on our way”). This paints them in a negative light and perpetuates the idea that all Appalachians are uneducated and lazy.

However, Appalachian authors have a different take on things. They work to dispel the negative stereotypes against their own people, or at least to present them realistically without

generalizing millions of people. They write from what they know, and in that sense portray a more nuanced perception of the region and the people within it. These works exhibit similar language features, but focus more on the lives and stories of the characters within them, rather than their “deficient” vocabularies or “ungrammatical” way of speaking. In this paper, I will discuss the varying nature of depictions of Appalachians in popular comic strips and novels, and how they conform to or fight against the negative stereotypes of the region. I will also discuss how authors use specifically linguistic stereotypes to demonstrate underlying character traits of ignorance and laziness, or, conversely, how they use their linguistic features to highlight their differences from other southerners or Americans.

In a time when most comic strips dealt with northern issues, the first images of southern citizens in comics distinguished their accents as one of their main character traits. A common technique to signify dialectal difference was the use of eye dialect. As defined by the Merriam-Webster dictionary, eye dialect is “the use of misspellings that are based on standard pronunciations but are usually intended to suggest a speaker’s illiteracy or [their] use of generally nonstandard pronunciations”. Examples of this are “sez” for “says,” “kow” for “cow,” etc. The two places this feature appears most prominently are in the strips *Li'l Abner* by Al Capp and *Barney Google and Snuffy Smith* by Fred Lasswell. Though both authors are from outside Appalachia (New England and Florida, respectively) they created comic strips that depict the stereotype of the hillbilly-esque Appalachian mountaineer around the same time: *Abner* became popular in the 1930s and '40s, and *Snuffy* began to eclipse his friend Barney Google in the late '30s. Both strips continued into at least the 1970s, with some versions of *Snuffy* still being published in the early 21st century. In a 1978 strip from Lasswell, Snuffy’s wife (“Maw”) says to their son, “it’s time fer yore bath” and later, “when ye git all purtied up”. Here, misspellings

signify to the audience that Maw doesn't know how to correctly pronounce words, which sets off a prescriptivist signal that she is less educated or less intelligent. Similarly, an *Abner* strip shows a busty female (whose waist is smaller than her neck, which brings up a different kind of problem in Capp's comics) telling her partner: "we'd hafta live in a swamp, an' assosheate wif ally-gators". Another shows Abner saying, "corn-graj-oo-lay-shuns" to a woman—meaning 'congratulations'. Orthographically, the characters seem to mispronounce the words they use, but the spellings actually indicate standard pronunciation when transcribed into the phonetic alphabet. These "mispronunciations" serve to perpetuate the stereotype of the uneducated southern hillbilly.

Similarly, Laswell and Capp use different characteristics of the Appalachian dialect to further link the characters to the negative stereotypes "inherent" in the region. One of the most well-known features of Appalachian English is the use of a-prefixing, as stated above. In one *Li'l Abner* strip, a character gives a perfect example: "Look! Salomey's a-floatin' past th' winder!" This pops up many times throughout both comic strips. Another feature is the dropping of the "th" in words like "Smith" and "with" so that Snuffy's last name would be pronounced "Smif" by his friends, and he would be "wif" his wife at their home. Additionally, words ending in -ing are pronounced without their final velar nasal, so that "singing" would become "singin"; this can be seen in "a-floatin'" in the example above. These features are considered vernacular, and therefore "wrong" or "bad" because they don't conform to the standard. In the same way that eye dialect is used to point out illiteracy, these point to a lack of education about the standard varieties of English taught in the conventional classroom, and show Snuffy, Abner, and their friends and family to be unintelligent and uneducated.

Both *Li'l Abner* and *Snuffy Smith* make use of the stereotype of the lazy, dirty hillbilly as well. In an entry on *Abner*, the *Encyclopedia Britannica* describes him as a “muscle-bound hillbilly, as lazy as he was dull-witted” and then continues on to describe his father as a “lazy, illiterate husband...[who] did little more than lie about”. Interestingly, these perceptions of the lazy hillbilly only extend to the male characters—the same entry implies Abner’s mother is the one that does all of the work (“Mammy, the unofficial mayor of Dogpatch...kept the Yokum household running”) and also describes Abner’s eventual wife, Daisy Mae Scragg, as “beautiful yet hard-working”. This extends into one of the comic’s main legacies, Sadie Hawkins Day, in which women in Dogpatch are “allowed to marry any bachelor they could chase down and capture” (Britannica). In addition to perpetuating a stereotype about the emotional vacancy of men and the female desire to “settle down,” Sadie Hawkins Day proved that the women in Dogpatch were more forward-thinking and industrious than the men—after all, they were the ones who had to do all the work to not only catch their husbands, but keep up with the household afterward. In addition, this idea of looking down on the men but somehow preserving the women from too much negative judgment perpetuates the idea that women need to be saved and kept pure for male consumption—even if that male is on the other side of the fourth wall.

Snuffy even seems to be aware of the idea of his own laziness. He is frequently seen lying around as his wife cooks, cleans, and cares for their son, and in one strip, he seems to realize that fact quite abruptly. Their son enters, wearing his clothes backwards, and tells them about “opposite day” at school, which prompts their following responses:



His concern at the prospect of physical labor shows how rarely he does anything more than Maw is doing in the last panel. Lasswell repeatedly depicts Snuffy in this way, and convinces the reader (who, at the time the comic was popular, did not have much exposure to any actual Appalachians if they lived outside the region) that this is the norm for all men in the area.

Snuffy also perpetuates the idea of backcountry folk who don't pay their taxes—maybe because they don't work. Lasswell uses eye-dialect again to show the ignorance of Snuffy in his



spelling of “revenuers” or agents from the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms, considered outsiders by the folk in the town of Hootin’ Holler. The anger in his friend’s face at the accusation in the image to the left clearly shows the emotions surrounding these agents, who posed the threat of shutting down one’s

illegal moonshine operation. The implied joke is that the residents of Hootin’ Holler would never be “revenooers” because that would imply a position of power, something obviously so absurd that even Snuffy himself can’t entertain the thought. Similar strips of the comic go on to discuss the actual revenuers as outsiders, and paint a picture of a suspicious hillbilly who raises his gun to every stranger who enters his property. This implies that these men and women do not have the brain capacity to accept that strangers are not necessarily always dangerous intruders. This connects to another common portrayal of Snuffy: that he’s always in jail for breaking some law or another, or perhaps for avoiding his taxes, or operating a distillery, or shooting an innocent Yank wandering through the holler. In a later strip when Barney Google returns to Hootin’

Holler, he encounters a mailman who points him in a different direction than the one in which he is traveling: “Um...Smif’s place is thataway, Barney,” to which Barney replies “Yep! But Snuffy prob’ly ain’t!” while pointing towards the town jail. Again, poor Snuffy is portrayed as the lazy, law-breakin’ hillbilly who can’t get his act together.

Time and time again throughout both of these popular, well-received, decades-running comic strips, the main characters are depicted as stupid, lazy, law-breaking, uneducated hillbilly hicks who live in the backwoods of the Appalachian hills. Whether it is through their accent, their vocabulary, their activities, or their appearances, Snuffy and Abner are the victims of the everlasting stereotypes against Appalachians. While it would be one thing to portray them as such if they were actually lazy, no-good lawbreakers, the bigger problem is that the most prominent marker of their identity is their speech patterns and their connection to Appalachia. Prescriptivist ideals that language variation is bad, and the idea that there is a “standard” English to which everyone should conform, push on the reader the notion that Snuffy, Abner, and all of their peers are somehow less intelligent, less capable, less powerful, and generally lesser than the audience (and the authors). As two of the last remaining acceptable modes of oppression, language variation and prejudice against Appalachians unfortunately go hand in hand, and the work of Laswell and Capp add ample fuel to the already-blazing fire.

Unfortunately, the stereotype is not just stuck in the mid-20th century. The stereotype of the southern hillbilly, redneck, or hick has endured into present-day depictions of southerners and Appalachians alike. Specifically:

“the ‘hillbilly’ has survived world wars, the Great Depression, the rise and fall of the cold war, the social revolutions of the 1960s, and the shift from radio to film to television to the Internet...it has endured because of its semantic and

ideological malleableness—a changeability rooted in its core ambiguity as a representation of a ‘white other’ that both celebrates and denigrates the American past and the folkways of the southern mountain folk” (Harkins).

Because the term has existed for more than a century, and does not seem to be on its way out in any shape or form, many authors from Appalachia have taken it upon themselves to depict their families, neighbors, friends, and themselves in a more positive light. They acknowledge dialectal difference as a way to highlight the varying nature of the millions of people in the region, and instead of being defensive of their language and culture, are instead celebrating the variety of it.

A popular author from Appalachia, Denise Giardina, embodies these principles. Many of her novels are set in West Virginia, where she was raised, and she consistently shows West Virginians—coal miners, families, “normal” individuals—as no different than the average American. She is described in one book review as an Appalachian author who “brings back to life her departed neighbors and the communities they populated” (Eads). In another, she can “recreate with incredible depth and complexity and humanity a place, a time, a people, a culture...that would be forever lost to us if not for her beautiful and permanent artistry” (Mooney). Giardina is often portrayed as one of the quintessential modern Appalachian authors, and her positive depictions of her culture are valuable because of the ways in which they raise up Appalachians out of their never-ending stereotypical portrayals. In *Storming Heaven*, Giardina tells the story of four people in the fictional Annadel, WV, modeled after Keystone, WV, in McDowell County. All four use lexical qualities that are characteristic of Appalachian English, such as phrases like “don’t let’s fret about the dishes,” (Giardina 105) as well as bits of eye dialect like “git” and “et” to signify “get” and “ate”. However, the inclusion of these terms is purposefully throughout the entire novel in order to paint an accurate picture of the events and

the people within it. The story doesn't rest on the dialect of the characters; it rests on the struggles they go through as inhabitants of a dying mining town, about to be confronted by the United States Army in a fight for union rights. Giardina tells a story that happens to feature Appalachian characters, and thus must stay true to their language.

Another author, Ann Pancake, uses similar ideas in her short story writing. One of her characters, Cam, reflects on how her old friends pronounce her name versus how it was said by an ex-boyfriend, Eric, from Daytona. He “hardened every consonant, choked up every vowel. Such an awkward, a cramped way to work your words out your mouth...she couldn't stand to hear him say her name, how he'd clip it off, one syllable. Cam. Like he had no idea about the all of her. Back home, they speak it full. They say it Cay-um” (Pancake). She uses a bit of eye dialect here, as well, in the representation of how her family and friends back home would make the vowel in “Cam” into a diphthong and add an extra syllable to the end. The added emphasis, instead of being presented as a marker of a lack of education, signified home to Cam, how she felt differently in the mountains than she did on the beach as a waitress. She also presents Eric's dialect in a negative light, even though many would consider it the “standard” variety of English. In highlighting her own “redneck” pronunciation and disparaging the clipped, short “standard” speech, Pancake elevates the Appalachian dialect to a place it doesn't often get to visit.

It is also important to realize that Cam's identity does not solely rest on her accent, like many of the Capp and Lasswell characters' do. Throughout “Redneck Boys” Cam gives the reader a glimpse into her mind and the struggles she's recently faced, including a car accident and subsequent hospitalization of her partner Richard and the sudden reappearance of an old flame. The reemergence of Splint, Cam's childhood friend and almost-lover, throws her into a litany of memories about her adolescence, which may or may not be that far off—Cam reveals

she is only thirty years old, and already world-weary. Her inner monologue and memories about the men in her life signify to the reader a weariness about adulthood and a familiarity with economic struggle that are no laughing matters. Though she has been with Richard for ten years, she admits “she never felt for [him] what she felt for Splint” and that he “was just something that happened when she came home for Christmas” (Pancake). She adds that “she was still homesick and she just wanted to hear them talk...it could have been any boy who talked that way. She ran into Richard that night” (Pancake). In any region, in any time, an accidental pregnancy with a boy you barely know is a cause for at least some stress. Most likely, Cam wouldn’t have had access to an abortion clinic, much less the means to afford one, which brings up more questions about how her life would be different if only she lived outside Appalachia and free from the economic and social inequalities suffered by its people. In any case, Pancake clearly uses Cam’s life to paint a picture of the complexities that many in Appalachia face. Her experiences are highly relatable—dating, pregnancy scares, growing up too fast—and serve to humanize her because of her past and her surroundings, rather than despite them.

The Appalachian dialect and stereotypes remain similar throughout most of the works that discuss them, whether they are authored by Appalachians themselves or not. While Lasswell and Capp present Snuffy and Abner in a highly negative light, thanks to stereotypical ideas of laziness and ignorance, Giardina and Pancake both discuss their characters’ lives as reflections of their own, and so present Appalachians in a positive way. Unfortunately, due to both the tendency of Americans to remember the bad over the good, and to prefer short comics instead of novels, the works by Capp and Lasswell are what stick. Negative perceptions of Appalachians remain, no matter how hard folks like Giardina, Pancake, and their contemporaries fight against the grain. Interestingly, some authors who are themselves from Appalachia or spent large

amounts of time there may fall into the Capp/Lasswell camp, and write novels featuring Appalachians in a negative light despite their roots. This raises the question for some about the true qualities of the region, and whether its forward-thinking creators—like Pancake and Giardina—can defeat its backward policies (most recently, laws about raw milk consumption and attempts to pass discrimination laws in the West Virginia state legislature) to retain young Appalachians who have the possibility of eradicating the negative stereotype altogether. Hopefully, the inherent natural beauty in the state will combine with the rising awareness about language diversity in Appalachia to form a fair, just, and welcoming West Virginia—but only time will tell.

Bibliography

- Eads, Martha Greene. "Raising The Dead In Denise Giardina's Appalachian Fiction." *Christianity and Literature* 63.1 (2013): 75-87. *ATLA Religion Database with ATLASerials*. Web. 8 March 2016.
- Giardina, Denise. *Storming Heaven: A Novel*. New York: Ballantine, 1988. Print.
- Harkins, Anthony. *Hillbilly: A Cultural History of an American Icon*. New York: Oxford University Press. 2004. Print.
- Lasswell, Fred. "Comic Art AuctionsView All." *Fred Laswell Snuffy Smith Colored 1978 Sunday, in Jaime Vaquer's COMIC STRIP-SUNDAYS Comic Art Gallery Room*. N.p., 12 Oct. 2009. Web. 8 Mar. 2016.
- Lasswell, Fred. "Planet Kirby." : *The Sunday Paper*. N.p., 25 Jan. 2013. Web. 10 Mar. 2016.
- Mooney, Stephen D. "'Beyond Measure': An Appreciation of Denise Giardina's *Storming Heaven* and *The Unquiet Earth*." *The Iron Mountain Review: Denise Giardina Issue*: 9-14.
- "Newsletter 06-17-2015." *Plant City Farm & Flea Market*. N.p., 17 June 2015. Web. 8 Mar. 2016.
- Pancake, Ann. "Redneck Boys." *Appalachian Gateway: An Anthology of Contemporary Stories and Poetry*. Ed. Brosi, George, and Egerton, Kate. Knoxville, TN: University of Tennessee Press, 2013. 65-72. ProQuest ebrary. Web. 8 March 2016.
- "Sunday One-liners - The Comics Curmudgeon." *The Comics Curmudgeon RSS*. N.p., 1 June 2008. Web. 8 Mar. 2016.