

“A Mountain to Rest My Eyes Against”: Place of Origin in Lee Smith’s *Fair and Tender Ladies*

by Donna Ogle

It is no surprise that a region as rich in natural splendor and resources as Appalachia would, from early on, attract settlers, in particular those who sought not just bounty from the land but also a more meaningful relationship with it. Later on, historians and social observers would call this establishing a “sense of place.”

—Mari-Lynn Evans, et. al., eds., *The Appalachians*

Although Lee Smith was born and raised in a small Southwestern Virginia town, for many years she wrote novels and short stories that were not located in Appalachia or infused with the Appalachian tradition. Smith says of her own early writing, “[...] when I started out I thought the idea was to be sophisticated. To be a good writer, I thought, the idea would be to learn elegant language, write fancy sentences about an upper-class person” (Herion-Sarafidis 11). However, when she began writing novels set in Appalachia, Smith found her niche as an author. Smith’s novels became more real, more intricate, and more complex when she wrote about the people and places that she knew intimately. “Writing is about these things [meaning, love, and family],” says Smith, “and as writers, we cannot choose our truest material. But sometimes we are lucky enough to find it” (“Terrain” 281). As can be seen by her success, Smith has found her “truest material.”

When Smith began to use Appalachia for the setting of her novels, readers became more aware of the mountains’ influence on the characters she created. Critics have approached the reading and discussion of these novels in relation to place, focusing on the importance of mountain traditions and heritage. One area that has been overlooked, however, is the importance of place in relation to the characters and how it affects their sense of who they are and where they belong. Eudora Welty explains place as that which “absorbs our earliest notice and attention; it bestows on us our original awareness; and our critical powers spring from the study of it and the growth of experience inside it” (qtd. in Evans 5). In *Fair and Tender Ladies*, Smith explores three distinct ways in which to respond to place of origin: 1) acceptance without questioning, 2) total rejection and shame, and 3) an initial struggle against place of origin followed by a complete embracing of all that it encompasses, both good and bad. Smith impresses the reader with the importance of the balanced view

of place epitomized by her main character, Ivy Rowe, who chooses this third mode of responding to place.

Elizabeth Broadwell proclaims Smith's *Fair and Tender Ladies* "perhaps her most critically acclaimed and certainly her best loved" novel (248). *Fair and Tender Ladies* is an epistolary novel that was inspired by a packet of letters Smith bought at a flea market in Greensboro, North Carolina (Arnow 62). The reader journeys from childhood to death with the main character, Ivy Rowe, as she writes letters to friends and family members, both those living and those deceased.

This epistolary style enables Smith to develop Ivy's selfhood or self-presence in a way with which the reader can easily identify. Anne Bower says that "in addition, *Fair and Tender Ladies*' particular way of using the epistolary form leads the external reader to a deeper awareness that, in the 'real world' and in the world of the novel, the isolated private work of one woman writer, once collected and published, can be a precious resource serving many others" (22). This resource, provided by Lee Smith, allows the reader to understand Ivy's, as well as Smith's, feelings toward place of origin.

Most critics have mentioned the importance of place in Smith's novels, but only in the sense that the Appalachian setting is an integral part of their characters, their traditions, and their heritage. There is yet another way in which to read this novel, with the importance of place being tied to the characters' understanding of who they are and where they belong. Lee Smith uses her characters to portray different levels of awareness of place, of having roots, and of being grounded in and connected to a physical location which influences their lives, their happiness, and their level of satisfaction with themselves and those around them. My reading shows that the environment in which we live is a part of who we are. Without making Appalachia seem as though it was (or is) the only region of people that experience this, Evans explains: "This happened in other parts of America as well. But in Appalachia, such a connection between people and place became so dramatic and deep as to become the perfect living example of a sense of place" (5). Smith creates the characters, Ethel, Beulah, and Ivy, to embody the three distinct ways of responding to the experience of place.

Ethel embraces the mountain life and never pretends to be anything other than a mountain girl. Ethel never questions who she is or where she belongs. This perspective affords Ethel a narrow view of life. She has no patience with others who want to get away from the mountain:

Well Ethel is only nine but she will not play party, when I [Ivy] say I have some scrumptious cake she says it is only pone and when I say, hear the lovely music Miss Ethel it is violins, she says my name is nothing but Ethel, just plain Ethel, and that is birds. (FTL 10)

Smith allows Ethel to slip into the background of the story soon after her introduction. Her character is fairly one-dimensional because she is not interested in life outside of the mountain community. Even though Ethel is the first sister to leave the mountain, she is not swayed from her adherence to her upbringing: "Ethel has not changed a bit from living in town, she is still as funny and honest as the day is long and the fancy life has not turned a hair on her head" (FTL 68). Ethel seizes the opportunities that are presented and makes the best of her life, living according to the traditions of earlier generations. Ethel lives her life, taking her place among the mountain people without any distinguishing moment(s) to define her life. Each day is the same as all the others and she never realizes that her existence could be any different. She accepts

her life and her place as being unchangeably part of who she is. Ethel sees herself as fixed and static rather than open to change.

Smith uses Ethel to portray the response of unquestioning acceptance of home and heritage. While Ethel continues to be a correspondent for Ivy, Smith uses Ethel's undistinguished, minor role as an indication of her skewed view of place of origin. Ethel and Beulah are diametrically opposed.

Beulah doesn't want to be associated with her past, the mountain, her upbringing, or her roots. She refuses to see value in any of the mountain ways or experiences. She looks only to getting away and being someone else from some other place. Beulah is the epitome of total rejection and shame in response to place of origin: "Don't you ever, Beulah said, I mean ever Ivy Rowe, call old Granny over here with all her crazy old ideas. I won't have it. I will not. [...] And I will not have that for my boys, she said, or for me and Curtis [...]. We will have more. Beulah set her jaw when she said more" (*FTL* 130). Beulah functions to illustrate the opposite extreme from Ethel. Beulah wants and wants and is never satisfied with her life: "Beulah wanted to get away from her past, from where she'd come from, what she'd been" (*FTL* 286). Ethel and Ivy's comments concerning Beulah provide a sharp contrast between the sisters and their differing views of place:

I [Ivy] remember way back when her [Beulah] and Curtis first got married and she asked Ethel and me over there for supper in that little house by the lumberyard in Majestic, and everything on the table had a cream sauce, and Beulah had on black jet earrings, and after supper, on the way back, Ethel said, Beulah is putting on airs. (*FTL* 131)

Beulah's refusal to accept her heritage leads to a life of loneliness and disappointment: "I [Beulah] try my best to get away from Sugar Fork and I never can it seems like [...]. Oh I want to leave here, she said. I want to go up in the world so bad, I want oh I want—but here she broke down crying" (*FTL* 152). Smith's commentary through Ivy's comments shows the shame and rejection that Beulah feels is heaped upon her by virtue of her mountain heritage:

Beulah wants so much that I don't know if there is enough in the world to satisfy her, I honestly don't. And also she is so scared, and ashamed of herself someway [...]. She reads all the magazines and gets herself up just so [...]. But somehow it's like she is still playing party and doesn't believe it [that she is as much a lady as the richer women of Diamond] herself. (*FTL* 160)

Beulah's life comes to a sad end. She never comes to terms with her place of origin, which results in a slow, sorrowful death. Loyal Jones eloquently expresses the longing of establishing place in our hearts: "We mountaineers never forget our native place, and we go back there as often as possible. Always, we think of going back for good [...]" (103). Because Beulah denies her need to come to accept her place of origin, her life becomes unbearable. Smith leaves the reader with a feeling that there must be a better way to live in harmony with heritage and home, and so we are given Ivy Rowe.

Ivy engages in a struggle that isn't present within Beulah or Ethel. She values the mountain, but doesn't want to spend her life stuck there. Lee Smith sums up this struggle in her own life as well: "It wasn't until I was well over thirty before I could turn back and really get what I needed from the past. It wasn't until I was sure that I wasn't stuck there, before I could appreciate what the past had to offer. The mountains can be enclosing, and lots of times people just end up stuck" (Hunt 33). In this way

we can see that Ivy is perhaps an extension of Smith herself and her own struggle with her mountain childhood. Ivy realizes and expresses the bond between herself and the mountains upon her return from town to her place of origin, her home place: "I am back where I have longed to be, where I belong. [...] I am the happiest that I have ever been" (*FTL* 180).

Ivy enjoys being back on the mountain. Yet as she continues to have more children and less time for herself, she falls into a deep despondency. She questions what happened to the young girl she used to be, the one who had such possibilities:

But I have fallen down and down and down into this darkness, I can see it all so clear now, and bits and pieces of me have rolled off and been lost along the way. They have rolled off down this mountain someplace until there is not much left but a dried-up husk, with me leeches out by hard work and babies. I feel like a locust—like a box turtle shell. (*FTL* 193)

Paula Eckard focuses on these feelings of loss of self-expression and the death of the innumerable possibilities open to Ivy. Eckard shows how Ivy works through this loss within her letters and finds a maternal voice that ties female bodily experiences to expressive language as well as to everyday life. Ivy's letters "speak the body" (172). However, Eckard fails to note that Smith not only loses herself during this time, but also her connection to her mountain home.

Ivy does not take the time to enjoy the mountain any longer. She does not see the beauty of nor feel connected to Blue Star Mountain as she once did. In a sense, Ivy has become like Ethel. She does not question who she is. She simply lives with and takes care of her family, day in and day out.

The creative side, the longing to see the world and to experience adventure in Ivy does not stay buried forever. In one of her letters Ivy explores her feelings about having abandoned the mountains and, in the process, herself: "Oh Silvaney. Those days when I sank into the easy darkness took their toll. It is like I went so far I scared myself, and now I have to come back up" (*FTL* 208). Lucinda MacKethan has compared Ivy's loss of self to that found in Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*. The comparison points out the search for self within both novels and the importance of being restored to a personal wholeness (Broadwell 248).

Ivy's "coming back to herself" takes place when Honey Breeding, the bee man, comes to her home. Honey has a strange effect on Ivy. She has settled into her life on the mountain; yet, when he appears in the morning sunshine, she feels frustrated with her life and wants to lash out at the surroundings mountains: "I want to scream all the time or when I look out at the mountains I want to reach out and rip them all away leaving only the flat hard sudden sky" (*FTL* 211-212). Ivy feels hatred for her beloved mountains. She feels trapped, stuck in a life of drudgery and Honey, who is free to roam the mountains, to come and go as he pleases with no obligations or responsibilities, exacerbates these feelings.

Smith allows the reader to see that Honey and Ivy are portions of the same person: "But I [Ivy] am as big and strong as he is, and I toppled him into the starry flowers where we laid face to face and leg to leg and toe to toe. He is just the same size as me. In fact I think he is me, and I am him, and it will be so forever and ever" (*FTL* 230). Honey was unable to leave the mountains behind even though he had been to France and Germany during the war: "he could not stand a city or a town [...] he had to have mountains [...]" (*FTL* 235). This statement about Honey's need for the mountains echoes Ivy's own feelings: "May be I am like you, and need the pure high

air, and a mountain to lay my eyes against" (*FTL* 75). As the part of herself that desires freedom, Honey leads Ivy to a restoration of herself and her connection to her place of origin. He does not lead her away from who she is, her roots, and her upbringing, but leads her to the very pinnacle of the mountain. He encourages her to talk, tell stories and listen to his stories. Ivy sees in Honey all the aspects that she once loved and admired about herself: "Honey Breeding was full of tricks, full of stories, full of songs" (*FTL* 235).

Ivy literally walks away from her home, her children, her responsibilities, and her husband to be with Honey. Critic Katherine Kearns sees Ivy as a character who struggles with the opposition of her role as artist to her role as wife and mother (Broadwell 248). In a sense, Ivy wants to get away from her life just as desperately as Beulah does. She flees the darkness, the feeling of being stuck, but she doesn't flee from the mountains. "I [Ivy] felt giddy and crazy, climbing the mountain, I felt like a girl again. It seemed I was dropping years as I went, letting them fall there beside the trace, leaving them all behind me. I felt again like I had as a girl, light-headed, light-footed, running all over town" (*FTL* 224). Ivy comes to realize how important the mountain, her heritage, her life as a mountain woman, is to her. She longs to connect with the mountain in a spiritual, emotional way and does so while she is there with Honey. She touches the mountain and her soul and comes away a whole, vibrant person:

[I] laid down in the grass while all the poems I ever knew came rushing back over my body like the wind. It was like they were all still there someplace, they had just been waiting. I felt I had got a part of myself back that I had lost without even knowing it was gone. Honey had given me back my very soul. (*FTL* 232)

As she touches this part of herself that had lain dormant, she realizes that the mountain, her connection to it, did not have to be connected to Honey. She could remember all the stories and poems and enjoy the beauty without waiting for someone else to take her there. Ivy may have left the mountain, but the mountain was still within her: "All of a sudden I thought, I could of climbed up here by myself, anytime" (*FTL* 232). With this revelation, Ivy is ready to return home to her husband and family, to embrace the mountains in all their triumph and tragedy. Kearns indicates that Ivy's integration of both selves at the end of the novel points to Smith's own acceptance of her role as an artist (Broadwell 248).

Ivy's affair with Honey Breeding, her trip up the mountain, clearly defines Ivy's connections to the mountain. She comes down no longer wanting to leave Blue Star. Her struggle with place of origin has been resolved and her acceptance takes on a life of its own. Ivy becomes a bastion of the community and a crusader for upholding all the values for which the mountain, her place of origin, is a symbol. Even though her children encouraged her to move into town, Ivy remains in her childhood home until the last pen stroke of the last letter.

In this novel, Ivy models the wisdom of moderation or balance in her reaction to sense of place. From a young age, Ivy understood the value of not forgetting one's roots. While visiting in Majestic, Ivy writes to her family, "I will be so happy to come back up ther and see what you all are up to, for I have not got spoilt a bit and belive me I remane forever yor devoted, Ivy Rowe" (*FTL* 50-51). Ivy returns to the mountain in a physical, as well as an emotional, way during her disastrous affair with Honey Breeding. She embraces the elemental force of the mountain and allows it to energize her.

Lee Smith, through the character of Ivy Rowe, illustrates the importance of know-

ing oneself and one's connection to place of origin. Upon looking back at her life, her experiences, Ivy recognizes this truism:

I have been so many people. And yet I think the most important thing is Don't forget. Don't ever forget. I tell you this now, in particular. A person can not afford to forget who they are or where they came from, or so I think, even when the remembering brings pain. (*FTL* 266)

Loyal Jones corroborates this thought with his own reflections on the place that origins holds within each of us: "Our place will always be close on our minds. And this place is tied in my mind along with my family, and with the people I knew there in the growing process" (103). All that we are, all that we can hope to become is tied to the place we call home.

Ivy is a combination of Beulah's and Ethel's perceptions of place. Even though she struggles with wanting more, with seeing that there is more to life than the mountain upon which she lives, she still realizes the importance of Blue Star Mountain as a part of herself. Ivy sees value in her surroundings. She repeatedly recalls her father's admonition to savor the taste of spring, to enjoy the moment and the place in which she found herself. She recognizes Blue Star Mountain as the "prettiest place in the world" (*FTL* 6). Ivy comes to fully embrace all that the mountains epitomize, whether good or bad. The desire in Ivy to find herself is echoed in Smith's own words: "[m]ost of us are always searching, through our work and in our lives: for meaning, for love, for home" ("Terrain" 281).

Lee Smith uses her characters to portray different levels of awareness of place, of having roots, and being grounded and connected to a physical location which influences their lives, their happiness. My reading of this novel shows that the environment in which we live is truly a part of who we are. Smith's characters in *Fair and Tender Ladies* are tied to place of origin, whether they recognize the connection or not. As readers, we are allowed an inside view that we can apply to our own lives, regardless of where our own place of origin happens to be.

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