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# “The world is ripe, and we’ll pluck it like an apple from a tree”: Poetics of resistance in Ron Rash’s *Serena*

Jules Padelou

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Université de Bretagne Occidentale



FACULTÉ  
DES LETTRES &  
SCIENCES HUMAINES

**“The world is ripe, and we’ll pluck it like an apple from a tree”:**

**Poetics of resistance in Ron Rash’s *Serena***

Jules Pasdelou

Under the supervision of Professor Marie-Christine Agosto

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U.F.R Lettres et Sciences Humaines

Master 1 Arts, Lettres et Civilisations – 2019/20

Parcours Textes et Images en Langues Étrangères



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## Introduction

“The world is ripe and we’ll pluck it like an apple from a tree<sup>1</sup>” is a sentence pronounced by Serena at Pemberton’s birthday party to share her desire to continue her clear-cutting venture in Brazil to Lowenstein and Calhoun, business investors with whom she has made a partnership. It is situated at the end of the novel, but the reader has already understood Serena’s ideology that consists in seeing nature and humans as mere disposable objects to be exploited for her own benefits. Janet Maslin thinks that when “Serena gives full voice to her ambitions<sup>2</sup>”, Rash goes “one little step to far<sup>3</sup>” and that it does “the book an injustice<sup>4</sup>”. But, on the contrary, the fact that she exposes her plans in a poetic manner without an ounce of shame gives more credit to Serena’s character as the reader, who is as much impressed by her words than the characters of the novel, is shaken by the undeniable proof of her evilness. The sentence functions on the level of the diegesis and is also metatextual — through this sentence, the author addresses the reader. On the first level, it is meant to increase Serena’s power to the eyes of the other characters as well as the reader. Indeed, the use of the abstract entity, the “world”, shows how Serena deprives beings of their intrinsic quality in order to dominate them. The term “world” also expresses her absence of boundaries, as though everything could be subdued. As an object of the verb “to pluck”, the world becomes a mere tool acted upon by the subject “we” — which suggests a relationship of domination between the subjects and their surroundings. This firm intention of Serena and her colleagues to appropriate the world is conveyed by the modal “will” which expresses volition. The sentence comes to express more than Serena’s thirst for power, it is the unconscious proclamation of her propensity for hubris, and, as such, it becomes proleptic and foreshadows her death sentence which takes the form of a divine retribution in the novel’s coda. Joshua Lee sees another layer to Serena’s words. He says that this sentence is profoundly ironical and explains that “she uses this particular phrasing because the Pemberton Lumber Company is cutting down trees to sell them, and if all the trees are cut as she wishes, there will be no apples left to pluck<sup>5</sup>.” Although this sentence is ironical, it mostly functions as

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<sup>1</sup> Rash, Ron. *Serena* (Edinburgh; London; Melbourne: Canongate, 2009), p.340.

<sup>2</sup> Maslin, Janet. “Ron Rash’s ‘Serena’: Appalachian Story of Greed and Logging in the Great Depression”. *The New York Times*, October 5th 2008.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> Lee, Joshua. “The Pembertons and Corporate Greed: An Ecocritical Look at Ron Rash’s *Serena*” *James Dickey Review* 29.2 (2013): p.58.



a warning from the author: the simile that identifies the world to an apple is clearly an intertext for the transgressive act of the Fall and thus implies huge consequences. As Serena doesn't really reflect on the consequences of her actions and is willing to live only in the present, Rash, with this sentence, implicitly warns us about the unbridled power of his eponymous character. This warning was already present in the epigraph of the novel which is also alluded to by Serena's phrasing: "A hand that with a grasp may grip the whole worlde". Taken from Marlowe's *The Massacre of Paris*, this sentence already exemplified the transgressive actions of the main character of the novel.

Ron Rash was born in Chester, South Carolina, in 1953 but raised in the foothills of North Carolina even though "[he] was always taught that home was Buncombe County and Watauga County, in the mountains<sup>6</sup>". It is indeed his visits on his grandmother's farm in Boone, Watauga County that "gave [him his] primary landscape<sup>7</sup>" for his fiction and poetry. Today, he lives in North Carolina and teaches creative writing at Western Carolina University where he holds the Parris Chair in Appalachian Cultural Studies. A prolific American author of the XXI<sup>st</sup> century, he has published 7 novels, 6 short story collections and 4 poetry collections to this day. He is a regional author of the South of the United States and writes in the tradition of Faulkner, Carson McCullers and Flannery O'Connor. On a smaller scale, he also participates in the Appalachian literary Renaissance, the existence of which he acknowledges in an interview with Joyce Compton Brown: "One of the things I believe – and I think most of the people in this room would agree – is that the best writing ever done in the Appalachian region is being done right now. This is the first generation when you have lots of authors with both the time and the opportunity to write<sup>8</sup>." Rash's work is so deeply grounded in the Appalachian region that the people, landscape, history, customs and language of the region have become typical of his writing. Even though his work is very located, he becomes more than a regional author and has been acclaimed nationally and internationally. In 2008, *Chemistry and other stories* (2007) was a finalist for the PEN/Faulkner Award for fiction and his fourth collection of short stories, *Burning Bright* (2010) won the Franck O'Connor International Short Story Award. His books have been translated into more than a dozen languages and he has been invited all over the world to give readings. His novels are mostly detective novels and eco-fictions, which is the case of *Serena* (2008).

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<sup>6</sup> Lang, John. "The Power of Blood-Memory" *Appalachia and Beyond: Conversations with Writers from the Mountain South* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2006), p.342.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.* p.342.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.* p.350.

In an interview with Jesse Graves and Randall Wilhelm Ron Rash said that the part of him that seeped into *Serena* was “that almost fanatical will, that drivenness<sup>9</sup>”. In another interview with French scholar Frederique Spill, Ron Rash confessed that the genesis of *Serena* was exceptionally painful: “[It] was a strange experience writing that book. I went into a deep, dark place and I’ve never been that consumed by a book before or since.”<sup>10</sup> The energy Rash put in his novel along with the hardships he endured during the creative process most certainly explain the quality of the novel. After working for “three years, pretty much four to five hours a day, some days much longer, six days a week<sup>11</sup>” and producing twelve full drafts, Rash finally published his fourth novel in 2008. This publication secured him a position on the international literary scene. Indeed, the novel was recognized by the New York Times as a book of the year and was a finalist for the PEN/Faulkner Award for fiction in 2009. In 2014, *Serena* was adapted into a movie by Susan Bier and it starred as leading actors the famous duo Jennifer Lawrence and Bradley Cooper. Some viewers might go back to the source of the movie and read the novel. The author himself, the critics and readers of Rash’s novels all agree to say *Serena* is Rash’s masterpiece.

*Serena* takes place in Appalachia, in the Haywood and Jackson counties west of Asheville during the Depression Era. The focus alternates between Serena and George Pemberton, Bostonian entrepreneurs who rule over their timber empire, Rachel Harmon, a local girl who struggles to bring up her son Jacob on her own and a group of loggers, Snipes’ cutting crew. Another character, the mountain, is little by little destroyed by a large-scale clear-cutting enterprise. *Serena* is qualified on the back cover of the Canongate edition as “a mesmerizing tale of love, ambition, violence and revenge”. Love is what brings the characters together in the novel: the desire of becoming one of the newlywed Serena and George Pemberton, the growing love of Rachel for her son Jacob and the brotherly affection of the loggers who, fond of the Bible, apply its well-known maxim — “love thy neighbor”<sup>12</sup>. As for ambition, it is embodied in the character of Serena whose thirst for power is insatiable. She fiercely opposes the state and preservationists, Secretary Albright and Horace Kephart, and their National Park scheme and does not hesitate to murder anyone standing in her way. Violence plagues the novel: not only the violence of the murders, but the violence with which the Pemberton Lumber Company treats its employees and the Appalachian landscape. The novel ends in a series of revengeful

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<sup>9</sup> Clepton, Miller. Newcomb, Rain. *Conversations with Ron Rash* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2017), p.94.

<sup>10</sup> Spill, Frederique. “An Interview with Ron Rash”, *Transatlantica* [Online] 1, July 22nd 2014.

<sup>11</sup> Clepton, Miller. *op.cit.* p.113-114.

<sup>12</sup> Rash, Ron. *Serena. op. cit.* p.248.

acts. First, Serena attempts to murder Rachel for having what she will never have — a son with Pemberton. Then, Serena poisons her husband Pemberton for helping Rachel and Jacob escape her wrath. Finally, in the coda, forty-six years after the story, Jacob kills Serena in Brazil, not only avenging his mother but a people and a land.

This study “Poetics of resistance in Ron Rash’s *Serena*” tries to explain why there are two antagonistic visions of Rash’s work. Contemporary critics tend to see Rash either as a mere objective witness to Appalachia’s history or as a voice for the Appalachian minority, the hillbillies. This study aims to show how the actors of the story — the mountain, the mountaineers and the Appalachian-born author — together create an opposition to outside forces. However, “Poetics of resistance” is not an attempt to reduce *Serena* to its political message. For Rash, art is many things and can be read on many levels. During a conference in Amiens on November 7<sup>th</sup> 2019, talking about the political quality of his novels, Rash said “If I am not doing more, I would be better off writing essays”<sup>13</sup>. In order to respect the author’s work, multiple facets of *Serena* will be studied in this essay, may they be generic, historical, socio-economic, cultural, environmental or purely aesthetic.

As Marie-Christine Agosto has noted “Rash’s novels have hardly been analyzed for their environmental claims. Instead, the novels have mostly been praised for their narrative craft and their imaginative quality; their power to recreate Appalachian voice and character through language and images has been privileged over their value as political testimony.”<sup>14</sup> However, more and more ecocritical analyses have been done in the past few years, mostly because it is a flourishing field when it comes to analyzing *Serena*. One can quote Brenda Dye Stephens’ *Divergent Worldviews in Ron Rash’s “Serena”*, Lee Joshua’s article “The Pembertons and Corporate Greed: An Ecocritical Look at Ron Rash’s *Serena*” or Marie-Christine Agosto’s article “Poetics and Politics of Place in Ron Rash’s fiction: *One Foot in Eden, Saints at the River and Serena*”. This thesis is part of this current movement. But as Michael Beilfuss says in his article *Rootedness and Mobility* these ecocritical studies remain quite exceptional for a southern novel: “With a few exceptions, the most well-known ecocritics, and the most influential works, rarely address southern literature and/or don't examine it as southern<sup>15</sup>”. Why Southern works have not yet been envisioned through an ecocritical look remains a mystery

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<sup>13</sup> Rash, Ron. Conference in Amiens November 7<sup>th</sup> 2019.

<sup>14</sup> Agosto, Marie-Christine. “Poetics and Politics of Place in Ron Rash’s fiction: *One foot in Eden, Saints at the River and Serena*”, *Environmental Crises and Human Costs*. Eds: Ozdag, Ufuk. Gavillon, Francois. (Madrid: Universidad de Alcalà, 2015), p.65-79, p.65.

<sup>15</sup> Beilfuss, Michael J. “Rootedness and Mobility: Southern Sacrifice Zones in Ron Rash’s *Serena*.” *The Mississippi Quarterly* 68.3-4, (2015): p.380.

especially since ecocriticism is by essence an interdisciplinary approach which could be efficient to analyze Southern novels. Indeed, as Sarah Robertson says, “discussing the South, just like discussing any region, demands an interdisciplinary approach that encompasses literature, history, religion, economics, politics, race, gender and culture<sup>16</sup>”. Our ecocritical study of Ron Rash’s *Serena* will use all the tools necessary to account for the concept of place, from history to geography but also economy, sociology as well as a cultural and post-colonial approach.

The ecocritical look has been chosen because *Serena* fits Lawrence Buell’s criteria of what an environmental text should be as explained in *The Environmental Imagination*:

- 1) The nonhuman environment is present not merely as a framing device but as a presence that begins to suggest that human history is implicated in natural history.
- 2) The human interest is not understood to be the only legitimate interest.
- 3) Human accountability to the environment is part of the text’s ethical orientation.
- 4) Some sense of the environment as a process rather than a constant or a given, is at least implicit in the text<sup>17</sup>

As an eco-fiction, *Serena* meets all the criteria listed by Buell. The mountain is not only a background for the human drama but a living character who impacts the plot and the other characters. The focus of the novel is far from being on the sole human world since the mountain, omnipresent, has an intrinsic quality of its own and suffers as a human would. Furthermore, the novel shows how the human and the non-human worlds interact with each other: if the fate of the landscape is to be destroyed by the hands of humans, the landscape ultimately has the power to retaliate in an anthropomorphic fashion through rattlesnake bites, falling limbs, swirling creek currents etc. The destiny of the humans and nature is inextricably linked in *Serena* as it is shown by the multiplicity of similes that identify the human world to the natural world and the death of the mountain affects the livelihoods of the human characters. Human accountability to the environment is of course part of the text’s ethical orientation and is most explicitly present in chapter 35 when Snipes’ crew finally realize they are responsible for destroying a whole ecosystem, their ecosystem.

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<sup>16</sup> Robertson, Sarah. “Pushing Boundaries in Southern Studies” *Journal of American Studies* 48-3 (2014): p.703.

<sup>17</sup> Buell, Lawrence. *The Environmental Imagination: Thoreau, Nature Writing, and the Formation of American Culture* (Cambridge (Mass.); London: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1995), p.7-8.

In literature in general, place is often seen as a mere backdrop for the human drama that really counts. As Eudora Welty puts it, place is “one of the lesser angels that watch over the racing hand of fiction”<sup>18</sup>. Yet, *Serena* features a strong sense of place especially since Rash is affiliated to regionalism, which he distinguishes from local color: “Local color is writing that is only about difference—what makes this particular place exotic. Regional writing shows what is distinct about a place—its language, culture and all of that—yet at the same time says something universal.”<sup>19</sup>

Place has a polysemic quality that makes it, according to Buell, “an additionally rich and tangled arena for environmental criticism”<sup>20</sup>. The outline of this study is organized as to render an analysis of the different aspects of a place in *Serena*. Even though it is difficult to define, it “gestures in at least three directions at once – toward environmental materiality, toward social perception or construction, and toward individual affect or bound.”<sup>21</sup> One will add a fourth direction to this definition — a political one, since places can be seen as the center of a power play between their proponents.

The first thing that comes to one’s mind when a place is evoked is its environmental materiality. A place is usually under the aegis of stability but in *Serena* it is, on the contrary, the subject of huge transformations. The composition of the place under siege — Appalachia, the mountain and natives — will be first examined. As in his other novels, Rash describes Appalachia very thoroughly: its places, inhabitants, customs, wildlife and language have all been captured in a realistic fashion. A sense of localism will already emerge from this study especially since this local ecosystem is disrupted by trans-local forces such as greedy entrepreneurs and idealist politicians and environmentalists. A ‘battle royal’ for Appalachia’s land takes place in the novel: whereas the entrepreneurs will do anything to pursue the spoiling of the land, the state and preservationists are planning to create a national park to protect the local wildlife. The historical and fictional outcome of this battle, the creation of the Great Smoky Mountains National Park, will be examined. Finally, the consequences of this shaping of the local by the global will be addressed: environmental crisis, human misery and displacement and ultimately the destruction of both human and natural worlds or an entire ecosystem.

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<sup>18</sup> Welty, Eudora. *The Eye of the Storyteller* (Kent (Ohio); London: Kent State University Press, 1989)

<sup>19</sup> Lang, John. *Understanding Ron Rash* (Columbia: University of Columbia Press, 2014), p.1.

<sup>20</sup> Buell, Lawrence. *The Future of Environmental Criticism: Environmental Crisis and Literary Imagination* (Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2005), p.63.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

A place is also a social construct. In *Serena*, the nature of the place will differ whether it is seen through the eyes of the locals or the outsiders. Two antagonistic visions of the place thus prevail in the novel. They will be studied through the individual affect or bond the two main characters of the novel have with the place — Serena and Rachel, the boss of the Boston Lumber Company and the Appalachian farm girl. Whereas Serena has a modern approach to the place, Rachel inhabits the place according to tradition. On the one hand, Serena, the embodiment of imperial America, reifies her surroundings in order to prey the place, bringing only death in her wake. On the other hand, Rachel, the embodiment of pastoral America, lives in symbiosis with the place to the point where she can appreciate its inherent beauty. Finally, these two worldviews that come out of the place cannot be reconciled: a cultural gap separates the outsiders from the natives as well as wide socio-economic inequalities which are both due to the establishment of a colonial situation.

If a place has a physicality that is shaped in *Serena* by translocal actors and if the meaning of the place differs from one character to another, it is because the place is a political entity by nature. Politics of place will study the fictional acts of resistance engaged by the place itself and its inhabitants against outside forces and finally show how Rash denounces multiple realities and resists, through his fiction, against the erasure of time, the environmental injustice that plagues Appalachia and the vision foreigners assign to his spirit country. After demonstrating that the mountain is a character in its own right, one will show how this apparently abused entity reclaims the value of its existence by fighting back sporadically while also influencing the destiny of the characters. The natives also question the monopoly of the outsiders on their land in multiple ways. This resistance can be led by individuals such as Rachel, Reverend Bolick or Sheriff McDowell but also collectively by the loggers of Snipes' crew. The end of the novel is the epitome of resistance when Jacob kills Serena and thus avenges every wrong that has been done to Appalachia. Even if the story is set in the 1920's, the novel denounces universal and contemporary matters as well. By recording the harm done to a specific land, Rash has made a universal environmentalist plea. Under Rash's pen, the simple description of the mistreatment of a place becomes a manifesto in favor of Appalachia.

Finding a clear political stance in *Serena* is harder than it seems. As Rash says, he doesn't have an agenda when he writes a novel<sup>22</sup>. In *Serena*, he never openly denounces the submission of his dear Appalachia. However, he willingly dramatizes the appropriation of a land by alien forces, the enslavement of a population reduced to cheap replaceable manpower

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<sup>22</sup> Rash, Ron. Conference in Amiens November 7<sup>th</sup> 2019.

and the destruction of a whole ecosystem through systematic logging. In the novel, Appalachia's resources and local inhabitants are at the disposal of entrepreneurs from Boston and finish in the hands of the state, a reality which is also at the expense of the locals because they have to make way for the Smoky Mountains National Park. As Wendell Berry points out in *Home Economics*, "the people of rural America have been struggling with the realization that [they] are living in a colony<sup>23</sup>". In *Serena*, Appalachia is more than under siege: it is sucked dry by deracinated foreign interests. Mark Powell says that the pattern of a local community invaded by global alien forces cannot be applied to *Serena* because "Serena may hail from Boston, the men who cut the trees do not; ultimately, what corrodes the heart is local<sup>24</sup>". However, his analysis does not take into account the fact that the workers do not destroy their surroundings willingly as they are forced into labor. This study will thus apply to *Serena* the pattern of a holistic pastoral community invaded by global alien forces. Historically, it is only in the 1880's, at the end of the Gilded Age, that Appalachia started to be invested by the timber and copper industry. A conservation movement made of the state and preservationists constituted itself soon afterwards in order to protect this exploited rural area. *Serena*, set in 1929, is at a crossroads: nature is no longer seen as something to be exploited but something to be preserved. In the novel, Appalachia is represented as the center of a conflict that opposes the timber and copper industries to the state and preservationists. They are represented respectively by the fictional Boston Lumber Company and Harris Mineral Company and Secretary Albright and Horace Kephart. The formers exploit the land and its inhabitants in order to make profit and the latter wants to create a National Park to preserve the land again at the expense of the locals. This intervention of outside forces in Appalachia dooms the place as it is the theatre of destruction, displacement, misery and murder. As the history of Appalachia is represented as a tragedy, the novel, by recording these events, is an act of resistance in itself. In depicting the hardships undergone by a poor community of mountaineers in the North Carolina mountains in the 1920s and the shaping of a land by outsiders such as well-connected entrepreneurs and far-off politicians, Rash gives us more than a strong knowledge of a place but the leverage to denounce an evil that has affected his place, and all places. One will show how this dramatization of a place shaped by trans-local entities turns into a manifesto in favor of Appalachia.

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<sup>23</sup> Berry, Wendell. *Home Economics* (San Francisco: North Point Press, 1987), p.185.

<sup>24</sup> Powell, Mark. « *Serena* ». *Southern Quarterly* 47.3 (2010): p.202-204, p.212.

# 1. The Transformation of a Place

*Serena* can be analyzed as a modern pastoral for it is indeed the story of a colonial aggression of a woman and a child, a people and their land. This aggression is carried out by masculine characters even if the originality of the novel rests on the fact that it is a woman, Serena, who controls the domination over the North Carolina Mountains. But if one focuses on the specific depiction of place, one cannot but notice that the local is fashioned by the global. The place, its local population and landscape undergo drastic changes, all fashioned by the hands of translocal actors. If *Serena* belongs to the genre of regionalist fiction it is because the local is described in a minute manner. However, the depiction of a fierce fight between entrepreneurs and the state and its consequences on the place further highlights the localist stance of the novel. Indeed, state official Secretary Albright wants to acquire a land which is already the possession of a logging company which is a historical fact. By 1930, when the novel takes place, the land in Southern Appalachia was owned only by 38% of its local population<sup>25</sup>. As Wendell Berry points out in *Home Economics*, “the people of rural America have been struggling with the realization that [they] are living in a colony”<sup>26</sup>. Rash’s novel may help to realize that fact as the North Carolina Mountains are depicted as a place under siege, sucked dry by deracinated foreign interests. Industrial logging led by corrupted entrepreneurs coupled with the idealism of the state and the preservationists escalate in the vision of the apocalypse where an entire place is destroyed and has nothing left to offer to the Appalachians besides misery, displacement and murder. The way the place, the landscape and the local population are described will be studied in this essay. Then, one will talk about the translocal forces that disrupt this local ecosystem. Finally, the consequences of this stranglehold of the global on the local will further the discrepancy between the two scales and show the utter annihilation of place.

## 1.1. Localism

Rash chose the mountains of North Carolina as a setting for his fiction. As an eco-fiction and a historical novel, *Serena* captures the reality of the Appalachian Mountains in the 1920’s and thoroughly describes its wildlife and inhabitants with the precision of a realistic novel. The study of the place tends to show Rash’s topophilia<sup>27</sup>.

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<sup>25</sup> Davis, Donald Edward. *Where There are Mountains: An Environmental History of the Southern Appalachians* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2000)

<sup>26</sup> Berry, Wendell. *Home Economics* (San Francisco: North Point Press, 1987), p.185.

<sup>27</sup> Agosto, Marie-Christine. “Poetics and Politics of Place in Ron Rash’s fiction: ‘One foot in Eden’, ‘Saints at the River’ and ‘Serena’”, *Environmental Crises and Human Costs* (2015), p.65-79, p.66.



### 1.1.1. Appalachia in the 1920's

Like all his other novels, poetry and short stories, *Serena* is set in Appalachia. Rash considers himself as primarily an Appalachian writer even though he aspires to be recognized internationally. Whereas *One Foot in Eden* (2002) and *Saints at the River* (2004) are set in Oconee County, South Carolina, *Serena* is set in the North Carolina mountains<sup>28</sup>, the same state as *The World Made Straight* (2006), *The Cove* (2012) and *Above the Waterfall* (2016). In 2000, in an interview with Jack Shuler, before writing all his novels, Ron Rash had already said that he “always felt between these two places<sup>29</sup>”. There are at least three main reasons why all his work is set in the Appalachian Mountains. The first reason is that the geography of his work corresponds to his family geography. In 1999, in an interview with Jeff Daniel Marion, he said that “one of the reasons [his work is deeply grounded in the mountain region] is because [he] spent so much time up there and also just a sense this was [his] *families' territory* [my italics]<sup>30</sup>”. Rash has deep roots in the Appalachian Mountains and his ancestors have lived in the North Carolina mountains since the 18<sup>th</sup> century. His father's family settled in Buncombe County in the mid-1700's and one of his ancestors founded Waynesville. His mother's family arrived in Watauga County in the 1700's. Generations have succeeded and Rash still has a strong tie to the region. The second reason is linked to the first one: the mountains are Rash's “spirit country”. In an interview with Joyce Compton Brown, he said: “I find that I write only rarely about Boiling Springs; instead I write about the mountains, particularly about that farm or the area around it. I would say that that area is my *spirit country* [my italics]—and always will be.<sup>31</sup>” From about the time he was twelve, Rash would indeed spend his summers on his grandmother's farm in Boone, up in the mountains, a time he qualified as “wonderful<sup>32</sup>” and that gave him his ‘primary landscape<sup>33</sup>’. He calls the mountains his “spirit country” because even if he was not born there, he has a strong connection with a place that he loves unconditionally. Finally, if Rash perseveres in depicting the Appalachian Mountains in his work it is because he thinks that if one really goes in the depth of a place, one talks about all places. Through the particular, he attempts to find the universal. His motto — that explains his entire

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<sup>28</sup> Rash, Ron. *Serena*, *op. cit.* p.3.

<sup>29</sup> Clexton, Miller. *op.cit.* p.22.

<sup>30</sup> Clexton, Miller. *op.cit.* p.3.

<sup>31</sup> Lang, John. “The Power of Blood-Memory”, *op.cit.* p.342.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.* p.342.

<sup>33</sup> Lang, John. “The Power of Blood-Memory”, *op.cit.* p.342.

philosophy — is a sentence by Eudora Welty that says “One place understood helps us understand all the other places better”.

In order to reach the universal, the place has to be very specific. Rash’s topophilia is translated in *Serena* as he has chosen to focus specifically on the mountains of North Carolina and carries out a minute description of the place. The place names are essential in this description. Scattered throughout the novel, they are often composed of a noun followed by a geographical term as it is the case of “Rudisell Creek<sup>34</sup>” or “Henley Creek<sup>35</sup>”. They inform us about the topography of the Appalachian Mountains. The fictional names of the places correspond to those of the real world although Rash confessed, he sometimes changed them slightly<sup>36</sup>. However, they all reflect a tangible reality, making of *Serena* a realistic novel. The place names also have an evocative power. As Rash says, they “are so beautiful very often and so vivid and render the place so well<sup>37</sup>”. In addition to their aesthetic function, they conjure up images to the reader’s mind, especially when the noun is a term taken from the natural world such as “Balsam Mountain<sup>38</sup>” or “Pigeon River Valley<sup>39</sup>” or even an object from the human world such as ‘Fork Ridge<sup>40</sup>’. At the beginning of chapter twelve, Rash uses five names of places in a three-line sentence:

In the following weeks, most of Noland Mountain had been logged and crews had worked north to Bunk Ridge before turning west, following a spur across Davidson Branch and into the wide expanse between Campbell Fork and upper Indian Creek.<sup>41</sup>

Here, the names of places inform us about the history of North Carolina, “Campbell” being a family established in the region and also the name of one of the characters in *Serena*, and “Indian” referring to the Cherokee tribes that were present in the mountains. In this passage, what is striking is the outstanding number of names of places. The precise delimitation of a clear-cut area turns into an almost boundless environmental disaster thanks to the name-dropping of places. A shift from the old pastoral feeling of topophilia to a more political use of places, representative of modern eco-fictions, can be observed.

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<sup>34</sup> Rash, Ron. *Serena*, *op. cit.* p.42.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.* p.110.

<sup>36</sup> Clepton, Miller. *op.cit.* p.88.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.* p.87.

<sup>38</sup> Rash, Ron. *Serena*, *op. cit.* p.107.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.* p.231.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.* p.102.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.* p.115.

In addition to a strong sense of place, *Serena* possesses a strong sense of time. As in *The World Made Straight*, a novel haunted by the Civil War, Rash has chosen a great historical event as a catalyst for his novel. The action begins in 1929 and finishes about “twenty-six months<sup>42</sup>” later, spanning the years following the Great Depression. During those years, the disappearance of the subsistence economy was already significant. Prior to the 1880’s, Appalachia was a self-sufficient region that represented the Jeffersonian dream of an all agricultural America. But at the time of the story, the advance of modernity has become more and more apparent. The fate of the farmers thus echoes the fate of the forests as everything is meant to disappear. This idea of decline is present in the image of an abandoned farmhouse when Pemberton plans to kill Buchanan at a hunting party in chapter fifteen:

Pemberton and Buchanan walked to where the orchard ended at a sagging farmhouse, beside it a barn and a well. The well bucket dangled from a rotting rope, a rusty dipper beside the well mouth. Pemberton dropped the dipper into the darkness, unsurprised when he heard no splash.<sup>43</sup>

The description of the house can be seen as a foreshadowing of Buchanan’s death but what is relevant here is the image of the loss of a way of life. The adjectives “sagging” “rotting” and “rusty” that respectively describe the farmhouse, the rope and the dipper participate in the making of a striking image of decay. The absence of “splash” stands for the barrenness of the place but also death, water being a symbol of life. In another passage, the desertion of the local population appears to be more recent:

They drove another few miles, passing small farms, a good number only inhabited by what creatures sheltered inside the broken windows and sagging roofs, foreclosure notices nailed on doors and porch beams. In the yard or field always some remnant left behind— a rusty harrow or washtub, a child’s frayed rope swing, some last forlorn claim on the place.<sup>44</sup>

The farms are no longer inhabited but haunted, the presence of the “creatures” suggesting that nature has taken back its rights. The “foreclosure notices” prove that the local farmers have had to face eviction. This phenomenon is also shown during the Pemberton’s trip to Jackson County:

The road came to an abrupt end at the farmhouse and they got out. A foreclosure notice was nailed on the front door. *Hoover can go to Hell* scrawled across it in what looked to be charcoal. A sense of recent habitation lingered — stacked poplar in the woodpile, on the porch a cloth sack of pumpkin seeds, a cane pole with line and hook.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> Rash, Ron. *Serena. op.cit.* p.278.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.* p.146.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.* p.119.

<sup>45</sup> Rash, Ron. *Serena. op.cit.* p.166-167.

Contrary to the first passage, those two excerpts show that the desertion of the farmers is recent at the time of the story. During the Great Depression, the slow process of disappearance of the agrarian lifestyle accelerates as it is made clear in the reference to president Hoover. The farmers had to face many struggles: bankruptcy, selling their land to extractive industries, or getting evicted for the creation of a national park. In addition to a strong sense of place, *Serena* thus captures the *zeitgeist* of an era.

### 1.1.2. The Mountain

The presence of the natural world is a strong feature of Rash's novels. In 2000, in an interview with Jack Shuler, Rash had already said that the setting of his fiction was essentially natural: "I write so much about the natural world. I don't write about cities. I don't write about suburbs. My work is usually set, if not in small towns, in the countryside or in the mountains."<sup>46</sup> This representation of the natural world ought to be studied.

Rash's novel *Serena* can be considered as a real botanical encyclopedia or bestiary. In this novel, the wildlife that can be found in the Appalachian Mountains is represented in its diversity. A wide range of trees can be noticed: "dogwood<sup>47</sup>", "silver birch<sup>48</sup>", "hemlock<sup>49</sup>", "poplar<sup>50</sup>", "hickories<sup>51</sup>", "white pine<sup>52</sup>", "fir<sup>53</sup>", "birch<sup>54</sup>", "chestnuts<sup>55</sup>", "sycamore<sup>56</sup>", "scrub oak<sup>57</sup>", "mountain laurel<sup>58</sup>", "rhododendron<sup>59</sup>". The numerous occurrences of animals are also quite exceptional for a novel: "wild dogs<sup>60</sup>", "fireflies<sup>61</sup>", "whippoorwill<sup>62</sup>", "timber

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<sup>46</sup> Clepton, Miller. *op.cit.* p.22.

<sup>47</sup> Rash, Ron. *Serena. op.cit.* p.13.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.* p.78.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.* p.143.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.* p.144.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.* p.167.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.* p.184.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.* p.231.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.* p.49.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.* p.56.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*

rattlesnake<sup>63</sup>”, “wooly worms<sup>64</sup>”, “hornets<sup>65</sup>”, “deer<sup>66</sup>”, “bear<sup>67</sup>”, “possum<sup>68</sup>”, “raccoon<sup>69</sup>”, “salamander<sup>70</sup>”, “bat<sup>71</sup>”, “knottyheads<sup>72</sup>”, “shiners<sup>73</sup>”, “woodcock<sup>74</sup>”, “bullfrog<sup>75</sup>”, “katydid<sup>76</sup>”, “field crickets<sup>77</sup>”, “woodpecker<sup>78</sup>”, “staccato<sup>79</sup>”, “yellowhammer<sup>80</sup>”, “kits<sup>81</sup>”, “lizard<sup>82</sup>”, “trout<sup>83</sup>”, “goldfinches<sup>84</sup>” “doves<sup>85</sup>”. This representation of wildlife is meant to increase the realistic quality of the novel and show the variety of what nature has to offer. It also adds a touch of exoticism for the readers who are not from the region. The reference to multiple tree and animal species finally grants the novel the qualities of an environmental encyclopedia of the Appalachian Mountains.

This description of the natural world is so realistic that the setting of *Serena* corresponds to the real geography of the mountains. In the real world, the species of trees will differ whether they are located at the foot or at the top of a mountain. Hardwoods are known to be present at the top of a mountain. This feature of Appalachian forests can be found in the novel, as it is the case in chapter three when Rachel goes up the mountain and reaches the “highest ridge<sup>86</sup>” and where it is said that “the trees [are] all hardwoods now<sup>87</sup>”. In a similar ascending movement in chapter seven, “poplar and hickories [replace] the softwoods<sup>88</sup>”. As the fictional geography matches the geography of the real world, Rash’s intention is made clear: making a realistic portrait of the mountains.

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<sup>63</sup> Rash, Ron. *Serena. op.cit.* p.58.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.* p.62.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.* p.70.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.* p.72.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.* p.77.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.* p.78.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.* p.93.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.* p.115.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.* p.193.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.* p.195.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.* p.216.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.* p.218.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.* p.265.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.* p.269.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.* p.308.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.* p.334.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.* p.354.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.* p.48.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.* p.48.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.* p.78.

Informing the reader about the geography of the natural world is not Rash's sole purpose when he evokes nature. If nature has a specific geography, it also has a specific history. *Serena* records the presence of the American chestnut that has disappeared due to the chestnut blight. The illness is described physically at the beginning of the novel: "An orange growth furred the bark, and the upper branches were withered, unleafed.<sup>89</sup>" Formerly the most dominant tree species in the Southern Appalachians, the American chestnut represented about 20% of the trees in the region. Donald Edward Davis stresses the importance of this disappearance: "In fact, as important as commercial logging and dam construction were to environmental and cultural change in the region, few events in North American environmental history compare with the loss of this unique tree species<sup>90</sup>." By including the American chestnut in his novel, as well as recording the deforestation of the land, Rash intends to make an environmental history of the Appalachian Mountains.

Before being an activist, Rash is thus an archivist who describes nature for its own sake. The description of the natural world as a means for Rash to denounce how humans spoil nature will be tackled later in this dissertation. In the meantime, the evocation of nature that is to say the different species of trees and animals is first and foremost an end in itself. As Rash said in an interview with Clémentine Thiebault and Mikael Demets in 2012, the feeling of nature has precedence over the ontological question of man's relationship with nature in his work:

My task as a novelist (...) is also to describe places by giving specific details about their fauna, flora, a rock or a river, in order to reveal nature, its complexity, its beauty, and to observe the interactions between man and his milieu. I must first make it possible for readers to see the beauty of a region; then they can be aware of what man does to nature.<sup>91</sup>

According to Rash, the first purpose for describing nature is to reveal the beauty of it. Only after the realization of that inner beauty can the portrait of nature be used to back up a denunciation of what humans do to the environment. Sometimes, the feeling of nature and the environmentalist plea merge. The two are inextricably linked because if nature is a beautiful entity, then it ought to be preserved. At the end of the novel, in chapter thirty-five, when the loggers realize their environment has been reduced to a wasteland, the description of a flight of goldfinches serves as a reminder of nature's beauty and impermanence:

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<sup>89</sup> Rash, Ron. *Serena. op.cit.* p.12.

<sup>90</sup> Davis, Donald Edward. *op.cit.*

<sup>91</sup> Clepton, Miller. *op.cit.* p.166.

A flock of goldfinches flew into view, their feathers bright against the valley floor as they winged southward. They swooped low and the flock contracted, perhaps in memory. For a few seconds they appeared suspended there, then the flock expanded like gold cloth unraveling. They circled the valley once before disappearing over Shanty Mountain, their passage through the charred valley as ephemeral as a candle flame waved over an abyss.<sup>92</sup>

The flock of goldfinches is an embodiment of nature's life which is manifest in the use of dynamic action verbs. The birds' movement, coupled with their color ("bright") turns out to be as beautiful as "gold cloth unraveling". The enchanted vision of the birds' flight contrasts with the 'charred valley' that reveals the hubris of humans who have destroyed what was once a beautiful, living entity. Nature is mourning and the use of this pathetic fallacy can be linked with the workers' state of mind, showing nature and humans are the same when confronted to loss. The final comparison of the flock being "as ephemeral as a candle flame waved over an abyss" is a reminder of nature's frailty and impermanence but also expresses the idea of hope even though once the candle dies, there is nothing but void.

### 1.1.3. The Natives

The depiction of the natives in *Serena* is made in such a way as to confront the reader with alterity but also recognize their humanity. It clearly challenges the hillbilly stereotype. The Appalachian community is described with the objectivity of an anthropologist through the eyes of Buchanan. Folklore is incorporated to "deepen the mystery"<sup>93</sup> surrounding those characters Rash seems to have a deep respect for.

Rash's characters are a challenge to the hillbilly stereotype. The emergence of the stereotype dates back to the aftermath of the Civil War when travel literature mixing reality and fantasy represented the people of Appalachia as savages. This stereotype is still present today since Appalachian people are seen by Americans as backward. In *Understanding Ron Rash*, John Lang tells us that:

one of the aims of Rash's work has always been to subvert stereotypes of Appalachia and its people, stereotypes that assume Appalachians are lazy, stupid, illiterate or minimally educated, violent, impoverished, and incestuous.<sup>94</sup>

Through the study of violence, one will study how Rash subverts the hillbilly stereotype. First, subverting a stereotype doesn't mean ignoring the realities from which they come from. Rash

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<sup>92</sup> Rash, Ron. *Serena. op.cit.* p.334.

<sup>93</sup> Lang, John. "The Power of Blood-Memory". *op.cit.* p.342.

<sup>94</sup> Lang, John. *Understanding Ron Rash* (Columbia: University of Columbia Press, 2014)

doesn't deny the violence that plagues the community of workers since he wrote in chapter four that the workers are "many with violent tendencies of their own (...)"<sup>95</sup>. Rash depicts the Appalachian society in the Depression era as prone to violence, again showing a tendency to realism. Present at the very beginning of the novel, the character of Abe Harmon could be seen as the epitome of the hillbilly stereotype since he is portrayed as a violent alcoholic troublemaker. However, we understand later in a chapter dedicated to Rachel that if he has a "temper like a kitchen match waiting to be struck, especially if he'd been drinking"<sup>96</sup>, it is because he was abandoned by his wife and had to raise Rachel on his own. The reason that lays underneath a violent behavior or an addiction to alcohol resides in a broken heart. Similarly, the violence of the workers can be explained by their harsh conditions of work or their poverty. By explaining where the violence comes from Rash shows that violence is not innate but acquired. Anyway, true violence in *Serena* doesn't come from the Appalachians but from the Pembertons who come from outside the region and who commit multiple murders. This is another way for Rash to say that reality is always more complicated than its representation.

Compared to *Serena* who disdains the past, the natives have old traditions, handed down from generation to generation. According to Eliot Porter, Appalachian traditions are unique due to the isolation of the place:

Left to themselves, cut off by lack of easy transportation and communication from the majority of Americans, the mountaineers retained much of the old manners, speech and customs, and developed others peculiar to themselves.<sup>97</sup>

To include those traditions in his novel, Rash uses a device to avoid being too didactic. Indeed, the character of Buchanan acts as an anthropologist who does research about the highlanders and that writes down his discoveries in a notebook. The first occurrence of this method is when Pemberton remembers Buchanan told him about the "border ballads"<sup>98</sup> as he listens to a woman who plays a "steel-stringed instrument"<sup>99</sup> and sings about "murder and retribution on the shores of a Scottish loch"<sup>100</sup>. These border ballads are traditional songs that date back to the first immigrants coming to Appalachia from the Anglo Scottish border at the beginning of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. The highlanders' customs come from immemorial times as is their names that are Old

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<sup>95</sup> Rash, Ron. *Serena. op.cit.* p.54.

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.* p.49.

<sup>97</sup> Porter, Eliot. *et.al. Appalachian Wilderness: the Great Smoky Mountains* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1973), p.70.

<sup>98</sup> Rash, Ron. *Serena. op.cit.* p.58.

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid.* p.57.

<sup>100</sup> *Ibid.* p.57-58.



Testament derivations. Hence Buchanan again notices that “the highlanders tended to live more by the Old Testament than the New<sup>101</sup>”. However, in chapter sixteen, Buchanan is dead and the movement is reversed: it is the presence of the wreaths indicating the workers’ celebration of Old Christmas (when “the magi visited the Christ child<sup>102</sup>”) that reminds Pemberton of the man. Through the character of Buchanan, Rash informs us about the traditions of the mountain people without interrupting the plot.

In addition to the importance of traditions, highlanders define themselves by a specific way of thinking and representations tinted by obscurantism. Snipe’s crew mythologizes nature throughout the novel by assuming there is a mountain lion within it. Highlanders mystify their surroundings with beliefs in the supernatural or see all sorts of signs in nature. One example of this is in Stewart’s words in chapter five:

My daddy said the woolly worms was wearing a thicker coat all summer and we’re sure enough seeing the truth of it” Stewart said. “Daddy allowed that wasn’t the only sign. He said the hornets was building their nests close to the ground”<sup>103</sup>

Animal behavior is used by Stewart and his dad to explain the early winter. The belief in local folklore is also present in the character of Widow Jenkins who says to Rachel “*You have to tell the bees he died*<sup>104</sup>” worrying they would leave their hive after Abe Harmon’s death. Even if they grant nature all sorts of powers, highlanders tend to have the capacity to distance themselves from those beliefs. For example, Stewart’s comment is openly challenged by preacher McIntyre when he says “Them’s pagan believings, Stewart<sup>105</sup>”. Similarly, Rachel “wasn’t sure if it was true or not [but] she’d done it<sup>106</sup>”. By giving his characters the capacity to question their beliefs, Rash avoids caricature and the representation of the Appalachians as naïve. This paradox of a people prone to believe fables though able to distance themselves is present in chapter ten when the narrator says “all manner of *tall tales* [my italics] were spoken and *nearly* [my italics] believed<sup>107</sup>”. In conclusion, folklore seems to be an essential part of the Appalachian society as Rash makes clear by the way he was upbrought:

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<sup>101</sup> Rash, Ron. *Serena. op.cit* p.112.

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid.* p.160.

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid.* p.62.

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid.* p.82.

<sup>105</sup> *Ibid.* p.62.

<sup>106</sup> *Ibid.* p.82.

<sup>107</sup> *Ibid.* p.102.

I grew up in a world in which folklore was so intense and I heard so much of it. There were all sorts of natural portents, like writing spiders that would write their messages in their webs and the ghosts that my grandparents and uncles would tell me about. All that Appalachian folklore was important to my work, the sense of mystery it conveyed.<sup>108</sup>

By including the folklore in his novels Rash's purpose is to convey a sense of mystery. Galloway's mother, an old mystic woman who can foresee the future, and who is a reminiscence of the character of Widow Glendower in *One Foot in Eden*, may be the embodiment of Rash's desire to "deepen the mystery<sup>109</sup>" of the world.

## **1.2. Translocal Forces**

*Serena* can be seen as a novel about the disruption of translocal forces in a place. The initial image of the train arriving at the Waynesville station from Boston is representative of a process of invasion that will last the entire novel. The North Carolina Mountains are the center of a conflict between Bostonian entrepreneurs and state officials and environmentalists. This stranglehold on the place ends by the creation of a National Park which may look as a victory for the environment but mostly benefits global interests.

### **1.2.1. The Robber Barons**

The transformation of the Appalachian landscape by industry was already present in Rash's 2004 novel *Saints at the River* in which the Chattahoochee river is qualified as a "watershed little more than a housing development with an open sewer running through its middle<sup>110</sup>". The considerable damages caused by industry on the place have but one cause: the constant invasion of foreign companies that seek to make profit out of the region's plentiful natural resources. In *Serena*, extractive industries such as timber and mining companies are both represented respectively by the Boston Lumber Company, later renamed the Pemberton Lumber Company and Harris, the "local copper and kaolin magnate<sup>111</sup>" who runs the Harris Mineral Company. They actually cooperate in the novel and buy a tract together which makes sense since "a pattern emerged in which timber companies initially bought and leased large

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<sup>108</sup> Lang, John. "The Power of Blood-Memory", *op.cit.* p.341.

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid.* p.342.

<sup>110</sup> Rash, Ron. *Saints at the river* (New York: Henry Holt, 2004), p.33.

<sup>111</sup> Rash, Ron. *Serena. op.cit.* p.14.

tracts of land, encouraging railroad companies to enter the area or building their own railroads, then logged the land and followed that with coal mining at these and other coal-rich sites<sup>112</sup>”. If their cooperation is historically realistic, it also serves the entrepreneurs’ only purpose in the novel: to make profit at any cost. Rash’s depiction of the entrepreneurs refers to the image of the robber baron who spoils the land, represses employees and uses corrupted means to accumulate wealth. Throughout *Serena*, the vision of the world of the entrepreneurs is monolithic and doesn’t change. In chapter one, when Serena discovers the apparent rusticity of her future dwelling, she sees “money freed to buy more timber tracks<sup>113</sup>” that is to say a way to increase production. In chapter thirty-seven, Pemberton wonders: “how many millions of board feet of timber were in those mountains<sup>114</sup>” showing that even in the most severe pain leading to his death, his psyche is conditioned to prey nature in order to make financial gain.

Every action the Pembertons undertake is to make profit. Several means are employed to achieve this end and among them are efficiency, having control over the workers, bribes and constantly expanding their business. Murder can also be seen as a way to make more profit. If the motive for Buchanan’s murder is to avoid selling land to the state, his death benefits the Pembertons in another way. Indeed, Buchanan’s death deters Wilkie of continuing his partnership with the Pembertons and makes of Serena and Pemberton the sole owners of the company. Instead of splitting their profit in three ways, the Pembertons accumulate all the money made by the company from that moment on.

First, a good management of time enables the Pembertons to make more money. There is also a sense of urgency that comes from the fact that their land can be taken away if the pro-park faction uses the eminent domain law. But even before this looming confiscation, the portable houses of the workers were already representative of this desire of efficiency since they are portable and are ready to be sent to the next working location. Campbell’s status as an “overseer<sup>115</sup>” is later revealed to be because of his “usual efficiency<sup>116</sup>”. The idea that everything that slows down the accumulation of wealth is a waste of time can be found in the thoughts of Pemberton that “suspects someday soon there’d be a poison to eradicate such valueless trees and shrubs and make it easier to cut and haul out hardwoods<sup>117</sup>”. But the desire to be efficient has its own limits when it comes to choose between efficiency and profit. In

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<sup>112</sup> Rehder, John B. *Appalachian Folkways* (Baltimore; London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004), p.180.

<sup>113</sup> Rash, Ron. *Serena. op.cit.* p.17.

<sup>114</sup> *Ibid.* p.366.

<sup>115</sup> *Ibid.* p.7.

<sup>116</sup> *Ibid.* p.214.

<sup>117</sup> *Ibid.* p.232.

chapter nineteen, Snipes and Campbell don't think they should clear-cut the trees of a gap in Big Fork Ridge because it "would be slow going, and particularly dangerous<sup>118</sup>". But Pemberton insists they should be harvested because profit is more important to him than efficiency and the security of the workers. Besides, this decision leads to the demise of Dunbar, one of the loggers of Snipes' crew. This great loss stirs up the reader's hatred for the Pembertons who don't even realize the consequences of their lust for profit.

The Pembertons don't care about the security of their workers but want to earn their respect more than anything. Reducing them to an impressionable workforce prevents any form of dissidence that would slow down the clear-cutting. Accordingly, the reader learns that before the story took place Pemberton worked with the men as a strategy to earn their respect<sup>119</sup>. When he kills Abe Harmon, his first thought is that "[the workers would] respect him, and Serena even more<sup>120</sup>". Serena's wager with Bilded is but another way to impose herself as the worker's new boss and show her superiority<sup>121</sup>. In the case they would disrespect the Pembertons, the workers put themselves in great danger. Bilded gets fired which is later revealed to be a ruthless decision since he "has a wife and three children<sup>122</sup>" to feed. Campbell is murdered. This murder is also a way to frighten the workers who "need to understand the necessity of loyalty<sup>123</sup>" according to Serena. For the Pembertons, keeping the workers obedient is seen as a way for their business to thrive.

Any sort of means is used in order to make profit. The reader learns multiple times that among them are bribes. This image of the corrupted entrepreneur was already present in Rash's earlier fiction *Saints at the River* through the character of Bryan. When environmentalist Luke asks him to put up a barrier between his construction area and a stream, he "opens his billfold and (takes) out three hundred-dollar bills<sup>124</sup>". In *Serena*, the first occurrence is only implied by Stuart when he says: "You can count on Harris and the Pembertons fattening every wallet from the county courthouse up to the governor's mansion.<sup>125</sup>" This judgment turns out to be true since the reader learns at the end of the novel in Serena's own words that Campbell was murdered because "(h)e knows who we've paid off and what for<sup>126</sup>". Furthermore, the character of Bowden, the replacement of the uncorrupted Sheriff MacDowell is "exactly what Pemberton

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<sup>118</sup> Rash, Ron. *Serena. op.cit.* p.184.

<sup>119</sup> *Ibid.* p.54.

<sup>120</sup> *Ibid.* p.11.

<sup>121</sup> *Ibid.* p.22-23.

<sup>122</sup> *Ibid.* p.36.

<sup>123</sup> *Ibid.* p.226.

<sup>124</sup> Rash, Ron. *Saints at the river. op.cit.* p.104.

<sup>125</sup> Rash, Ron. *Serena. op.cit.* p.64.

<sup>126</sup> *Ibid.* p.226.

expected<sup>127</sup>” that is to say an easily corrupted person. The image of the corrupted entrepreneur has a universal appeal but is specifically applicable to Appalachia in the 1920’s. Indeed, Allen W. Batteau says that correlatively to its industrialization, Appalachia suffered from “political corruption<sup>128</sup>”, a phenomenon that often “seems to accompany the rapid accumulation of great fortunes<sup>129</sup>”. Rash thus draws his evil characters from historical reality, capturing the psyche of the corrupted robber baron in Appalachia.

Finally, this lust for profit rests upon an absence of boundaries. Throughout the novel, the Pembertons ceaselessly seek to expand their business be it in Appalachia with the acquisition of the Jackson County tract or the desire of Serena to go to Brazil which is seen as the perfect place because of its laissez-faire attitude towards business. In Brazil, there is “no law but nature’s law<sup>130</sup>” as Serena puts it. This idea of an irresistible expansion of the company can be summarized in the sentence pronounced by Pemberton at his birthday party: “Give us a lifetime and Mrs. Pemberton and I will cut down every tree, not just in Brazil but in the world<sup>131</sup>.” This attitude, the never-ending desire of conquest, is a defining trait of the robber barons.

### 1.2.2. The ‘Battle Royal’ of the 1920’s

The Pembertons are not the only ones who want to appropriate Appalachia’s hillsides. *Serena* is also the story of a fierce battle between two distinct visions of the world. On the one hand, greedy entrepreneurs want to continue logging the forests and won’t sell “unless [they] make a good profit<sup>132</sup>”. On the other hand, state and preservationists, represented by Secretary Albright<sup>133</sup> and Horace Kephart<sup>134</sup> band together in order to create a National Park. This “battle royal<sup>135</sup>”, as Snipes calls it, is the backdrop of *Serena*.

In 1929, at the time the story takes place, Appalachia’s occupation by the timber and the coal industries had long started even though it was relatively late compared to the rest of The United States. In *Appalachian Wilderness*, Eliot Porter stresses the isolation of Appalachia before 1890, when the industry first came to the place:

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<sup>127</sup> Rash, Ron. *Serena. op.cit.* p.279.

<sup>128</sup> Batteau, Allen. *The Invention of Appalachia* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1990), p.4.

<sup>129</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>130</sup> Rash, Ron. *Serena. op.cit.* p.29.

<sup>131</sup> *Ibid.* p.346.

<sup>132</sup> *Ibid.* p.69.

<sup>133</sup> Horace M. Albright was an American conservationist. In 1929, he succeeded Stephen Mather as director in charge of the National Park Service.

<sup>134</sup> Horace Kephart was an American conservationist. He is best known for his book *Our Southern Highlanders* (1913).

<sup>135</sup> Rash, Ron. *Serena. op.cit.* p.116.

For over a century [1790's onwards] the mountaineer settlements were left in cultural and economic isolation, an island or backwater overlooked and forgotten by the managers of the great industrial development which was and still is altering the face of the continent.<sup>136</sup>

The industry would come to Appalachia only at the end of the Gilded Age, once timber resources had become scarce in New England and the Great Lake region. The region opened up after the land had been bought by logging companies. The tracts were cheap for they were remote and escaped human occupation. The clear-cutting started correlatively to the arrival of the railroad, a prerequisite to transport the raw materials outside the region. The timber boom in Appalachia lasted from 1890 to 1920. More precisely, the clear-cutting in the Haywood and Jackson Counties — where *Serena* takes place —, lasted almost fifty years. As soon as 1883, the two counties respectively possessed thirteen and seven sawmills<sup>137</sup>, indicating that timber companies were present in the area way before the time of the novel.

Set in 1929, the book marks the end of an era: nature is no longer seen as something to be exploited but something to be preserved. As the character of Harris says in the novel, the land grabs for the park started in 1926<sup>138</sup>. The idea of the park, however, historically emerged in 1923, when a number of Knoxville businessmen formed the Great Smoky Mountain Conservation Association<sup>139</sup>. Among the difficulties for the creation of the park were locational disputes and fundraising but most of all lumber interests which are represented in *Serena*. Historically, the opposition was as fierce as at it is depicted in the novel. Numerous companies occupied the land and stood in the way of the park's creation. As John Rehder says in *Appalachian Folkways*: “before the formation of the Great Smokey Mountains National Park in 1926, there were eighteen logging companies working the lands that later became the park.”<sup>140</sup> Even if the Boston Lumber Company is fictional, the monopoly on the land by timber companies is an historical reality. Besides, the “Champion Paper<sup>141</sup>” Company and “Colonel Townsend<sup>142</sup>”, at the head of the Little River Railroad and Little River Company, really existed and actually sold their land to the state.

The efforts to make a national park lasted from 1923 to 1934, when Congress finally created the park. With hindsight, the reader knows the park was created. However, Rash didn't

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<sup>136</sup> Porter, Eliot. *op.cit.* p.70.

<sup>137</sup> Rehder, John B. *op.cit.* p.172.

<sup>138</sup> Rash, Ron. *Serena. op.cit.* p.165.

<sup>139</sup> Batteau, Allen. *op.cit.*

<sup>140</sup> Rehder, John B. *op.cit.* p.173.

<sup>141</sup> Rash, Ron. *Serena. op.cit.* p.14.

<sup>142</sup> *Ibid.* p.139.

want to represent the creation of the park as an irresistible process but rather as the outcome of a fierce fight. By setting his novel in the wake of 1929, Rash intentionally wanted to build the action at the climax of the crisis. The Pembertons and their business partners join forces with Harris against Secretary Albright, Horace Kephart, Rockefeller's lawyer Davis and editor Webb. The absence of the highlander's in the battle for their land show they have no longer control over their destinies. The opinion of the Appalachians on the park is a complex question. The workers of Snipes crew take the side of the entrepreneurs because, as Dunbar says, "if this camp gets shut down [they]'ll be in the worst kind of fix<sup>143</sup>" and lose their jobs. On the contrary, Sheriff MacDowell is represented as a pro-park environmental champion, Galloway saying that "the sheriff's near hep on naturing as Kephart is<sup>144</sup>". Webb, editor of the Ashville Citizen, comes from the region but his presence at the Biltmore Estate in chapter twenty-four shows that he is a wealthy person who doesn't have the same priorities as the people of the region. The opposite opinions do not enable to distinguish a homogeneous Appalachian voice. On the contrary, there seems to be a division between well-off connected Appalachians and a mass of poorer farmers, loggers and minors.

The negotiations take place in chapter fourteen when the park delegation comes to the timber camp. The lively exchange takes the form of personal attacks against Kephart, threats of eminent domain or even flatteries to win over Wilkie. The price of the land is discussed but the Pembertons and Harris finally refuse the deal. Serena even offers to Harris to invest in the Elkmont tract, yet another action that categorizes the entrepreneurs as greedy. However, Rash refuses the oversimplification of a battle between good environmentalists and evil entrepreneurs. The representation of Wilkie and Buchanan balance with Serena, Pemberton and Harris' complete disrespect for the other party. Wilkie and Buchanan's silence during the exchange, could be interpreted, as Serena does<sup>145</sup>, as their willingness to seal the deal. Besides, Buchanan already showed signs of hesitation during the first hunting trip when he asked: "So the Secretary of the Interior's interest in this land. You still say we shouldn't consider it?<sup>146</sup>" The probable compatibility between their status as entrepreneurs and their approval of the park is hinted at by Secretary Albright when he reminds his opponents that "Mr. Rockefeller is a businessman like all of you, yet he has given five million dollars<sup>147</sup>". The emphasis on Rockefeller's donation enables Rash to nuance the image of the entrepreneur as a selfish person. If the entrepreneurs

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<sup>143</sup> Rash, Ron. *Serena. op.cit.* p.116.

<sup>144</sup> *Ibid.* p.119.

<sup>145</sup> *Ibid.* p.140.

<sup>146</sup> *Ibid.* p.69.

<sup>147</sup> *Ibid.* p.138.

are not all represented as against the park *per se*, the government and environmentalists are also portrayed as greedy and willing to use any means possible to create the park. As the novel unfolds, the apparent solemnity of Secretary Albright during the negotiations grows into impatience, Harris saying that “he’s given up being a diplomat<sup>148</sup>”. In order to get the Townsend tract that includes “more virgin hardwoods than any land in the Smokies<sup>149</sup>”, Kephart uses deceit, planting rubies in the Jackson County tract to lure Harris and the Pembertons into buying it. This more than black-and-white “battle royal<sup>150</sup>” ends by the Pembertons selling their land and the creation of the Great Smoky Mountains National Park.

### 1.2.3. The Great Smoky Mountains National Park

The outcome of the battle between the Pembertons and Secretary Albright and Horace Kephart is the creation of the Great Smoky Mountains National Park. It is a relief for the reader of *Serena*, who has witnessed the wounding atrocities committed towards the landscape throughout the novel. However, Rash nuances this apparent victory.

The Great Smoky Mountains National Park is one of the largest protected areas in the United States. It contains geological exceptions and an outstanding number of plant and animal species. Indeed, it is composed largely of the Ocoee rocks that “are so old that they contain no traces of plant or animal life<sup>151</sup>”. According to Arthur Stupka, chief park naturalist at the Great Smokies for twenty-five years, the park includes “more than 1300 kinds of flowering plants, almost 350 mosses and liverworts, 230 lichens, and more than 2,000 fungi<sup>152</sup>”. The beauty of its scenery attracts many tourists.

The Great Smoky Mountains National Park is the result of a local struggle represented in *Serena* but also a global phenomenon typical of the United States. The origins of national parks are to be found in the origins of the country itself, when the first environmentalist discourse led by transcendentalist writers and thinkers associated essence of humanity and symbiosis with nature. The necessity of national parks was already advocated by Henry David Thoreau in “Walking” in 1862: “Each town should have a park, or rather a primitive forest, or five hundred or a thousand acres, where a stick should never be cut for fuel, a common

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<sup>148</sup> Rash, Ron. *Serena. op.cit.* p.159.

<sup>149</sup> *Ibid.* p.139.

<sup>150</sup> *Ibid.* p.116.

<sup>151</sup> Porter, Eliot. *op.cit.* p.25.

<sup>152</sup> Porter, Eliot. *op.cit.* p.89.



possession forever, for instruction and recreation.<sup>153</sup>” The park is primarily seen as a final barrier in case private property should become the only way of inhabiting the land. Thoreau’s idea of the park is visionary because not that different from the parks we know actually — it is an untouched primal forest enjoyable by all. The idea of a return to nature and thus the necessity of natural parks will be reinstated by John Muir in *Our National Parks* in 1901 when he says: “thousands of tired, nerve-shaken, over-civilized people are beginning to find out that going to the mountains is going home; that wildness is a necessity.<sup>154</sup>”

Both Thoreau and Muir appear in the novel, essentially in comparison with Horace Kephart: “He’s their new Muir<sup>155</sup>” says Serena whereas Wilkie considers him as their “local Thoreau<sup>156</sup>”. It is ironic that the words of Serena are meant to be an insult for they enable Rash to pay tribute to the man. Even if Rash puts him among environmental landmarks, he still depicts his flaws such as his alcoholism which is hinted at three times<sup>157</sup> or the fact that he has abandoned his wife and kids behind<sup>158</sup>. Those flaws are even implied by Serena who says “I’ll have him check out Kephart as well. See if he’s as stellar a citizen as John Muir<sup>159</sup>”. By comparing Kephart to Muir, the preservation of Appalachia is inscribed in a global national park movement which takes its roots in Yellowstone and Yosemite. Yet, there is an important difference between other national parks and the Great Smoky Mountains National Park. Yellowstone and Yosemite were primarily untouched federal land. The land of Great Smoky Mountains National Park was owned by private companies and mountaineers. *Serena* shows how negotiations and removals were at the core of the park’s creation.

In *Serena*, the motive for the creation of the park is proclaimed by Horace Kephart when he says: “I’m doing it for the future.<sup>160</sup>” For Kephart, the creation of the park is part of an environmentalist agenda whose motive has been the preservation of nature. It is in accordance with the vision of environmentalist Edward Abbey who says that the purpose of the park is the “preservation of the greatest stands of virgin forests yet remaining in the eastern United States<sup>161</sup>”. However, the willingness to preserve nature was not that significant at the time of the Great Depression and several other reasons seem to have lain behind the creation of the park. According to Allen Batteau, “a dominant motivation for the creation of these parks was

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<sup>153</sup> Thoreau, Henry David. « Walking », 1862.

<sup>154</sup> Muir, John. *Our National Parks*, 1901.

<sup>155</sup> Rash, Ron. *Serena. op.cit.* p.117.

<sup>156</sup> *Ibid.* p.35.

<sup>157</sup> *Ibid.* p.135. p.166. p.266.

<sup>158</sup> *Ibid.* p.136.

<sup>159</sup> *Ibid.* p.76.

<sup>160</sup> *Ibid.* p.136.

<sup>161</sup> Porter, Eliot. *op.cit.* p.88.

the enhancement of tourist attractions and local tourist trade<sup>162</sup>”. Tourism is not the only economic reason that would have led to the creation of the park. In *The Invention of Appalachia*, Batteau adds: “The conservation movement is an effort by established middle-classes to preserve their position (including their access to scenery) against the ambition of upstarts.<sup>163</sup>” The park is seen as the result of a class struggle in which the middle classes want to avoid growing inequalities by checking the predation of industrialists who were carving a fortune out of the Appalachian hillsides. The conservation movement is thus less opposed to the exploitation of natural resources than their single-purpose appropriation as they had a “development-oriented agenda, as distinct from an orientation centered on preservation<sup>164</sup>”. The “development-oriented agenda” Batteau talks about can be found in the words of Gifford Pinchot who wants the reserves to provide a “perpetual supply of timber for home industries<sup>165</sup>”. Gifford Pinchot who was at the head of the United States Forest Service from 1905 to 1910, was the first to promote the creation of a national park in the East. In 1910, in *The Fight For Conservation*, he stresses the importance of preserving natural resources for the future of the nation:

Shall we conserve those resources, and in our turn transmit them, still unexhausted, to our descendants? Unless we do, those who come after us will have to pay the price of misery, degradation, and failure for the progress and prosperity of our day. When the natural resources of any nation become exhausted, disaster and decay in every department of national life follow as a matter of course. Therefore the conservation of natural resources is the basis, and the only permanent basis, of national success. There are other conditions, but this one lies at the foundation.<sup>166</sup>

For Pinchot, the park is not a means to preserve nature but another way to keep resources at hand for future use. May they be environmental or economic, motives that lay behind the creation of the Great Smoky Mountain National Park are all future-oriented, contrasting with the “here and now”<sup>167</sup> of *Serena* and by extension, unregulated capitalism.

Rash is known for being an environmentalist preoccupied by nature’s well-being. However, he avoids being too didactic in his fiction, afraid the reader would reduce him to “one of those tree-hugger<sup>168</sup>”. Indeed, in *Serena*, the natural park is never presented as a good thing but rather the objective outcome of an historical battle. Yet Rash cannot but admire those who

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<sup>162</sup> Batteau, Allen. *op.cit.*

<sup>163</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>164</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>165</sup> Davis, Donald Edward. *op.cit.*

<sup>166</sup> Pinchot, Gifford. *The Fight For Conservation*, 1910.

<sup>167</sup> Rash, Ron. *Serena. op.cit.* p.136.

<sup>168</sup> Clepton, Miller. *op.cit.* p.134.

have helped creating the park. In 2010, in an interview with Christophe Dupuis, he qualifies the enthusiasm for the park as “a miracle” and Theodore Roosevelt as a “visionary”:

It is really a miracle that at such a time, during the Great Depression—at a time when there was no money at all and when people were not concerned with the preservation of nature—there should have been visionary people like President Theodore Roosevelt who defended such a cause. John Muir also wrote about that topic. People became so fond of the idea of creating the national parks that the Rockefellers ended up giving a lot of money, and many people did so, even in schools: kids donated their small change to contribute to the project. This is partly why I wrote this book: for people to be aware and remember it.<sup>169</sup>

By describing the struggles that led to the establishment of the park, Rash wants to pay tribute to those who made it possible be it politics, businessmen or common men. Although he agrees with the necessity of the park to protect an endangered wildlife, he never disregarded the displacement of the local population which is mentioned three times in the novel<sup>170</sup>. This appropriation of Appalachian land, started by foreign companies and resumed by the government, participates to the disappearance of a community with its own lifestyle and culture. *Serena* as a means to educate about the Great Smoky Mountains National Park also shows how the local had to be sacrificed for global interests.

### **1.3. Endangered Ecosystem**

The interference of outside forces such as companies and the government in the Appalachian ecosystem has huge consequences. The landscape is spoiled and ultimately frozen into a national park. Farmers are forced off their land, or forced to destroy their own habitat in order to survive. Both humans and nature suffer from this invasion which ends by the image of the apocalypse.

#### **1.3.1. Spoiling the Wilderness**

The initial image of a skidder catching an entire mountain — “[its] boom angled toward the mountain, and the cables were so taut it looked as if the whole mountain was hooked and ready to be dragged down the tracks to Waynesville<sup>171</sup>” — may as well be more prophetic than

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<sup>169</sup> Rash, Ron. *Serena. op.cit.* p.128.

<sup>170</sup> *Ibid.* p.28. p.63. p.137.

<sup>171</sup> *Ibid.* p.24.

hyperbolic in the sense that the clear-cutting enterprise of the Pembertons is so grand in scale that it has spoiled an entire wilderness. Indeed, the Pemberton Lumber Company owns and ultimately destroys about “thirty-four thousand acres<sup>172</sup>” which are later completed by the Jackson County tract. The exploitation of the landscape also takes the entire novel that is to say almost the three years of the diegesis. Rash uses several devices to show the irreparable damage done to the Appalachian wilderness by the timber industry. Anthropomorphism, death imagery and apocalypse tropes are used for the reader to visualize and feel the impact of large-scale deforestation.

One of the first visible degradations done to the landscape in the novel is the presence of the railroad that transports the timber from the mountains to Waynesville. The laying of the tracks already included harming the landscape since we learn in a flashback that “obstacles not dug up or filled in were leveled with dynamite or trestles<sup>173</sup>”. But from the vantage point where Pemberton brings Serena at the beginning of the novel, “the railroad track appeared sewn into the lowland like stitches<sup>174</sup>”. The comparison that identifies the railroad track to stitches make of the valley a wounded human being —an ongoing metaphor throughout the novel. It is also metonymic since the tracks are seen as the part of a much bigger phenomenon — it is the means by which the gigantic wound will be inflicted to the mountain. It is not a surprise the railroad should be linked *in medias res* to the sufferings of the landscape since, according to John Rehder, “the role the railroad played in resource exploitation in Southern Appalachia cannot be overemphasized. Once the railroad entered the Appalachian forest, the landscape would never be the same<sup>175</sup>”. The arrival of the railroad in the region has *de facto* doomed the fate of the landscape. The railroad, traditionally seen as the epitome of civilization, is thus transformed, under Rash’s pen, into the tool of evil.

The clear-cutting of the forests in *Serena* is represented as a deadly battle between humans and nature. The comparisons between war and clear-cutting abound in the novel. The landscape has turned into “acres of stumps that, from a distance, resembled grave markers in a recently vacated battlefield<sup>176</sup>”. A huge number of stumps — the sole remainder of the trees — are represented as the signs of each tree’s own individual demise. Clear-cutting is thus seen as deadly and devastating as a war. Also, when the crews are working, the sound of the axes against the trees is reminiscent of rifle shots: “the lead choppers began notching trees, a sound like rifle

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<sup>172</sup> Rash, Ron. *Serena. op.cit.* p.14.

<sup>173</sup> *Ibid.* p.53.

<sup>174</sup> *Ibid.* p.14.

<sup>175</sup> Rehder, John B. *op.cit.* p.173.

<sup>176</sup> Rash, Ron. *Serena. op.cit.* p.23.

shots ricocheting across the valley.<sup>177</sup>” It is not one rifle-shot —that produces a dull sound — but multiple rifle shots that, amplified by the natural acoustics of the valley, produces an unbearable noisiness reminiscent of a war. Even if many workers die in this enterprise, the landscape seems to be the real loser of this battle as the following quote suggests: “It was the last hardwood on the ridge, and a few scarlet leaves fell like an early surrendering.<sup>178</sup>” Here, the only retaliation of nature — the falling of a few scarlet leaves — is inexistent or rather vain. The image of the last tree succumbing to its death highlights the weakness of nature when confronted to the destructive force of humans. To conclude, the use of a lexical field of war (‘battlefield’, ‘rifle shots’, ‘surrendering’) emphasizes not only the violence of clear-cutting for the workers but also for the landscape.

This confrontation between man and landscape rests on the personification of the landscape which is capable of, if not completely retaliating, suffering and ultimately dying. The trees are very much alive before they are turned into stumps and they seem to suffer as much as humans would. Because of this, the sound made by the saw cutting a tree is compared to the act of breathing heavily showing the trees are not just living but suffering: “the cross-cut saw resumed, the blade’s rapid back-and-forth like inhalations and exhalations, a sound as if the tree itself were panting.<sup>179</sup>” When it comes to clear-cutting in the novel, this is one of a few images or rather the only image of a landscape that is alive, and it is represented on the verge of death. Death imagery is the main device used to show the consequences of deforestation by Rash. In winter, for example, even when snow hides the stumps, the slash piles that raise white humps across the landscape are referred to as “burial mounds<sup>180</sup>”. The comparison of the landscape to a cemetery highlights the idea that clear-cutting is a butchery. It also gives a sense of loss, the material remnants of the clear-cutting being the sign of nature’s demise. If *Serena* dramatizes the tragic aspect of human existence, the landscape does not seem to be exempt from the Greek *fatum*. Indeed, the stumps are linked from the beginning to “grave markers<sup>181</sup>” a prolepsis of the state of the mountains at the very end of the novel when “the valley and ridges resemble[s] the skinned hide of some huge animal<sup>182</sup>”. By representing the landscape as a dying or a dead entity, Rash wants to make clear that deforestation is a barbaric murderous activity.

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<sup>177</sup> Rash, Ron. *Serena. op.cit.* p.26.

<sup>178</sup> *Ibid.* p.301.

<sup>179</sup> *Ibid.* p.111.

<sup>180</sup> *Ibid.* p.63.

<sup>181</sup> *Ibid.* p.23.

<sup>182</sup> *Ibid.* p.333.

Clear-cutting is represented as a long process that ends by the destruction of an entire world and takes on almost cosmic proportions. At the beginning of the novel, the landscape is already damaged for the men have been clear-cutting for nine months<sup>183</sup>. As they move forward throughout the novel the workers leave behind “an ever-widening wasteland of stumps and slash, brown clogged creeks awash with dead trout<sup>184</sup>”. This abundant motif of “stumps and slash<sup>185</sup>” or the dantesque vision of a “wasteland<sup>186</sup>” scattered throughout the novel carefully prepared the final image of the apocalypse. It was also prepared by Ross’ bad omen when he warns his fellow workers in chapter sixteen: “So what happens when there ain’t nothing left alive at all?<sup>187</sup>” In chapter thirty-five, the tableau of desolation ends by Preacher McIntyre saying: ‘I think this is what the end of the world will be like.<sup>188</sup>’ This apocalyptic trope is even more powerful since it is located at the end of a chapter and at the end of the novel. The tone is solemn for it is McIntyre who speaks when he has been silent during the whole novel, as if the dreadful scenery could not but induce speaking to the mute. Finally, the irreparable damage done to the land and its inhabitants is compared to the destructiveness of the First World War. As Rash plays with the cultural metaphor of the apocalypse, *Serena* is granted the status of an efficient eco-fiction.

### 1.3.2. Highlander’s Misery

*Serena* is as much an eco-fiction as a social novel. If the landscape is obviously at the core of foreign speculations, the highlanders living in the place have turned into the unfortunate casualties of this invasion. The novel depicts the hardships undergone by the mountaineers be it the anonymous Appalachian or the friendly workers of Snipes’ cutting-crew. The coming of outsiders redistributes the mountaineers in the place for they are forced to leave their homes either to work in a logging camp or to make way to the National Park. This redistribution of the population is epitomized by an abandoned church Rachel happens to pass by: “On the other side stood a deserted white clapboard church. (...) So many people lived in the timber camp now that Reverend Bolick held his services in the camp’s dining hall instead of the church.<sup>189</sup>” The highlanders who cannot live from agriculture anymore and who are affected by the stock

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<sup>183</sup> Rash, Ron. *Serena. op.cit.* p.14.

<sup>184</sup> *Ibid.* p.115.

<sup>185</sup> *Ibid.* p.28. p.103. p.110. p.115. p.227. p.248.

<sup>186</sup> *Ibid.* p.227. p.322.

<sup>187</sup> *Ibid.* p.159.

<sup>188</sup> *Ibid.* p.336.

<sup>189</sup> *Ibid.* p.49.

market crash have no choice but to become manpower for the industry and suffer from appalling working conditions. As the story unfolds, the number of injured or dead workers keep increasing, the reality of which is captured by Doctor Cheney at the beginning of the story when he says ironically that “if you could gather up all the body parts and sew them together, you’d gain an extra worker every month<sup>190</sup>”. But as far as the loggers of Snipe’s crew are concerned, they can always count on their camaraderie as a meager consolation price for the grim reality of their lives.

In the words of Secretary Albright displacement is “an unfortunate aspect of what has to be done<sup>191</sup>”, the well-being of the local inhabitants being sacrificed for the common good of the country. But for the workers of Snipes crew the land the government wants to freeze into a national park belonged to their families and their ancestors. It also seems almost unbelievable to them that natural species take precedence over human beings and that the two should be separated: they are “running the folks out so you can run the critters in<sup>192</sup>” says Ross, disconcerted. On top of that, they almost all have a family relative affected by the creation of the park. Dunbar’s cousin<sup>193</sup> and Stewart’s uncle<sup>194</sup> both got evicted and Henryson’s cousin lost his job since clear-cutting is forbidden on Townsend’s land after he sold it to the state<sup>195</sup>. As said before, Rash nuances the benefits of the park to show it was built at the expense of the local population whose life is forever changed by its creation.

The novel describes the harsh condition of being a worker for the timber industry in Appalachia in the 1920’s. As Stewart says “there can’t be a worser job in the world<sup>196</sup>” than being a logger. To begin with, the workers and their families left their homes to live in an unhealthy logging camp infested by rats where they sleep in portable “stringhouses<sup>197</sup>” that resemble “cheap wooden boxcars<sup>198</sup>” and that are ready to be sent onto flat cars to the next working location. They pay rent eight dollars a month to live in these makeshift cabins when they are paid only two dollars a day for an eleven-hour shift. The harshness of their work is encapsulated by the name of their tools they call “misery whips<sup>199</sup>”. Logging is represented as a noisy, dirty, dangerous job and that is why workers are using whatever they can to ease their

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<sup>190</sup> Rash, Ron. *Serena. op.cit.* p.26.

<sup>191</sup> *Ibid.* p.138.

<sup>192</sup> *Ibid.* p.335.

<sup>193</sup> *Ibid.* p.63.

<sup>194</sup> *Ibid.* p.335.

<sup>195</sup> *Ibid.* p.218.

<sup>196</sup> *Ibid.* p.176.

<sup>197</sup> *Ibid.* p.15.

<sup>198</sup> *Ibid.* p.15.

<sup>199</sup> *Ibid.* p.27.

everyday life. They use all sorts of stimulants to stay alert such as coffee, tobacco or even cocaine. They also carry lucky charms to prevent any accident from happening: “Some workers began wearing hand-whittled wooden crosses around their necks while others carried rabbit foos and loadstones, salt and buckeyes and arrowheads and even half-pound horseshoes.<sup>200</sup>” However, their attire does not seem to protect them from the dangers of logging and most of all the timber rattlesnakes as they wear “bib overalls<sup>201</sup>”, “flannel shirts and pants<sup>202</sup>”, “Chippawah boots<sup>203</sup>” or “shoes of canvas and leather<sup>204</sup>” or even nothing in the case of the signal boys who are barefoot.

The story is punctuated by the mention of dead or injured workers may they be anonymous or central characters. The loggers are risking their life and the integrity of their body on a daily basis. They can suffer from the venom of deadly animals such as timber rattlesnakes, yellow jackets or hornets. The use of sharp tools is also dangerous and causes many accidents as it is the case for Galloway who got his hand chopped off. Danger also comes from the industrialization of work and the use of machinery which makes the workers all the more careful: “Logs cut late on Saturday yet dangled from the cables, and men passed heedfully under them as they might clouds packed with dynamite.<sup>205</sup>” The extent of the human carnage is described thoroughly at the opening of part two:

The lingering cold defied any calendar. From October until May, snow and ice clung to the ridges. Several men died when they slipped trying to avoid falling trees or limbs. Another tumbled off a cliff edge and one impaled himself on his own axe and still another was beheaded by a snapped cable. A cutting crew lost its way during a snowstorm in January and was found days later, their palms peeling off when searchers pried the axe handles from their frozen hands. Fingers or toes lost to frostbite were among the season’s lesser hazards<sup>206</sup>.

About half of the year the men are thus prey to the winter’s hardships. The heavy rains can also be seen as a threat to the workers: “Recent rains had slowed progress, not just forcing men to slog through mud but causing more accidents as well.<sup>207</sup>” Working in the mountains means being subjected to the weather and the passing of the seasons, which makes the conditions of the workers all the more precarious.

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<sup>200</sup> Rash, Ron. *Serena. op.cit.* p.183.

<sup>201</sup> *Ibid.* p.23.

<sup>202</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>203</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>204</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>205</sup> *Ibid.* p.24.

<sup>206</sup> *Ibid.* p.101.

<sup>207</sup> *Ibid.* p.176.



As said before, the human cost of logging is unprecedented. The Pembertons' disregard towards human life, made clear by an absence of safety conditions and the lack of equipment provided for the workers, is also due to the fact that manpower is easily replaceable: "Men seeking work came to the camp in a steady procession now. Some camped out in the stumps and slash, waiting days for a maimed or killed worker to be brought from the woods in hopes of being his replacement<sup>208</sup>." If the death of a worker means nothing to the Pembertons, it means a substantial increase in the living conditions of the men queuing up in front of the commissary. Their life is not the only thing at stake and they need to feed their families: "hungry children and siblings, sick parents and sick wives<sup>209</sup>." It is the same families who mourn the workers when they die, as it is shown by the presence of the wife and the son of Ledbetter at his funeral. The description of Ledbetter's corpse shows how the trauma of being a logger still lingers in death: "A placard bearing the words rest in peace had been placed on the coffin's squared head, but the corpse's tight-shouldered rigidity belied the notion, as if even in death Ledbetter anticipated another falling tree<sup>210</sup>." The precariousness of the mountaineers' life in death shows the immense impact the activity of logging can have on the common man.

Translocal forces thus reduce the common Appalachian to cheap replaceable manpower or deracinate him from a land passed on from generation to generation, putting his life at risk. As Marie-Christine Agosto says, unbridled powers work in concert to assail the Appalachians:

The human greed and hubris of men believing in a capitalistic economy and megalomaniac nationalism, the blind idealism of conservationist enthusiasts, together with water, snakes, wild animals and other secret agents of nature's revenge, all are to be seen as primitive forces of evil of which the common man is a victim<sup>211</sup>.

The 'secret agents of nature's revenge' in question will be studied later in this essay (see "The Mountain Fights Back"). Metropolitan interests don't take into account the lives of the local population. As such, human exploitation associated with the clear-cutting of the forests together form in *Serena* the destruction of a whole ecosystem.

### 1.3.3. The Destruction of Both Worlds

What is at stake in *Serena* is not simply the clear-cutting of the trees — which would be the entrepreneurs' reductive vision of their work—, nor the endangered well-being of the

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<sup>208</sup> Rash, Ron. *Serena. op.cit.* p.199.

<sup>209</sup> *Ibid.* p.199.

<sup>210</sup> *Ibid.* p.124.

<sup>211</sup> Agosto, Marie-Christine. *op.cit.* p.78.

Appalachians, but the disturbance of a whole ecological balance, the destruction of a delicate ecosystem where man and nature live in harmony. In *Serena*, the human world and the natural world both suffer the same fate as they are annihilated. A parallel can even be drawn between the sufferings of men and the spoiling of the mountain since they are both the consequence of a same invasion. The destruction of the Appalachian ecosystem has also an immediate consequence on the human world. As the trees that used to sustain the ecosystem are destroyed, men fall prey to erosion, floods and fires. In the end, the Appalachians have destroyed their environment against their will, an environment that used to satisfy their basic needs and provide them with food and water. The human and natural world being linked, the scope of the destruction broadens and escalates in an unprecedented catastrophe.

According to Marie-Christine Agosto, *Serena* shows “the violence done to the landscape through systematic logging, and how it echoes the physical and moral damage done to man<sup>212</sup>”. Indeed, the demise of the forests can be linked to the bad living conditions of the workers and the multiple murders, the Pemberton’s disregard of the well-being of nature explaining their disregard of human life and vice versa. The Pemberton Lumber Company’s enterprise is as noxious for nature as for humans, “men falling dead near about as fast as the trees<sup>213</sup>” as Ross says. Marie-Christine Agosto furthers the analogy when she explains that “limbs of trees and limbs of men are severed at the same prodigious rate and both men and nature are the victims of a common devastation<sup>214</sup>”. The use of the word ‘limb’ to qualify both the trees and the men underlines the shared destiny and the endangered integrity of the Appalachians and their surroundings. Trees and men literally die at the same time as it is the case when Snipes crew chops a yellow poplar tree that hits a sycamore and frees a limb that enters Dunbar’s body:

The limb fell toward Dunbar, whose back arched as his axe struck wood the same instant the sycamore limb entered between his collar bone and spine. Dunbar’s face smashed against the ground as his knees hit, the rest of his body buckling inward. The white limb had not snapped or slipped free from the flesh. It remained embedded in Dunbar’s back like a lightning bolt, and as the limb’s angled weight succumbed to gravity, Dunbar’s body slowly, almost reverently, lifted to a kneeling position, as if to be given a last look at the world.<sup>215</sup>

This excerpt dramatizes the outcome of the battle between men and nature: violent deaths on both sides. Men and trees are both succumbing to their fate as they are but the casualties of forces of evil that are beyond their control. It is interesting to note that the limb falls at the same

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<sup>212</sup> Rash, Ron. *Serena. op.cit.* p.65.

<sup>213</sup> *Ibid.* p.301.

<sup>214</sup> Agosto, Marie-Christine. *op.cit.* p.72.

<sup>215</sup> Rash, Ron. *Serena. op.cit.* p.187.

time as Dunbar's axe strikes the trunk of the poplar tree, as if nature was retaliating. Physicality is part of this encounter, mutilated bodies intertwining, the broken sycamore limb entering and being stuck in Dunbar's flesh. Dunbar's condition is as hopeless as that of the limb, their last movements being controlled by gravity. This scene is only an episode that stands for a greater massacre, the reality of which is captured by Ross when he compares clear-cutting to the First World War: "they's a feeling about a place where men died and the land died with them<sup>216</sup>." Human loss coupled with the destruction of the environment turns the Appalachian Mountains into a barren land that has nothing to offer anymore for its population, the war-like enterprise of the Pembertons leaving only destruction for future generations. "It'd be like trying to live in a graveyard<sup>217</sup>" says Snipes at the end of the novel, emphasizing the irreversible damage done to the place.

Large-scale clear-cutting of trees has a devastating effect on the mountains and ultimately on the Appalachians themselves. Trees are essential to preserve the well-being of the Appalachian ecosystem: they provide food and shelter for animal species, protect plants from the harsh mountain climate and they are a natural barrier to heavy rainfall. At the age of the anthropocene, the impact of men on the landscape is so extensive that it produces specific phenomena Rash describes in his novel such as fires, floods and erosion. As Wendell Berry says: "by living in opposition to nature, we can *cause* natural calamities of which we would otherwise be free."<sup>218</sup> For instance, industrialization coupled with an increased human presence multiplies the risk of forest fires. In 1891 alone, between 800,000 and 1,2 million acres of woodland burned in North Carolina<sup>219</sup>. In the novel, Sheriff MacDowell intently puts fire to the house of the Pembertons to kill them. However, if the target was punctual, the result of his action or the burning of the whole timber camp, shows the extent of the damage unchecked forest fires can make in the mountains: "Men begrimed by smoke and soot moved to and fro across the valley's smoldering floor."<sup>220</sup> The impact of men on nature, specifically through clear-cutting, can also be seen in the erosion of the mountains and the spoiling of the purity of the water. At the very beginning of the novel, the Pembertons drive through "a creek clogged with silt<sup>221</sup>". Since trees are being cut, the soils are no longer stabilized and water carries dirt away in the streams. Trees also absorbed the rain and played an important role in preventing

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<sup>216</sup> Rash, Ron. *Serena. op.cit.* p.335.

<sup>217</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>218</sup> Berry, Wendell. *op.cit.* p.71.

<sup>219</sup> Davis, Donald Edward. *op.cit.*

<sup>220</sup> Rash, Ron. *Serena. op.cit.* p.321.

<sup>221</sup> *Ibid.* p.15.

excessive water runoff. The workers are the first casualties of the floods that plague the mountains: “Though the rains had lessened, silt-stalled creeks continued to make traversing the bottom-land a precarious business. Men stumbled and slipped, came up cursing and wiping mud from their faces and clothes.<sup>222</sup>” The entrepreneurs’ willingness to clear-cut entire mountains disrupts an entire ecosystem and creates unprecedented catastrophes the common Appalachian is a victim of.

The storyline is interspersed with workers chopping trees and trees being turned into timber for future human use. The way men spoil nature cannot be as clearly represented as in *Serena*. However, underneath this strong opposition between the human world and the natural world lies the idea that one cannot exist without the other. For instance, the workers and the trees are forever linked in the cycle of life. If killing is a way for the workers to survive, it also induces their demise and both trees and men seem to meet in the after-life: “the timber that had brought them here and killed them, and now enclosed them, also marked most of the graves.<sup>223</sup>” It is ironical that the thing that killed the workers should be containing their bodies but it eventually shows that even in death, workers are linked to the natural world. The image of the graveyard made of dead men and dead trees shows their similar fate. However, for the Appalachians who are still alive, destroying nature also means destroying themselves. As Rash said in an interview, “we are inextricably linked to the natural world. If it dies, we die with it. I think it is stupid and shortsighted not to recognize that fact<sup>224</sup>”. In *Serena*, the workers have destroyed their environment that used to provide them with food and water and now they can no longer survive. As Wendell Berry says: “We know, then, that the conflict between the human and the natural estates really exists and that it is to some extent necessary. But we are learning, or relearning, something else, too, that frightens us: namely, that this conflict often occurs at the expense of *both* estates. It is not only possible but altogether probable that by diminishing nature we diminish ourselves, and vice versa<sup>225</sup>.” In *Serena*, the workers destroy the forests that ultimately provide them with basic resources to survive. But it is only at the end of the novel that the reader fully understands the extent of the loss for the Appalachians. The water “tastes like mud<sup>226</sup>” and is unable to sustain fish anymore: “Used to be thick with trout too, this here stream. There was many a day you and me took our supper from it. Now you’d not catch

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<sup>222</sup> Rash, Ron. *Serena. op.cit.* p.221.

<sup>223</sup> *Ibid.* p.245.

<sup>224</sup> Clexton, Miller. *op.cit.* p.67-68.

<sup>225</sup> Berry, Wendell. *op.cit.* p.10.

<sup>226</sup> Rash, Ron. *Serena. op.cit.* p.333.

a knottyhead.<sup>227</sup>” By spoiling the natural world, men have destroyed their own chances of survival, both worlds being inextricably linked.

This essay tends to blur the difference between the translocal forces at stake in the novel. The park is actually a serious attempt to protect the land from further appropriation and preserve it for future generation even if it does not take into account the local population and serves global interests. The baron robbers, on the other hand, don’t even invest in the North Carolina Mountains, the rails that are set down at the end of the novel after the purchase of the Jackson County tract being pre-existing ones that are put “onto a flatcar<sup>228</sup>”. The entrepreneurs only leave destruction in their wake. But once the place destroyed, the local population has no other choice but to suffer or leave. Rash shows how the population has been deracinated through a worker’s funeral. The condition of the workers who mourn the death of their peer echoes the hopeless condition of the landscape, and the natives thus become the epitome of the placeless: “They moved through the blighted landscape slowly, looking as much like refugees as mourners<sup>229</sup>.” The novel shows how industrial logging has had an important impact on the subsistence economy of the place and its culture, removing the farmers from their land and eliminating from the forests the water, plants and animals the mountaineers had long depended upon for survival. Ironically, at the end of the novel, the only collateral damage for the entrepreneurs is that they could not find trout for an hors d’oeuvre: “Pemberton had armed a crew with fishing poles that afternoon to catch trout for an hors d’oeuvre, but the men returned from the creeks fishless, claiming no trout remained in the valley or nearby ridges to catch.<sup>230</sup>”

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<sup>227</sup> *Ibid.* p.334.

<sup>228</sup> Rash, Ron. *Serena. op.cit.* p.339.

<sup>229</sup> *Ibid.* p.249.

<sup>230</sup> *Ibid.* p.340.

## 2. One Place, Two Worldviews

In *Serena*, the two female characters are not only foes to one another, they have two completely opposite ways of inhabiting the place. Appalachia is one place, yet, two distinct worldviews clash within its mountains. This is partly due to the main characters' backgrounds. Serena is an intellectual coming from the North: she is emancipated and in favor of progress and business. Rachel is a biblical name that is well suited for her character: she is a plain country girl who is attached to the old ways of life. She is young, simple and sentimental. The two characters' different attributes entail two opposite relationships to the place. Serena and Rachel have come to embody America's schizophrenic attitude towards its rural areas — the extensive exploitation of the powerful companies and the subsistence agriculture of the local farmers. However, one is taking precedence over the other in the inexorable advance of modernity. Indeed, Serena has a modern and masculine way of treating the place: she appropriates the land, takes control over the natives and exploits nature. Preying the place entails a lack of care towards the sanctity of things which ends up in destruction and murder. On the contrary, Rachel has a more traditional relationship to the place: she has a deep respect for a land she has inhabited since she was born and that her ancestors have taught her to cherish. She has a very feminine attitude towards nature and, as she gives and takes back in a symbiotic relationship, she becomes able to perceive the inner beauties of the landscape. These two worldviews that the main characters of the novel embody are incompatible. A further study of the differences between the outsiders and the natives to the place will reach the conclusion of an incompatibility between their cultures and wide socio-economic discrepancies as a result of colonialism. Furthermore, the novel is altogether aporetic: none of those two ways of living in the place is seen as viable.

### 2.1. The Character of Serena: Modernity

Serena has a modern attitude towards the place as she is willing to become “master and possessor of nature” as Descartes says. She engages in a large-scale extensive exploitation of the land which leaves the mountains scarred as though they were “the skinned hide of some huge animal<sup>231</sup>”. Only destruction and death can come from the way Serena treats places and people. A parallel can even be drawn between Serena's plundering of the place and the multiple murder she commits as both come from the same disregard of the inner sanctity of things.

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<sup>231</sup> Rash, Ron. *Serena. op.cit.* p.333.

### 2.1.1. Imperialistic America

From the beginning of the novel onwards, Serena strikes the reader as a formidable woman. She mesmerizes all the characters surrounding her may they be her husband, the workers or her business partners who appear “incapable of further speech<sup>232</sup>” when they first meet her. In addition to being atypical, Serena is multi-faceted which enables many readings of her. Rash’s goal was indeed to “create a character resonant enough to allow many interpretations of her, in the past as well as the present<sup>233</sup>”. Among other readings, critics have stressed the intertextual resemblance between Serena and lady Macbeth. But Serena may as well stand for an imperialistic force, a defining trait of America throughout time. Her economical conquest of the Appalachian Mountains and the extension of her timber empire to the virgin forests of Brazil, with no other boundaries than the entire world, makes of her the epitome of American nationalism.

When I asked him why he called his main character Serena, Ron Rash answered that there were four reasons<sup>234</sup>. The main reason is that it is a beautiful name. Serena surely has an aesthetic quality of its own be it melodically or typographically. The meaning of the name also rests upon irony for Serena is nothing but serene. Psychologically, all her actions and thoughts reveal a profound anxiety, especially after her miscarriage, as she is always overseeing the crews, planning a murder or thinking about expanding her business to Brazil. Her restlessness even carries on as she sleeps: at the beginning of the novel, Pemberton is woken up twice by “her thrashing, her fierce latching onto him until she’d fallen back asleep<sup>235</sup>”. The third reason is that the name Serena is a reminiscence of Selena, the Greek goddess of the moon. There are a few passages in the novel where Serena is directly linked to the moon. At the end of the first chapter, she opens the curtains of the bedroom to let the moonlight in before making love to Pemberton<sup>236</sup>. The exceptional quality of her character fuels the speculations of the workers who believe that “come the night she bares her belly to the moon, soaking in all its powers<sup>237</sup>”. At the end of the novel, a “lunar eclipse<sup>238</sup>” occurs when Serena endows Galloway with the mission of killing Rachel and Jacob. In the coda, Serena gets out her hacienda to die in the light of a full moon<sup>239</sup>. Linking Serena to the moon enables Rash to grant his female character with

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<sup>232</sup> Rash, Ron. *Serena*. *op.cit.* p.6.

<sup>233</sup> Clepton, Miller. *op.cit.* p.144.

<sup>234</sup> Rash, Ron. Conference in Amiens November 7<sup>th</sup> 2019.

<sup>235</sup> Rash, Ron. *Serena*. *op.cit.* p.4.

<sup>236</sup> *Ibid.* p.20

<sup>237</sup> *Ibid.* p.201.

<sup>238</sup> *Ibid.* p.303.

<sup>239</sup> *Ibid.* p.370.

an unearthly power reminiscent of witches. Finally, the reason of interest for this study is that the name Serena is meant to sound foreign for the inhabitants of Appalachia. The exoticism and foreignness of Serena does not only come from her name but her character which is so original that the workers are drawn to her with a mixture of admiration and awe.

The onomastic analysis of the name Serena shows Rash's desire to emphasize his character's foreignness to the Appalachian region. This idea that Serena is an outsider to the place is also conveyed by the name of her company: the *Boston* Lumber Company. As an outsider, her taking control over the Appalachian Mountains and exploitation of the hillbilly minority together with the single appropriation of the profit being made makes of her the epitome of an imperial power. Metropolitan interests — a single individual from Boston — suck dry an entire rural area by plundering the landscape and reducing the locals to cheap replaceable manpower. Since the Appalachian Mountains and Boston are both part of the United-States, the situation resembles internal colonialism, especially since American imperialism was never territorial but entirely based on an economic domination. The novel actually shows how American imperialism and capitalism are but one and the same as they are both embodied in the character of Serena. Besides, the choice of making his main female character barren says a lot about Rash's vision of the capitalistic model of production.

Serena's eagle also comes from outside the region. It is brought from Mongolia to kill the timber rattlesnakes that hide in the slash. It is not a means to spare the workers' lives but rather to accelerate their progress that was slowed down by the fear of being bitten. If it is beneficial for the industry, it ultimately disturbs the mountain ecosystem since rattlesnakes are essential in keeping the balance of the rat population. The presence of the eagle is another proof that the place is transformed by outside forces in Rash's novel. But the eagle is also the symbol of America. The image of Serena and her emblematic eagle on her arm can thus be seen as an allegory of American nationalism. The fact that she is a strong advocate of a liberal economy that opposes the state's intervention in the matters of business is in agreement with this idea. Her venture in the Smokies, followed by the expansion of her company to the Brazilian mahogany forests surely hint at American expansionism, particularly at the western conquest but also abroad at South America. Making of Serena an embodiment of American nationalism enables Rash to reveal the true face of his country. While American leaders have advocated for the diffusion of democracy and human rights worldwide, Serena's model solely rests upon a predatory attitude, oblivious to the well-being of humans and the integrity of nature. As Marie-Christine Agosto says, the analogy between Serena and American nationalism "seems to point out that the American industrialism of the 1930's, and the American politics that supported it,



had nothing better to export to the world than destruction and death<sup>240</sup>”. Through the character of Serena, Rash debunks the idea that America is a country endowed with a particular mission — that of being a light to the world — as he reveals the flaws of what appears to be an aggressive country. In the coda, the revelation of the hidden face of America reaches its height when the reader learns that Serena has made a partnership with the “West German tractor company<sup>241</sup>” run by Joseph Mengele, a Nazi doctor who fled in Brazil. However, this is not the only reference to Nazi Germany that can be found in the novel, the eagle also being the symbol of the Nazi Party.

The character of Serena exemplifies the monopoly American imperialism has had and still has on humans and nature. If the domination is first and foremost economical and rests upon a capitalistic economy which is blind to the sufferings of people and the destruction of places, only seeking profit at any cost, it also turns out to be ideological, political and moral. Serena’s power is indeed overwhelming and her hubris calls to mind the ancient heroes of Greek tragedies as well as contemporary American expansionism. Indeed, her desire to conquer places has no physical boundaries as it is expressed rather explicitly by her husband at his birthday party: “Give us a lifetime and Mrs. Pemberton and I will cut down every tree, not just in Brazil but in the world.<sup>242</sup>” The boundless territorial expansion of Serena’s company coupled with her quest for power makes of her the epitome of an imperial power. However, her individualism could also be the reason why she preys upon the place.

### **2.1.2. Preying on the Place**

As an imperial force, Serena and her company subjugate an entire region. She plunders the Appalachian Mountains in many ways: she lumbers forests, kills animals and takes advantage of a fragile population by employing them as a cheap replaceable manpower. Serena’s relationship to the place is not at all that of care but ruthless domination. Everything that surrounds her is reified as she sucks life out of things to make them mere objects for her own benefits. Her psyche is made in such a way as to prey on things and a parallel can be drawn with her trained eagle. With her fellow entrepreneurs, she gathers knowledge about the mountains with no other goal than to exploit the plentiful natural resources of the region. If she dominates the landscape thanks to her intellect, she also dominates it physically as she is often

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<sup>240</sup> Agosto, Marie-Christine. *op.cit.* p.77.

<sup>241</sup> Rash, Ron. *Serena. op.cit.* p.369.

<sup>242</sup> *Ibid.* p.346.

depicted on top of mountains, looking down at her possessions — another allegory for her superiority to the place.

In the novel, Serena's name always appears jointly with complete annihilation: she rides her horse through "acres of stumps<sup>243</sup>" or checks "the depth a steel cable [bites] into a hickory stump<sup>244</sup>". This constant depiction of Serena in the midst of decimated landscapes enables Rash to grant his main character the status of a powerful female supervillain who leaves only destruction in her wake. At the end of the novel, photographer Frizzel manages to encapsulate this destructive power in a single photograph. The photograph shows Serena and Pemberton standing in front of what Frizzel calls a "dreary backdrop<sup>245</sup>" or a landscape made of stumps and slash — the remnants of the countless trees the couple has decimated. The photograph does not only represent Serena's destructiveness as it is also the sign of her superiority over people and places. First and foremost, the photograph would not exist had Serena not given her consent to Pemberton who almost had to beg to have the picture taken: "Indulge me this one time."<sup>246</sup> The reader may perceive the irony of the situation if he remembers Pemberton's first words to his workers. According to him, Serena should be treated as the equal of any man<sup>247</sup> but in reality, she exceeds her peers and turns out to be in charge throughout the whole novel. Secondly, Serena and Pemberton distort the initial purpose of the photograph. Indeed, the photograph was first meant to be published as a denunciation of the devastation the couple has wrecked upon the land and legitimate the park to public opinion. By making Frizzel take a photograph of them instead, Serena reclaims the land as a property the photographer is trespassing, thus subjecting him to her own rules. Furthermore, the meaning of the photograph also changes: the focal point is no longer a blighted landscape but Serena and her husband demonstrating true power. By putting herself in front of the landscape, she takes full credit of what she has done and ultimately controls her image. Finally, her supremacy can be deduced from her position in the photograph. Since Serena is standing on her horse, she is shown as physically above her husband, a fact that can be interpreted as a symbol of her superiority to him.

Plundering a place is easier when one has no affection for it. Since Serena comes from outside the region and only came to Appalachia to make profit, she is incapable of seeing the true harm she has done to the place. On the contrary, she is very satisfied with her enterprise and at the end of the novel, she even says to Pemberton: "I'm pleased with what we've done

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<sup>243</sup> Rash, Ron. *Serena. op.cit.* p.23.

<sup>244</sup> *Ibid.* p.249.

<sup>245</sup> *Ibid.* p.353.

<sup>246</sup> *Ibid.* p.353.

<sup>247</sup> *Ibid.* p.22.

here.<sup>248</sup>” Never in the novel has Serena shown a hint of remorse for all the murders she has committed and it seems to be the same for the spoliation of nature. On the contrary, she is proud of what she has done to the landscape. Critics have noticed this absence of remorse and John Lang says that “Rash strains credibility in his portrait of Serena, whose utter indifference to the potential consequences of her murderous actions may seem improbable<sup>249</sup>”. However, one could argue that Serena is as much human as could possibly be. She may not feel remorseful but she is totally capable of feeling human emotions. During the first hunting trip, “Pemberton watched tears well up Serena’s eyes<sup>250</sup>”, tears which were probably caused by the fear of Pemberton’s death after the bear attack.

Serena’s relationship to the land runs counter to an immemorial way of inhabiting places. As Marie-Christine Agosto says, “*Serena* bears witness to the disappearance of the ‘home place’, the ‘native land’, the ‘*Heimat*’, a feeling that pertains both to faith and childhood memory<sup>251</sup>”. Indeed, Serena’s predatory attitude towards the mountains is at the polar opposite of the affection Rachel feels for her reassuring “home place”. But even before she came to Appalachia Serena seems to have never known place-attachment. Being attached to a place would entail a respect for the past that Serena does not have. On the contrary, she puts her past behind, particularly her childhood in Colorado, a sensitive topic she does not want to talk about. Once she left her birth state, she never returned there. Before leaving for good, she even managed to burn down her family home, again showing a profound disregard of places and the memories they may conjure up. The only remnant of her time in Colorado is what matters the most to her: the money she got when she sold her father’s timber holdings which is, according to her, better used in North Carolina<sup>252</sup>. The fact that Serena is uprooted can explain why she has become self-centered and violent.

Being a foreigner to the region has a price, at least for Serena’s associates who are clearly alienated by the Appalachian Mountains. Numerous are the occurrences when the Bostonian entrepreneurs express their repulsion for the place: Pemberton qualifies the mountains as “inhospitable<sup>253</sup>” and later on as a “forsaken landscape<sup>254</sup>” just to fright off Wilkie who had already exclaimed that living in the Smokies was as if he were “banished to the

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<sup>248</sup> Rash, Ron. *Serena. op.cit.* p.352.

<sup>249</sup> Lang, John. *Understanding Ron Rash. op.cit.* p.89.

<sup>250</sup> Rash, Ron. *Serena. op.cit.* p.73.

<sup>251</sup> Agosto, Marie-Christine. *op.cit.* p.74.

<sup>252</sup> Rash, Ron. *Serena. op.cit.* p.55.

<sup>253</sup> *Ibid.* p.150.

<sup>254</sup> *Ibid.* p.151.

moon<sup>255</sup>”. Anyways, Pemberton’s words have a double entendre and the mountains might as well be “inhospitable” because he has murdered Buchanan, a fact that Wilkie takes into account when he decides to sell his share of the company and leave the Smokies for good. However, if one takes those remarks literally, they tend to express the hostility of the Appalachian Mountains to those outsiders to the region. This vision of the landscape is quite unusual in Rash’s novels since they often feature characters that were born in the area.

Serena’s psyche is conditioned to prey things be it people or places. Instead of seeing nature for what it really is, she sees trees as board feet of lumber, and species of trees as more or less profitable to her. During a hunting trip, she notices “quite a few poplars and oaks<sup>256</sup>” though not for their remarkable beauty but for their material, length and size. As soon as she commented upon the quality of the trees, Pemberton adds that it is “some of [their] best acreage<sup>257</sup>”, thus comforting her about the idea that there is money to be made in the area. Her psyche seems to function as that of a hunter in the sense that she closely observes her surroundings in order to target her prey, here the most profitable trees to chop off. As such, she ought to be compared to her eagle, a bird of prey. They are both predators who are linked textually, starting with their eyes. Serena’s eyes are described as “eyes that did not close<sup>258</sup>” and according to Snipes the eagle’s eyes “don’t blink nor nothing<sup>259</sup>”. In the same manner, Serena and her eagle are always on the lookout for a prey and won’t rest until they are satisfied. Since they also both alter the Appalachian ecosystem, Rash purposefully links the eagle’s rattlesnake hunt with Serena’s spoliation of the land through the color of the bodies they mutilate: “the dust-colored rattlesnake set down like a piece of slash<sup>260</sup>.” The wreck they have brought upon the land is unprecedented especially since the eagle has killed forty-two rattlesnakes near the end of the novel.

In order to plunder the landscape, Serena and her fellow entrepreneurs first need to acquire knowledge about the Appalachian Mountains. Indeed, everything on their land is under careful scrutiny be it the composition of the forests, the positioning of the different ridges and creeks as well as the degrees of ascent of the land. Besides, during the hunting trip that ends with Buchanan’s death, Harris trails, “still studying the landscape’s geology<sup>261</sup>”, showing that even in times of leisure the entrepreneurs cannot help but check out nature as a potential

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<sup>255</sup> Rash, Ron. *Serena. op.cit.* p.34.

<sup>256</sup> *Ibid.* p.69.

<sup>257</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>258</sup> *Ibid.* p.20.

<sup>259</sup> *Ibid.* p.105.

<sup>260</sup> *Ibid.* p.326.

<sup>261</sup> *Ibid.* p.144.

resource. From the moment she arrived in Appalachia, Serena surely carries out a strategy that consists in knowing the place to dominate it: “Serena was gone all morning, getting familiar with the landscape, learning the names of workers, ridges and creeks<sup>262</sup>.” Her education as the daughter of a timberman enables her to gather enough information about the place in order to exploit it. She ends up delineating and measuring the land very meticulously in order to create a new spur line that will transport the timber to the North: “Pemberton stared at the charcoal etching’s precise rendering of topography, the carefully calibrated degrees of ascent, all done by Serena’s hand<sup>263</sup>.” The use of science to dominate the landscape is common for extractive companies: Harris hires teams of geologists who make “exploratory sorties into cliffs and creek banks<sup>264</sup>” in order to find the precious minerals. But Serena and her colleagues can always count on their own education and experience to scrutinize the landscape they so eagerly want to master.

In *Serena*, the power couple seems to have taken the habit of overlooking the landscape. At the very beginning, Pemberton brings Serena to a “drop-off’s edge<sup>265</sup> to show her the land she possesses from that moment on. In chapter twenty-five, they resume the experience as they stand “atop Shanty Mountain<sup>266</sup> and look over the valley and ridges that surround them. The fact that the main characters take such a vantage point makes sense in the diegesis since they can judge what has already been clear-cut and what still remains to be done. But Serena and her husband standing above the land is also allegorical and shows their superiority to the place. As they tell themselves throughout the novel, the land is *theirs* which means that they can do whatever they want with it and in this case, plunder it. The smallness of the couple standing above an entire chain of mountains they possess is another image of human hubris.

In *Serena*, the North Carolina Mountains are represented as the monopoly of a single individual if one considers Pemberton under Serena’s influence. But the Pembertons not only own the place, they know every inch of the forests they so eagerly plunder. In the first scene of the novel, the smoke they leave behind as they walk is a prolepsis of the devastation they will bring to the land: “Cinders crunched under their feet, made gray wisps like snuffed matches<sup>267</sup>.” This image of annihilation can be applied to the destroyed forests of North Carolina as well as the death of the other human characters, every snuffed match could be representing a life the Pembertons will take in the course of the novel.

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<sup>262</sup> Rash, Ron. *Serena. op.cit.* p.27.

<sup>263</sup> *Ibid.* p.110.

<sup>264</sup> *Ibid.* p.215-216.

<sup>265</sup> *Ibid.* p.13.

<sup>266</sup> *Ibid.* p.249.

<sup>267</sup> *Ibid.* p.11.

### 2.1.3. Murder

Preying upon the place does not seem to be enough for Serena who also preys upon its human dwellers. Serena's disregard of the sanctity of life, which was discerned by Joshua Lee in his article<sup>268</sup>, can be applied to the place as well as humans. Furthermore, the fact that she is capable of plundering an entire region might explain why it is so easy for her to kill people and vice versa. The early episode of the hunting trip already showed Serena's disregard of life in general. Serena and her colleagues kill an outstanding number of deer and a bear just because they happen to live in the place: "By late afternoon the Pembertons and Buchanan had killed a dozen deer. Galloway made a mound of carcasses in the meadow's center and blood streaked the snow red<sup>269</sup>." Hunting deers can be part of the cycle of life especially when humans only kill a couple of deer for their meat or hides. However, in the case of the Pemberton's hunting trip, not only are the deer killed by the dozen but they are also left to rot in the forests, the only thing motivating them being the sheer joy of killing. The massacre takes on dramatic proportions, a deer being the symbol of untamed beauty. This passage tends to show that Serena is not only a threat to plant life or humans but also to animals.

The novel is punctuated by many murders which all have the same culprit: Serena. She engages in a killing spree that probably starts with the murder of Abe Harmon and only ends with her death in Brazil, even though there is no textual clue of who she may have murdered before the time of the diegesis and between the end of the novel and the coda. Besides, the number of murders keeps increasing as the novel unfolds and nothing seems to put an end to it except Rachel's escape. As soon as the second murder, Serena had already expressed her true intentions to Pemberton when she said that Buchanan's death was "a start, a true beginning<sup>270</sup>", thus revealing that she would not hesitate to repeat her misdeed. In total, Serena was the instigator of seven murders, the victims being (in chronological order): Abe Harmon, Buchanan, Doctor Cheney, Campbell, Widow Jenkins, Sheriff MacDowell and Pemberton. This exhaustive list does not take into account the numerous deaths of workers which are due to Serena's harsh management and Vaugh's decision to commit suicide to escape her wrath. As for the method she uses to kill her victims, Serena turns out to be creative: at first, she uses henchmen such as Pemberton or Galloway but turns out to be capable of killing on her own as she finally slits Widow Jenkins' throat and poisons her husband.

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<sup>268</sup> Lee, Joshua. "The Pembertons and Corporate Greed: An Ecocritical Look at Ron Rash's *Serena*". *James Dickey Review* 29.2 (2013): 44-60.

<sup>269</sup> Rash, Ron. *Serena*. *op.cit.* p.70.

<sup>270</sup> *Ibid.* p.152.

Murder is obviously a means for Serena to eliminate everyone who stands in her way and satisfy her insatiable thirst for power. But killing without ever being remorseful also comes with unsuspected benefits, especially for her love life. The more the Pembertons kill, the more their sex life intensifies. As Ron Charles says in his article, “nothing heats up their bed more than rubbing out a too-cautious investor or a potential opponent<sup>271</sup>”. Indeed, except for Rachel and her son Jacob, most of the characters that Serena wants to murder are seen as an obstacle to the company’s interest. As the couple gains more and more power, their desire for each other becomes almost irresistible. For example, in the aftermath of Buchanan’s murder, at the very moment the couple becomes the sole owner of the company, Pemberton embraces Serena and “desire seemed to fill not only his body but the whole room<sup>272</sup>”. This eroticization of murder takes another form when applied to wildlife. When Serena says “I liked the way we killed the bear together<sup>273</sup>”, she transforms Pemberton’s death-like experience into another display of their power as a couple. In the same manner, when Pemberton shows the company’s holdings to Serena and by extension the devastation that he has brought upon the land, he pulls her closer to kiss her<sup>274</sup>. The dreadful scenery may be made of decimated trees but for the Pembertons it is the sign of their complete dominion. Only true power seems to reinvigorate them as a couple. The utter destruction of any living being whatsoever be it trees, animals or humans seem to increase the Pemberton’s already strong libido.

Love and death are thus inextricably linked in the rise of this murderous power couple. The phrase “just us<sup>275</sup>”, repeated twice by Serena to Pemberton, exemplifies this correlation between the desire she feels for him and the death of a third party. “Just us” is Serena’s acknowledgement of her unconditional love for Pemberton alone while it can also signify the elimination of anyone that stands in their way. In this case, the death sentence is first directed towards their business partner Harris with whom they have made an unsuccessful partnership<sup>276</sup> and a few pages later towards Rachel and the child she has had with Pemberton<sup>277</sup>. The thrill of killing someone is also seen as a shared experience that reinforces the love of the newly-weds: “‘We’ve both killed now,’ Serena said urgently. ‘What you felt at the depot, I’ve felt too. We’re closer Pemberton, closer than we’ve ever been before.’” If murder reinvigorates the Pemberton’s love, death also becomes a part of their intimacy. Serena qualifies their frequent

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<sup>271</sup> Charles, Ron. “The Murderess of Smoky Mountain”, Washington Post, October 8th 2008.

<sup>272</sup> Rash, Ron. *Serena. op.cit.* p.151.

<sup>273</sup> *Ibid.* p.75.

<sup>274</sup> *Ibid.* p.14.

<sup>275</sup> *Ibid.* p.243, p.250.

<sup>276</sup> *Ibid.* p.243.

<sup>277</sup> *Ibid.* p.250.

love-making as a “kind of annihilation<sup>278</sup>”, again showing the absence of boundaries between the notions of love and death when the couple is concerned.

The Pembertons are surprisingly unapologetic about all the murders they commit. But what strikes the most is the barbarity of the murders. The bodies of the victims are almost always covered in blood as they undergo severe mutilations. Most of the time, the horror comes from human insides bursting out of the victim’s body: Abe Harmons’ intestines spill “onto his lap in loose gray ropes<sup>279</sup>”, “a piece of vertebrae<sup>280</sup>” hangs over Buchanan’s body and Doctor Cheney got his tongue cut out of his mouth. If the murders are all as bloody as one another they are not represented by Rash in the same manner. The first two murders are thoroughly described whereas the other murders are reported in retrospect by the loggers of Snipe’s crew. As Frederique Spill says in “Lady Macbeth in the Smoky Mountains”, it suggests a “banalization of murder, whose description becomes more and more succinct and allusive<sup>281</sup>”. The other difference is that the first two murders cover the first half of the novel whereas the last five deaths occur in the second half of the novel. This points to an escalation of murder which rests upon a progressive rise in the number of murders as the novel unfolds. For example, the murders of Campbell, Harris, widow Jenkins and Vaughn are only mentioned and succeed one another at a prodigious rate. Actually, the murder of Harris remains quite mysterious for there is not even a clue about the circumstances of his demise except the idea that the coroner claims it was an accident. Those differences in the treatment of the murders and their positioning along the timeline of the novel tend to pinpoint Serena’s miscarriage as a turning point in the novel. The loss of her heir and the incapability of producing another one is a traumatic experience that has probably triggered her bloodthirsty mindset. After the miscarriage, the rhythm of the murders thus accelerates as to create a maelstrom of death. In the end, the reader has totally assimilated that Serena is evil, and even wonders, like Henryson, who will be the next victim: “Makes you wonder who’s next, don’t it?<sup>282</sup>”

Last but not least, the study of murder generates a reflection about the genre of *Serena*. Does this incredible number of murders all together make of *Serena* a detective novel? It is true that Ron Rash’s novels have commonly been branded as detective novels by public opinion. However, if *Serena* borrows a little from the genre, it certainly lacks some basic topos such as

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<sup>278</sup> Rash, Ron. *Serena. op.cit.* p.20.

<sup>279</sup> *Ibid.* p.10.

<sup>280</sup> *Ibid.* p.148.

<sup>281</sup> Spill, Frédérique. *The Radiance of Small Things in Ron Rash’s Writing* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2019), p.106.

<sup>282</sup> Rash, Ron. *Serena. op.cit.* p.247.



an urban setting or a mystery to unravel through a rational inquiry. In the novel, the reader knows all along that Serena is evil and that she perpetrates all the murders. One may even wonder if *Serena* does not borrow at least as much to the atmosphere of the western novel. *Serena* can thus be seen as a novel of outlaws: the characters, driven by a competitive spirit that institutes gain as a supreme value, do not hesitate to engage in systematic settling of accounts and set up lethal traps to eliminate their enemies out of revenge. Even though western novels and *Serena* do not feature at all the same areas, the vastness and hostility of the Smokies are reminiscent of the landscapes of the wild west. Besides, the law does not seem to apply in any of those regions, the Smokies being a forlorn and forsaken place despite the efforts of Sheriff MacDowell to embody justice. In *Serena*, the well-known hunt of the culprit turns into the hunt of the innocent, particularly in chapter thirty-one when Rachel and her child Jacob are relentlessly chased by Serena's henchman Galloway. Actually, Rachel's chances to escape Galloway are as meager as that of a prey to the eagle: "their prey believes if it stays still long enough, it won't be noticed, (...) but the prey eventually flinches, and when it does the eagle always sees it."<sup>283</sup> Finally, against all the odds and unlike the end of short story "Pemberton's bride", Rachel achieves in escaping from the Appalachian Mountains. She may be the only one to escape her destiny for all the other characters seem to be doomed from the start. Additionally, the savagery of the murders, the prodigious amount of blood spilled together with the quest for power make of *Serena* the rewriting of a Shakespearian tragedy. The study of murder altogether highlights *Serena's* hybridity of genre especially its resemblance to the detective novel, the western novel and the Shakespearian tragedy even though it can also be considered as a social novel and an eco-fiction.

## **2.2. The Character of Rachel: Tradition**

Rachel inhabits her home-place like humans have done for millennia. She is dependent on a place that provides her with natural resources which enable her to survive. She has a strong connection with the land. Her way of living in accordance with nature, the pastoral spirit, may seem a little outdated for readers of the twenty-first century even though she often comes across something that is priceless for humanity: beauty.

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<sup>283</sup> Rash, Ron. *Serena. op.cit.* p.281.

### 2.2.1. Pastoral America

Rachel is a foe to Serena in many ways. However, this part of the essay will carry on the analysis of the political polarity those two feminine figures typify. Since the character of Serena has already been proven to be the epitome of imperial America, what still ought to be demonstrated is how the character of Rachel functions as an emblem of pastoral America. Rachel may be a quintessential Appalachian character but her significance goes beyond that mere fact as she also represents a way of life that has existed before the advent of modernity and still exists in many countries nowadays. Rachel is a character that bears witness to the harshness of farm life, the importance of tradition and the millennial human ability to live in accordance with nature. However, her evolution seems to pinpoint that rural America has reached a dead-end: if she first relies upon a subsistence economy, she quickly realizes she needs a job from the industry to survive and ends up fleeing Appalachia to never return there.

The character of Rachel is the one who evolves the most in the novel. However, she is first defined by her inability to control her own destiny, her entrapment. At barely seventeen, she is already pregnant and has lost her only figure of authority, her father. All of a sudden, she has to bear the burden of adult life: as she becomes the owner of her father's farmhouse, she brings baby Jacob into the world, which is as much a source of joy as the responsibility of another mouth to feed. In the first pages of the novel, she appears as the epitome of the harshness of rural life. The first time the focus is on her is in chapter three when she appears selling all her possessions — a cow and a horse — to pay for her father's tombstone. Rash portrays her from the start as a figure of dispossession which actually corresponds to a historical reality since the majority of Appalachian people struggled during the Great Depression. The story of Rachel becomes the symbol of entire generations of Appalachians as it is hinted at textually by Rachel's thoughts, Rash probably injecting metafiction in his story: "Rachel supposed there were others who had come to him with similar stories."<sup>284</sup> At some point, Rachel even imagines her downfall which would probably have happened had she not found a job in the timber camp, when comparing an abandoned farmhouse to her own home: "her place might look the same if she didn't have a good harvest of ginseng."<sup>285</sup> Rachel is represented as a plain country girl who has always lived in the mountains and who has no choice but to work hard to survive. To this end, she really captures the economic situation of rural Appalachia which can be defined by blatant poverty, unemployment and severe working conditions.

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<sup>284</sup> Rash, Ron. *Serena. op.cit.* p.47.

<sup>285</sup> *Ibid.* p.48.

In part one, Rachel is too proud to sell the knife Serena has given her to make money, so she first relies upon a subsistence economy to survive. She thus collects whatever she can find on her farm or in her natural surroundings. As soon as chapter seven, she decides to harvest ginseng, an activity which is, according to John Rehder, only accessible to the observant eye: “Ginseng can reproduce only after three years, so it is important for the collector to carefully recognize the plants that are reserved for future reproduction and obviously immature plants<sup>286</sup>.” In short, Rachel’s survival clearly depends upon an intimate knowledge of the place. This knowledge comes from her own experience as well as from the elderly who pass on the useful craft of recognizing plants from generation to generation: “She walked slowly, looking not just for the four-pronged yellow leaves but bloodroot and cinnamon ferns and other plants her father had taught her signaled places where ginseng grew<sup>287</sup>.” Rachel’s father has also taught her everything she needs to know about farm life and she has “learned about crops and plants and animals, how to mend a fence and chink a cabin<sup>288</sup>”. To survive in a subsistence economy, Rachel can always count on her acquired proficiency. She also uses the experience inherited by her father when, in chapter twenty, she repairs her cabin with “old horse droppings and then mud from a boggy seep below the spring<sup>289</sup>” which she mixes with “the consistency of the cornbread batter<sup>290</sup>”. As such, she represents generations of Appalachians who had to do things without the resources of the modern world. Edward Abbey’s comment is in accordance with that fact since he writes that “without the cash to buy tools or manufactured goods, and too far anyhow from the town and cities where such things were available, (the Appalachians) learned to make do with what they had or do without, and under the pressure of this necessity perfected their own crafts and arts<sup>291</sup>.” Those crafts and arts in question are passed on from generation to generation as it is shown through the character of Rachel who tells Jacob “there may come a time you need to know how to do this<sup>292</sup>” and adds “so watch me<sup>293</sup>”.

Living on a farm or in the forests of Southern Appalachia means living with the contingencies of nature. In *Serena*, nature turns out to be an ambiguous entity when it comes to Rachel’s livelihood. On the one hand, it fulfills her basic needs and provides her with food such

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<sup>286</sup> Rehder, John B. *op.cit.* p.166.

<sup>287</sup> Rash, Ron. *Serena. op.cit.* p.78.

<sup>288</sup> *Ibid.* p.50.

<sup>289</sup> *Ibid.* p.192.

<sup>290</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>291</sup> Porter, Eliot. *et.al. op.cit.* p.70.

<sup>292</sup> Rash, Ron. *Serena. op.cit.* p.192.

<sup>293</sup> *Ibid.*

as “ginseng<sup>294</sup>”, “bloodroot<sup>295</sup>”, ‘cinnamon ferns<sup>296</sup>’, “witch hazel<sup>297</sup>” etc. On the other hand, nature seems to have sometimes jeopardized Rachel’s resources: in chapter seven, a racoon ate all her eggs; when she was seven, one of her cows died eating cherry leaves; when she was twelve, “a hail storm (...) destroyed the corn crop<sup>298</sup>”. But nature is not the only constraint when one relies upon a subsistence economy: the work is very tedious given the poor amount of resources it creates. For only “ten dollars<sup>299</sup>”, Rachel’s entire afternoon digging roots resulted in an aching back which will probably “be sorer come morning<sup>300</sup>”. Again, the hard work does not seem to be rewarding enough and at some point, Rachel says to herself: “all this trouble because she was living so close to the bone a few pennies mattered<sup>301</sup>.” Luckily, Rachel can always count on the adaptability of her peers with whom she does not hesitate to barter: she completes her payment to Surratt with a saddle and gives Widow Jenkins bloodroot for watching over Jacob.

Whereas Serena and her colleagues act as egotistic individuals who are driven by greed, the Appalachian characters that surround Rachel show a great deal of solidarity towards her. Apart from the kitchen maids who are scornful towards Rachel, many characters help her during the course of the novel. This study will bring a twofold explanation. First, the inhabitants of rural Appalachia in the 1920’s still act as a collectivity. This is evident in many scenes of the novel may they take place at church, during a funeral or during times of leisure. Furthermore, Appalachian life is so hard that it may have created a sense of solidarity among the people. For example, the loggers of Snipe’s crew certainly endure appalling working conditions but they can always count on each other to hold on. The inhabitants of rural Appalachia thus form a community where solidarity prevails and Rachel is a part of that. Secondly, Rachel is the hero of the novel and in this regard, she is meant to be helped by auxiliaries. Rachel embodies goodness and particularly the innocence and purity of the persecuted. Sheriff MacDowell, Widow Jenkins, Joel Vaughn are Rachel’s main auxiliaries and they respectively represent justice, the wisdom of old age and the bashful lover. Their common point is that they all die for Rachel. This brings forth sacrifice as an obvious motif in Ron Rash’s *Serena*.

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<sup>294</sup> Rash, Ron. *Serena*. *op.cit.* p.77.

<sup>295</sup> *Ibid.* p.78.

<sup>296</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>297</sup> *Ibid.* p.80.

<sup>298</sup> *Ibid.* p.83.

<sup>299</sup> *Ibid.* p.80.

<sup>300</sup> *Ibid.* p.79.

<sup>301</sup> *Ibid.* p.82.

### 2.2.2. Symbiosis with the Place

Whereas the place is totally subjected to Serena's authority, Rachel lives in symbiosis with her natural surroundings. As Marie-Christine Agosto says, "to Rachel's simple mind, the cove is a re-enchanted place, womblike and protecting like a biblical valley, a shelter for her and her son Jacob<sup>302</sup>". If Rachel is so attached to the place, it is partly because it is her home-place which is the place where she was born and where she has always lived. The place is definitely a part of her and when she moves through the landscape, the different elements of nature conjure up memories of her youth. Rachel's relationship to her natural habitat oscillates between the human necessity of using nature as a resource and an almost supernatural symbiosis, as though she were a nymph. Rachel has more than a strong tie to the landscape since, under Rash's pen, her body sometimes merges with the landscape.

When the story focuses on Rachel, time and space seem to freeze so as to be in unison with the almost imperceptible rhythm of nature. With the character of Serena, one has proven that large-scale exploitation only leads to mass destruction and death. With the character of Rachel, the wonders and the liveliness of nature can be apprehended on a smaller scale, when the senses are heightened. In chapter twenty, Rachel's rejection of the natural sounds surrounding her turns into the ultimate sign of a more than strong reliance upon her native land:

The sun had fallen enough now that the air was cooling, the day's first breeze combing the white oaks highest branches. The bullfrog that lived above the springhouse made its first tentative grunts. Rachel knew the katydids and field crickets would soon join in. All soothing dependable sounds that always helped her fall asleep, not that she'd need them tonight.<sup>303</sup>

Scale and sound are important in this passage. This excerpt extends our usual hearing faculty to focus by turn on particular sounds emanating from small living things such as branches or animals. Those sounds may seem insignificant but they have had a great impact on Rachel's life. Indeed, they are not merely comforting for Rachel ("soothing"), they almost become a human presence, a non-human surrogate for her mother that has been missing ("dependable"). Here, nature actually deserves the designation of "mother nature". Like a mother to her child, nature often sings a lullaby so that Rachel can fall asleep. An emphasis is being made on the usual character of this lullaby ("always") which is also made clear by Rachel's foreshadowing of the sounds made by the crickets and the katydids. It was as though nature's evening

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<sup>302</sup> Agosto, Marie-Christine. *op.cit.* p.74.

<sup>303</sup> Rash, Ron. *Serena. op.cit.* p.195.

musicality had become a ritual that accompanies Rachel in her coming of age, in the good times as well as in the bad times (“not that she’d need them tonight”). Rachel has thus found a trustworthy companion in nature — a companion she has relied upon during the course of her entire life. Since Rachel has always lived among nature, the sight or touch of certain natural elements conjures up memories of her childhood, even more so when they are reminiscent of traumatic experiences: “Rachel saw a witch hazel shrub and paused to pull off some leaves, their pungent smell evoking memories of chest salves and days sick in bed.<sup>304</sup>” Rachel’s life is thus inextricably linked to her natural surroundings. One cannot but notice that in the quotation above, Rachel damages nature for her own benefits (“pull off”) as she uses witch hazel as a medicine at a time where the pharmaceutical companies did not exist yet. However, one will show that her tampering with nature is nothing alike Serena’s.

Rachel’s symbiosis with nature should not be overstated. She is still a human being and needs to use nature as a resource to live. For example, her house is built with wood that is made of trees that come from the surrounding forests: her father has built “the cabin itself with white oak logs and cedar shingles<sup>305</sup>”. To summarize, both Serena and Rachel have cut trees in the novel. However, there is a significant difference in scale and purpose. Whereas Serena clear-cuts entire chain of mountains to become richer and richer, Rachel’s father has chopped off a few trees to put a roof over their heads. In order to fulfill their basic needs, human beings have always had to use nature as a resource and Rachel is no exception to that fact. At some point, she even kills a racoon, again showing that she can damage nature as well. However, she hesitates to kill it which definitely contrasts with Serena’s cold-blooded murders. Rachel’s decision to kill is not driven by choice but necessity: it is “what you (have) to do on a farm<sup>306</sup>”. The few times Rachel is shown tampering with nature are justified right away textually by her condition — her struggle for survival. Even when she alters the land, Rachel treats it with a profound respect: when she is harvesting bloodroot, she tugs “the plants carefully from the ground<sup>307</sup>” and only breaks a stem “accidentally<sup>308</sup>”. Her precaution may as well come from the fact that the plants are meant to be sold and therefore should not be too damaged. But the main reason is certainly a deep care for the ecosystem on which she depends. Indeed, Rachel may take from nature but she also gives back and manages to ensure the plants’ reproduction for the upcoming year: “She separated the berries from the ginseng plants and placed them in the

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<sup>304</sup> Rash, Ron. *Serena. op.cit.* p.78.

<sup>305</sup> *Ibid.* p.192.

<sup>306</sup> *Ibid.* p.83.

<sup>307</sup> *Ibid.* p.78.

<sup>308</sup> *Ibid.* p.78.

broken soil, covered them up and moved on to the next plant<sup>309</sup>”. It would be anachronistic to say that Rachel has an ecological gesture. Nonetheless, given Rash’s precise knowledge of his own region, this excerpt tends to show that, at the time of the Great Depression, Appalachians were already conscious of the substantial benefits a sustainable attitude towards nature can produce. To sum up, Rachel may use nature as a resource but she does it without causing any harm, probably because her intentions towards her primal landscape are pure.

In *Serena*, Rachel is so close to nature that she almost comes to personify it. Her presentation at the beginning of the novel calls to mind the old spirits of nature: “Dew darkened the hem of her gingham dress as (she) walked out of the yard, the grass cool and slick against her bare feet and ankles.<sup>310</sup>” Her gingham dress, symbol of femininity and the nudity of her feet, symbol of primitivism point to the appearance of a nymph-like character. Her birth as a character is also made clear by the presence of the water, an element reminiscent of the amniotic fluid. As she serenely walks through the grass bare-footed, her body dampened by water, with her child Jacob “nestled in the crook of her left arm<sup>311</sup>” she unconsciously embodies a return to the origins, that is to say when men and nature were but one.

Throughout the novel, whether Rachel does simple everyday tasks or tries to save herself from danger, she can always count on the reassuring presence of the landscape with whom she has a deep spiritual connection. But this connection is first of all physical: her body and the different elements of nature are often depicted as coming into contact together. Even when the soil is not favorable to her passing, she adapts herself to move through the landscape with a surprising easiness: “Rachel stepped carefully across the boggy ground.<sup>312</sup>” Sometimes the landscape can be quite violent towards her and as she cuts rhubarb near the end of the novel, she has “briars clutching at her dress<sup>313</sup>”. This physical contact between Rachel and the land can sometimes leads to a metaphysical realization: “She was barefoot (...) she could feel the pebbly dust sifted over the packed dirt, feel how it anchored her to the world.<sup>314</sup>” It is at the very moment when Rachel loses touch with reality that the simple contact of her feet with the land puts her back on track, ready to reach town to save her son Jacob from a fever. The place is thus no longer a setting, it becomes a spiritual guide for Rachel. Sometimes, Rachel and the landscape merge and become but one: “She looked at the stars and they brightened and dimmed

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<sup>309</sup> Rash, Ron. *Serena. op.cit.* p.79.

<sup>310</sup> *Ibid.* p.39.

<sup>311</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>312</sup> *Ibid.* p.78.

<sup>313</sup> *Ibid.* p.293-294.

<sup>314</sup> *Ibid.* p.95.

in accord with her breathing, as if one hard puff might blow the whole lot of them out like candles.<sup>315</sup>” But here, Rachel’s relationship to the landscape is more than symbiotic: if there is certainly an analogy between the twofold movement of her breath and the twinkling of the stars, the idea that one hard puff from her might blow out the whole sky definitely seals both fates together — a wrong movement on the part of Rachel not only clears out the sky, it also extinguishes the light she follows to survive the fever, annihilates the stars which are a symbol of hope for her and her son Jacob. To sum up, Rachel’s relationship with the landscape is sane though a little bit backwards: if she spoils the land to survive, it is with the most profound respect and from mere physical contact she has achieved in establishing a strong spiritual connection over time. Through inhabiting the place, she has come to unconsciously embody it.

### 2.2.3. Beauty

The Appalachian Mountains overflow with natural wonders. Rachel’s closeness and knowledge of the primal landscape she lives in enables her to appreciate those wonders. Through her eyes, a simple river in the morning’s light gleams “like a vein of flowing gold<sup>316</sup>”. With Rachel, the old feeling of nature is revived for the reader to enjoy: all the colors, smells and sounds that the Appalachian Mountains have to offer are minutely described when the story focuses on her. Nature is perceived by Rachel’s heightened sensitivity and produces a strong impact on her. Beauty leaves such a mark that it resurges from the past in the form of Rachel’s childhood memories — the remainder of a time where innocence and amazement prevailed. In *Serena*, the beauty of things is often apprehended through similes that are taken from the natural world, and it is not only Rachel’s language but “the most universal of languages<sup>317</sup>” according to Rash.

When the omniscient narrator focuses on Rachel, beauty emanates from the surrounding landscape. The beauty of nature may be an old topos in literature but what better place than the Appalachian Mountains to provide material for apprehending the feeling of nature. The beauty of the place in the real world may be undeniable but *Serena* tends to show that it is only accessible to the people who are receptive to it. Indeed, *Serena* may be in the same place as Rachel but she is unable to see the wonders nature has to offer: among other things, she is too blinded by her lust for profit. In Rachel’s case, the beauty comes from an encounter between the natural landscape and her five senses. Even when she rides her horse and she no longer

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<sup>315</sup> Rash, Ron. *Serena. op.cit.* p.94.

<sup>316</sup> *Ibid.* p.43.

<sup>317</sup> Clepton, Miller. *op.cit.* p.78.



touches the ground, Rachel is a subject to nature's materiality: "Leathery rhododendron leaves rubbed against Rachel's dress."<sup>318</sup> Sometimes nature stimulates more than one sense at the time and in the following quote the contact of ferns with Rachel's dress creates a whispery sound that is a pleasure for the hear: "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."<sup>319</sup> This quote also proves that beauty is not without purpose: the soothing sound lulls baby Jacob back asleep. Beauty is often seen as pointless but in *Serena* it is represented as having a great impact on Rachel: "Beard-tongue brightened the bank, and Rachel smelled the wintergreen odor of the blooms, the best kind of smell on a warm day because breathing it in seemed to cool you off from the inside out."<sup>320</sup> The smell of the beard-tongue is not only pleasant, it has a direct effect on Rachel's body as it cools her off. Nature strikes the senses to change Rachel and Jacob's lives for the better.

Since now, Rachel was only passive in the making of the beautiful, her senses being struck by the elements of nature. But beauty can also come from Rachel's acute aesthetic judgment which is present when she reflects upon her surroundings. The things she sees and feels are thus filtered through her own experience of life: "The prettiest time of the year, she'd always believed, prettier than fall or even spring when the dogwood branches swayed and brightened as if harboring clouds of butterflies."<sup>321</sup> Rachel has experienced the passing of the seasons in the mountains since she was born and her aesthetic judgement derives from her thorough knowledge of the area. She has unconsciously developed categories that are fashioned by the place — one must have seen the "harboring clouds of butterflies" at least once to compare it to the branches. Having lived for so long in her birthplace is key in Rachel's perception of the beautiful as it is shown in the following excerpt:

It was the kind of early fall day Rachel had always loved, not warm or cold, the sky all deep-blue and cloudless and no breeze, the crops proud and ripe and the leaves so pretty but hardly one yet fallen — a day so perfect that the earth itself seemed sorry to let it pass, so slowed down its roll into evening and let it linger.<sup>322</sup>

In this excerpt, time has altered for Rachel to focus on her surroundings. Her love for this specific scenery seems to last through time ("had always loved") and is directed towards this

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<sup>318</sup> Rash, Ron. *Serena. op.cit.* p.48.

<sup>319</sup> *Ibid.* p.79.

<sup>320</sup> *Ibid.* p.194.

<sup>321</sup> *Ibid.* p.42.

<sup>322</sup> *Ibid.* p.270.

*kind* of day — a day that she has elected in comparison with many other days. Again, it is her lifelong and intimate knowledge of the place that enables her to find it so beautiful.

As I have proven before, Serena completely obliterates her past. When it comes to Rachel, it is an altogether different story: she cherishes her childhood memories more than anything. Even if she had a tough childhood, she reminds herself of the few happy moments she has had with her family. Her memories are the only thing that still connect her with her loved ones who are absent at the time of the diegesis: her mother has abandoned her when she was a child and her father was killed by Pemberton in the incipit of the novel. In the case of Rachel's memories, the beauty comes from two opposite poles: an idealization of the past which is a reconstruction of her childhood as a golden age and the actual astonishment of a child that discovers the world. As an example, here is Rachel's recollection of a happy moment she had with her father:

“Pretty isn't it,” he'd said as she entered the barn. Her father pointed at a large silver green moth. For a few minutes the chores were put off as the two of them just stood there. The barn's stripes of light grew dimmer, and the moth seemed to brighten, as if the slow open and close of its wings gathered up the evening's last light. Then the creature rose. As the moth fluttered out into the night, her father had lifted his large strong hand and settled it on Rachel's shoulder a moment, not turning to her as he did so. A moth at twilight, a touch of a hand on her back. Something, Rachel thought.<sup>323</sup>

and one of Rachel's clearest memories of her mother when she was lying on her parent's bed:

She'd told her mother that the blue bedspread felt cool and smooth despite the summer heat, like it'd feel if you could sleep on top of a creek pool. *Because it's satin*, her mother said, and Rachel had thought even the word was cool and smooth, whispery like the sound of a creek.<sup>324</sup>

Time spent with her family has left a mark on Rachel, but it would not be that memorable if it were not for the irruption of beauty in everyday life. Here again, the beautiful is perceived through the senses of sight, touch and hearing. Whereas in the first excerpt, the moth encapsulates nature's inner beauty, the second excerpt shows that the beauty of things — words or sensations — can be apprehended through the beauty of nature. Rash uses Rachel's childhood innocence and propensity to wonder to prove a point: nature's beauty can be dazzling.

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<sup>323</sup> Rash, Ron. *Serena. op.cit.* p.51.

<sup>324</sup> *Ibid.* p.49.

### 2.3. An Impossible Reconciliation

The two worldviews embodied by the main female characters are too different in nature to be fertilizing each other mutually. On the contrary, the place is the theater of a clash between the outsiders and the natives. On one side, the well-off individualistic entrepreneurs. On the other side, poor workers and farmers with an ancestral culture. As the gap between the two groups cannot be bridged, be it because of an incompatibility of cultures or a huge discrepancy between socio-economic statuses, the novel ends as it has started: the Appalachians still suffer in the end and Serena, having exploited all the resources available, exports her company in other places of the world, especially Brazil.

#### 2.3.1. A Clash of Cultures

*Serena* tends to show that America is not a homogeneous cultural entity. Two very different cultures of the United-States are displayed in the novel. The entrepreneurs come from Boston and embody the Northeastern culture. The Appalachians are culturally closer to the South even if it could be argued that the South does not form a homogeneous cultural entity as well, and that there are differences between its regions. Appalachian culture is very specific and it probably comes from the region's isolation. As an example of the cultural gap between the Appalachians and the Bostonians, here is Pemberton's thoughts about Galloway's mother: "Comical looking, but something else as well, Pemberton realized, a disconcerting *otherness* that was part of these mountains and would always be inexplicable to him."<sup>325</sup> It is not merely the clothing — the look, the appearance — that separates the Bostonian entrepreneurs from the Appalachian people, it is more profound than that and apparently, can't be explained. The word *otherness* is emphasized by Rash through italicization. The use of this word and its italicization suggests the idea that Pemberton dehumanizes Galloway's mother. In *Serena*, Appalachian culture is very often shown through the eyes of the outsiders who are intrigued if not scornful. The critic has to be cautious with the internal focalization because even though the entrepreneur's judgment is derived from an objective reality, Appalachian culture is still distorted by their subjectivity. For example, this is Pemberton's thoughts about Appalachian women: "Aging in these mountains, especially among the women, happened early. Pemberton had seen women of twenty-five here who would pass for fifty in Boston."<sup>326</sup> The process of early aging in the mountains can be explained by multiple factors: climatic conditions, a poor

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<sup>325</sup> Rash, Ron. *Serena. op.cit.* p.118.

<sup>326</sup> *Ibid.* p.112.

standard of living, the hardships of manual work etc. Pemberton's perspicacity has led him to identify an anthropological phenomenon but through the use of hyperbole, he exaggerates the differences between mountain women and women from Boston and loses all credibility. This constant judgement of the mountaineer be it their behavior, language or mores also shows the historical hegemony of the Northern culture. The entrepreneurs may be outnumbered by the Appalachians, but some of them still value their culture as superior.

The Bostonian entrepreneurs have a different way of behaving towards the peculiarities of Appalachian culture. Buchanan acts as an anthropologist who records every specificity of the Appalachian culture in a notebook. It seems to be more of a hobby than a tool to establish his domination over the workers. Serena and her husband Pemberton, on the contrary, are clearly prejudiced against mountain culture. What can be considered as an Appalachian custom is interpreted by Pemberton as a sign of laziness: "It struck Pemberton that males in these mountains rarely stood upright. Instead, they leaned into some tree or wall whenever possible. If none was available, they squatted, buttocks against the back of their heels.<sup>327</sup>" Pemberton does not say explicitly that the Appalachians are lazy people. However, the strong emphasis on this particular trait quickly turns into a caricature. In other occurrences, the prejudice against Appalachians is clearly stated. For example, this is how Serena speaks to Doctor Cheney: "'My husband tells me that you are from those very mountains, a place called Wild Hog Gap,' Serena said to Cheney. 'Obviously, your views on my sex were formed by the slatterns you grew up with (...)'<sup>328</sup>". Here, Cheney's particular views about femininity, that can also be seen as a way of questioning Serena's hegemony, are reduced to his cultural background. Being the "fairer sex<sup>329</sup>" as Cheney says himself, is not enough to impress Serena who still belittles him on the grounds that he was born in Appalachia. Pemberton and Serena express received ideas about the Appalachian people and respectively rely upon the stereotype of the lazy hillbilly and the backwards hillbilly. The cultural differences are emphasized by the couple to justify their economic and social superiority upon Appalachians and the appropriation of their land.

An essential component of culture is language. The Appalachians speak a dialect of English that is to say that they have an accent and specific phrases which are foreign to the Bostonian entrepreneurs. In the first pages of the novel, Serena already stresses the differences between her language and the one of the Appalachians: "'These highlanders,' Serena said as she looked out the window. 'I've read that they are so isolated that their speech harks back to

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<sup>327</sup> Rash, Ron. *Serena. op.cit.* p.4.

<sup>328</sup> *Ibid.* p.34.

<sup>329</sup> *Ibid.* p.34.

Elizabethan times'.<sup>330</sup>" The fact that Smoky Mountain English takes its roots in ancient Britain is accurate. However, Serena does not care for historical facts. She does not want to make small talk to Pemberton either. For her, the antiquity of the Appalachian language is a sign of the natives' barbarity. But not all the Bostonian entrepreneurs are prejudiced against the Appalachians and their language. In chapter two, Wilkie and Buchanan, Pemberton's associates, discuss the meaning of the phrase "feathered into": "I heard a phrase today worthy of your journal, Buchanan', Wilkie continued. 'Two workers at the splash pond were discussing a fight and spoke of how one combatant 'feathered into' the other. It apparently means to inflict great damage'.<sup>331</sup>" The phrase is instantly jotted down by Buchanan in his journal. He must have a deep respect for the Appalachian language to study it so enthusiastically. He does it with great objectivity, which makes of him an amateurish anthropologist. If the language is reduced to a curiosity, it is also because it is exotic for the outsiders. But apart from the exoticism the language conveys, its inner specificities sometimes lead to incomprehension: "The conversation was a halting exchange, the North Carolina highlander and the New England yankee struggling with each other's dialect like two ill-trained interpreters.<sup>332</sup>" The differences between the natives and the outsiders' language only widens the cultural gap already present between the two groups.

Sometimes, the entrepreneurs use the peculiarities of Appalachian culture to their advantage. This is the case of Pemberton when he invokes the violent temper characteristic of the Appalachians to legitimize his own violence against them. For example, when Pemberton is about to fight against Sheriff MacDowell, he cannot but imagine how prestigious and rewarding it would be to win against a mountaineer: "It would be a good fight, Pemberton told himself, because the highlanders considered it a matter of honor never to cut and run, or quit once a brawl had begun. He'd be able to pummel MacDowell for ten or fifteen minutes.<sup>333</sup>" In supposing Sheriff MacDowell is prone to violence, Pemberton finds an excuse to beat him up. One may question who is the most quarrelsome of the two since the mere idea of a fight makes Pemberton feel "a revived sense of his own strength that had been dormant too long<sup>334</sup>". Another example of the use of the natives' culture against them is through their religion. By holding services at the timber camp, the entrepreneurs satisfy the native's need to remain godly:

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<sup>330</sup> Rash, Ron. *Serena. op.cit.* p.13.

<sup>331</sup> *Ibid.* p.35.

<sup>332</sup> *Ibid.* p.256.

<sup>333</sup> *Ibid.* p.258.

<sup>334</sup> *Ibid.*

“We let Bolick hold evening services around Christmas and New Year’s,” Pemberton said. “I find it worth a few dollars of electricity to keep the workers godly, though I will get a less bothersome camp preacher next time.” Harris nodded. “A great business investment, religion. I’ll take it over government bonds anytime.”<sup>335</sup>

In this excerpt, the entrepreneurs unashamedly acknowledge that religion is “a great business investment” for them. They subvert the true meaning of the native’s religion to their advantage. By giving the Appalachians what they want the most, the entrepreneurs keep them in a state of obedience and avoid a possible strike. However, their deceitful tactics to keep the Appalachians under their control has one flaw: the lay preacher is no longer under their influence. This managerial use of the native’s religion is also representative of the power play at stake between two socio-economic classes.

### 2.3.2. Distinct Social Classes

*Serena* is a novel that *shows* more than it denounces the wide socio-economic gap between the elite and the masses. The concepts of elite and masses are used here deliberately because they encapsulate the striking oppositions between the characters of this social novel. Rash is very class-conscious especially since his ancestors could have been considered as lower class. Through his work, of which *Serena* is a part, he intends to debunk the idea that “a lot of times we think of America as being a classless society<sup>336</sup>”. In *Serena*, the dichotomy between the characters comes from two phenomena which are linked with each other. First, the most severe poverty can be observed among the Appalachians whereas the fortunate only come from outside the region. Secondly, Appalachia’s late opening to capitalism has created an imbalance of power between management and labor. Those two phenomena tend to merge as the capitals are embodied in the foreign entrepreneurs and the manpower is found directly on site — they are the inhabitants of a plundered Appalachia. However, the fact that the novel’s social reality is more complicated than a binary opposition between the elite and the masses will be demonstrated in this chapter.

In the microcosm that is the timber camp, the inequalities between bosses and employees have never been so visible. For example, the narrator’s focus on Serena’s horse turns into an indicator of the wealth gap between the entrepreneurs and the workers: “The saddle weighing the horse’s back was made of German leather with wool-flocked gusseted panels, its

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<sup>335</sup> Rash, Ron. *Serena. op.cit.* p.170.

<sup>336</sup> Lang, John. « The Power of Blood-Memory » *op.cit.* p.349.

cost more than a logger earned in a year.<sup>337</sup> But Serena’s opulent saddle is just one sign out of many. The social gap between the two classes can be seen in everything that is part of the characters’ daily lives that is to say housing, clothing and food. The most striking differences may be in housing: even if the Pembertons would rather use their money to buy more timber tracts than spend it on their “rather Spartan<sup>338</sup>” abode, the workers’ stringhouses that look like “cheap wooden boxcars<sup>339</sup> are still less valuable than the impressive table made of “a single piece of chestnut<sup>340</sup> they proudly display at Pemberton’s birthday party. But the different social classes are mostly visible through the characters’ clothing. The entrepreneurs’ attire is an undeniable sign of their privilege. At the beginning of the novel, Buchanan wears a white cotton dress shirt “fresh-pressed<sup>341</sup>” which proves that he puts a great attentiveness in the making of his public image. A “Princeton Phi Beta Kappa key<sup>342</sup>” is embedded on Wilkie’s watch fob, showing his pride to have been educated in one of the most prestigious universities of the country. A watch—which is supposed to be a trivial and useful object—turns into a piece of luxury for Pemberton who puts it in a “gold shell<sup>343</sup>”. Now, this is what the mountaineers wear on a basic work day:

Most wore mackinaws, though others wore wide-pocketed hunting jackets, black frocks or leather jerkins. Some donned what they’d once wore in more prosperous or martial times—lined submarine coats and Chesterfields, moleskin suit tops, coats from the Great War. Some wore what had been passed down from their forebearers, frayed work coats of pre-twentieth century vintage, including ones made of racoon and buckskin, even older cloaks whose butternut and blue colors bespoke long-ago divisions in the county.<sup>344</sup>

Compared to the costly garments of the entrepreneurs, the clothes of the workers appear as more than basic, if not strictly necessary to their work. There is a strong emphasis on the fact that most of the clothes are ancient—the workers’ poverty being the reason why they had no choice but to recycle the clothes of their forebearers. Some clothes date back to the First World War or even the Civil War and reveal not only the poverty of the workers but also the poverty of the worker’s forebearers who passed on, among their limited possessions, clothes given freely by the government. But, most of all, the clothes show a sense of continuity between the generations of Appalachians, the workers literally and metaphorically bearing the weight of

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<sup>337</sup> Rash, Ron. *Serena. op.cit.* p.21.

<sup>338</sup> *Ibid.* p.17.

<sup>339</sup> *Ibid.* p.15.

<sup>340</sup> *Ibid.* p.339.

<sup>341</sup> *Ibid.* p.3.

<sup>342</sup> *Ibid.* p.4.

<sup>343</sup> *Ibid.* p.4.

<sup>344</sup> *Ibid.* p.61-62.

history. Last but not least, the food that the characters eat can be seen as a great indicator of the social inequalities at hand in the novel. Since the workers are outdoors all day long, they must carry “their lunches in tote sacks and paper bags, metal milk pails and metal boxes shaped like bread loaves<sup>345</sup>” which can appear as very handy, but mostly reveal a limited food choice for a rather pedestrian lunch. In contrast, one of the Pembertons’ regular meals include “baskets of buttered biscuits and a silver platter draping with beef, large bowls of Steuben crystal brimmed with potatoes and carrots and squash, various jams and relishes<sup>346</sup>” and on big occasions such as Pemberton’s birthday, they can afford to garnish their table with “French Chardonnay<sup>347</sup>”, “Glenlivet scotch<sup>348</sup>” and “a box of Casamontez cigars<sup>349</sup>”.

The social divisions at stake in the novel are often perceptible by the reader when he has access to the mindsets of the main characters. As a reminder, the main characters are objectively at the polar opposites of the social scale: the Pembertons are in charge of a powerful logging company whereas Rachel is just a plain farm girl. But their social statuses can be indirectly deduced from their inner thoughts and personal memories as they are mirrored through the internal focalization adopted by the omniscient narrator. For example, when Pemberton confronts Rachel’s father, he wonders “how a man like (him can) possess such a fine weapon” and comes to the conclusion that it is either a “booty in a poker game<sup>350</sup>” or “an heirloom passed down from a more prosperous ancestor<sup>351</sup>”. Pemberton’s social and economic superiority certainly comes from the belittlement of Rachel’s father but also from the fact that he knows what a fine weapon looks like, showing a well-developed taste for luxury. Another example would be Rachel’s memories — in the form of a flash-back — when she goes around Pemberton’s house and touches every piece of furniture including “the gold-gilded oval mirror, a silver pitcher and basin in the bathroom, the Marvel water heater in the hallway, the ice box and oak-front shelf clock<sup>352</sup>”. The Pembertons are so used to having these objects surrounding them that they can’t even see how precious they are. Yet, those very objects are invaluable for Rachel who not only touches them but remembers touching them. However, the reader and the critic are not the only ones who are aware of the social inequalities between the characters. The characters themselves have a strong sense of belonging to a social class. The realization that

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<sup>345</sup> Rash, Ron. *Serena. op.cit.* p.23.

<sup>346</sup> *Ibid.* p.36.

<sup>347</sup> *Ibid.* p.340.

<sup>348</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>349</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>350</sup> *Ibid.* p.7.

<sup>351</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>352</sup> *Ibid.* p.44.



“what seemed treasures to her could be hardly noticed by someone else<sup>353</sup>” express Rachel’s consciousness of her limited access to basic furniture. The Pembertons are also aware of the social gap that separates them from the Appalachians and their alleged superiority. For example, these are Pemberton’s words after Serena has won the bet against Bilded: “A toast to another victory for management over labor<sup>354</sup>.” The characters’ mindsets thus reveal their social class whether it is conscious or not.

The binary opposition between local manpower and foreign entrepreneurs is one way of analyzing the social gaps in *Serena*. However, some characters don’t fit into any of these categories. This is the case of Campbell whose duties include “serving as a liaison between the workers and owners<sup>355</sup>”. This means that he is neither an entrepreneur nor a basic worker but in-between. There may be two reasons why he was elected as an overseer. One can be found in the text: According to Pemberton, Campbell “can book keep, repair anything, and uses a Gunter’s chain as well as any of the surveyors<sup>356</sup>”. Apart from his proficiency, the entrepreneurs surely needed someone like Campbell to be in charge because, as a native, he understands his fellow Appalachians who respect him in return. Campbell’s promotion can thus be seen as a managerial tactic of the Pembertons.

Two other characters are worth noticing when it comes to social ranking: John Cecil, a British aristocrat and his wife Cornelia, a direct descendant of Cornelius Vanderbilt. These characters have really existed and lived in the Biltmore Estate, located near Ashville. This is the description of their mansion when the Pembertons go to their gatsbyesque party in chapter twenty-four:

Pemberton made the last turn, and the mansion appeared before them like a cliff of lights. Towers and spires surged upward in silhouette. Gargoyles leaned from the parapets, their scowling features backlit by the glow of windows. The limestone veneer bespoke solidity, a confidence that the Vanderbilt family’s place in the world was beyond the vagaries of stock markets and industry.<sup>357</sup>

The grandeur of the Cecil’s mansion, which is similar to old castles, speak for the wealth of its two aristocratic landlords. Rash uses the metaphor of “the cliff of lights” to underline the grandness of the building, but also the awe it inspires to whoever crosses its main gate. The towers and spires surging upward in silhouette give the impression of a building that merges

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<sup>353</sup> Rash, Ron. *Serena. op.cit.* p.44.

<sup>354</sup> *Ibid.* p.33.

<sup>355</sup> *Ibid.* p.7-8.

<sup>356</sup> *Ibid.* p.17.

<sup>357</sup> *Ibid.* p.232.

with the sky, as though it was alive and reaching for the stars. The presence of the gargoyles can be interpreted as a sign of the mansion's timelessness. The fact that the wealth of the Cecils is "beyond the vagaries of the stock markets and industry" distinguishes them from the Pembertons. This distinction was already made by Marie-Christine Agosto when she writes that *Serena* "opposes two types of wealth: on the one hand, new money, made by unscrupulous spoliation of the land; on the other hand, the inherited wealth of a learned aristocracy, as shown in the episode where Serena is invited at the Cecils of Asheville<sup>358</sup>". To conclude this chapter, *Serena*, mirroring the social inequalities of the real world, includes in the same story the wealthiest people that have existed on earth like the Vanderbilt family and Rockefeller and dispossessed highlanders whose children "wear pants cinched tight by twine<sup>359</sup>".

### 2.3.3. Colonialism

*Serena* shows how a modern predatory attitude takes precedence over the millennial symbiotic relationship humans have had with places. Modernity imposes itself so violently that Appalachians have no other choice but to adapt or make way, literally. To impose a worldview on people and places is also known as colonialism. The two previous chapters about the cultural gap and socio-economic inequalities between two groups makes further sense when analyzed within the context of internal colonialism. As Joyce-Compton Brown says in his article, "in many ways, *Serena* is a study in post-colonialism. Takers come in, wreak havoc to a people and a way of life, and leave<sup>360</sup>". Two components of colonialism referred to by Joyce-Compton Brown are indeed present in the novel. The colonizers harm the natives in many ways: they confiscate their land, destroy the Appalachian forests which used to satisfy their basic needs and use them as cheap replaceable manpower. Secondly, the presence of the colonizers is not meant to last: once all the resources have been plundered in Appalachia, *Serena* leaves a wrecked land and delocalizes her company to South America where new resources are available.

In *Serena*, the colonizing force is no other than the national economy. The domination is assured by well-off northern industrialists such as Serena, Pemberton, Buchanan and Wilkie who rely on a capitalistic economy to make a fortune out of Appalachia. The wealth that is accumulated is produced by and for the trans-local Boston Lumber Company and is not re-invested in local Appalachia at all. Even the railroads, which could be used durably as a way of

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<sup>358</sup> Agosto, Marie-Christine. *op.cit.* p.77.

<sup>359</sup> Rash, Ron. *Serena. op.cit.* p.13.

<sup>360</sup> Brown, Joyce Compton. "Serena" *Appalachian Heritage* 37.1 (2009): 61-64.

opening up the region, are recycled and put “onto a flat car<sup>361</sup>” in order to clear-cut a new tract of land at the end of the novel. Those railroads transport all the timber that is harvested in Appalachia to the historically hegemonic North of the United-States. The timber will probably be used in northern manufactories that need raw materials to produce finished goods. Again, it means that the profit from timber is realized mainly in cities like Boston, far from where the timber is harvested. After all, Editor Webb’s fears have come true and the Pembertons are truly incapable to “give something back to the people of this region<sup>362</sup>”.

To establish their dominion, the colonizers have to deconstruct the economy, institutions and culture of the colonized. This tallies with Wendell Berry’s thinking especially when he says: “The way that a national economy preys on its internal colonies is by the destruction of community — that is, by the destruction of the principal of local self-sufficiency not only in the local economy but also in local culture.<sup>363</sup>” This “destruction of community” can be found in *Serena* in mainly two forms. First, the arrival of the Pembertons in the Smokies disturbs the local economy of the mountaineers. Indeed, the natives still had a subsistence economy which rested upon the well-being of the mountain ecosystem: the fertility of the land, the fluidity of the rivers and the integrity of the forests are all needed to provide the Appalachians with resources. However, the Pembertons and other companies destroy thousands of acres of forests for a living. By annihilating the mountain ecosystem, the Pembertons deprive the Appalachians of economic self-sufficiency. Secondly, the Pembertons not only judge the mountain culture but hold it in disdain. They probably don’t care for the fact that they unconsciously alter mountain culture. Among other things, the mountaineers had to move out from their ancestral homes to live in the timber camp in overcrowded small dwellings. The Pembertons also introduce consumerism in the workers’ lives as they all had to choose a gift for Christmas in chapter sixteen.

Colonialism institutes an imbalance of power between colonizers and colonized. But it also decays the bond of kinship and trust that knits together the colonized themselves. For example, the character of Campbell exemplifies the difficult position of being a native in a position of power. The way he addresses the workers shows the awkwardness of his superiority: He answers “the logger’s questions with words arranged to sound more like suggestions than orders<sup>364</sup>”. Another example would be the unhealthy competition between the natives queuing

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<sup>361</sup> Rash, Ron. *Serena. op.cit.* p.339.

<sup>362</sup> *Ibid.* p.137.

<sup>363</sup> Berry, Wendell. *op.cit.* p.185.

<sup>364</sup> Rash, Ron. *Serena. op.cit.* p.26

up in front of the commissary. They all want to be hired but only a few will be chosen by Campbell so they try to distinguish themselves from the others:

Some went shirtless to show off powerful physiques while other held axes brought from farms or other timber camps, ready at a moment's notice to begin chopping. Still others carried Bibles and read them with great attentiveness to show they were not blackguards or reds but Godly men. Some bore tattered pieces of paper testifying to their talent and reliability or discharge paper from military service.<sup>365</sup>

While the unemployed natives are put against each other, the condition of their employment still rests upon the demise of those who already work for the company. They almost come to wish for one of their peers to be killed since they are “waiting days for a maimed or killed worker to be brought from the woods in hope of being his replacement<sup>366</sup>”. Putting the natives against each other also enable the colonizers to establish their domination. They apply the age-old policy of divide and rule.

*Serena* is aporetic in the sense that it does not give an answer to the Appalachian problem exposed throughout the novel. The novel, based on a binary construction between modernity and tradition appears as a dead-end: no future is expected from either in Appalachia. Indeed, Serena's short capitalistic venture was not meant to last. The modern attitude towards the place which consists in plundering leaves the environment barren for future use. Serena's way of treating Appalachia only entailed long-lasting damage to the land and the death of innocent people. Rachel's traditional and sustainable way of living in the place is not meant to last either as she has to escape Appalachia to have a life of her own. Anyway, her way of life is progressively erased by the advance of modernity which imposes itself irremediably over time. The only solution that could be found in Appalachia was to create the Great Smoky National Park. It may be a solution to keep the natural world alive but it excludes any human presence whatsoever. The park is but an artificial construct for a metaphysical problem: how should humans treat places? As an answer, *Serena* only raises more questions with the same universal appeal. Should we give way to a predatory attitude towards places? Should we continue to live in accordance with tradition and have a saner though backwards relationship to places?

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<sup>365</sup> *Ibid.* p.199.

<sup>366</sup> *Ibid.*

### 3. Politics of Place

As I have shown in the previous chapter, Appalachia is a place invested by two contradictory forces which cannot be reconciled. The imperial force seems to have taken entire control over rural America by destroying everything in its wake. However, Appalachia and Appalachians are not represented as completely passive. They both resist to their oppressor in various ways, from rattlesnake bites to gossiping. The mountain, a leitmotiv in Rash's fiction, is a strong character who, despite the massive wound the Pembertons have inflicted to its core, has an agency of its own. As it ultimately influences the human characters in psychology and behavior, the mountain has become a cornerstone of Rash's fiction. As for the human characters, their resistance can be either individual or collective and can also become, especially embodied in the character of Jacob, the final retribution of a supra-natural entity. This intradiegetic resistance of the mountain and the Appalachian characters is craftily orchestrated by the author who willingly subverts the traditional image of a blighted land and a submissive people. Poetics of Resistance will study how the Appalachian-born author raises awareness about a time, a region, the world. As an historical novel, *Serena* resists to the ravages of time and conjures up a landscape and human manners long gone while also echoing contemporary matters. As an eco-fiction, it denounces the environmental injustice that has plagued Appalachia for centuries and also dramatizes the universal question of man's relationship with the land. By writing *Serena*, Rash has created a true political manifesto to whoever wants to harm his dear Appalachia, even if this manifesto just consists in showing the reality of a fragile region rather than telling the reader what to think about the Appalachian problem, a problem which the novel never tries to resolve.

#### 3.1. Giving a Voice to the Mountain

Whereas most novels use place as a mere background, the omnipresence and potential of action of the mountain in *Serena* suggests that it is one of the main characters of the novel — an assumption that will be proven later in this chapter. Even if the mountain's condition first appears as hopeless, its natural agents retaliate to the aggression led by the human characters, by anthropomorphically engaging in a war against the workers or ruthlessly ending Pemberton's life. The mountain ultimately influences the psychology of the human characters, another proof of its major importance in Rash's work.

### 3.1.1. A Character

Before arguing that the mountain resists to its aggression, one must first prove that the mountain is a character. Rash likes to say that the landscape is a character in his novels: “So I think for me, landscape is a character.<sup>367</sup>” In the case of *Serena*, the mountain is a fully developed character or round character. Without the mountain, the novel would lose all its meaning. The characteristics of a fictional character will be stated at the beginning of each paragraph and will be followed by an argumentation on how the mountain matches those criteria. But first, here is the general definition of a fictional character: A fictional character is an individual whose actions, experience and destiny form the central concern of a narrative fiction. This definition goes against the received idea that a character has to be a human being, the word “individual” being central here. Even if a character were to have human characteristics, the mountain would still be a character in *Serena*. Rash often uses anthropomorphism and depicts the mountain using human features. For example, the mountain is said to breathe twice in the novel: “The cross-cut saw resumed, the blade’s rapid back-and-forth like inhalations and exhalations, a sound as if the tree itself were panting<sup>368</sup>”; “the mountains swelled upward as if taking a last deep breath before slowly exhaling toward Cove Creek Valley.<sup>369</sup>” Human life would not be if it were not for the act of breathing. As the mountain breathes, Rash breathes life into the mountain. But this basic human action of breathing also implies a twofold dynamic movement which grants the mountain with a certain vitality, an undeniable vigor. One will look more closely at the characteristics of the fictional character to continue to show that the mountain is a character in its own right in Rash’s novel *Serena*.

First, a character is the reference of linguistic expressions. Usually the characters are referred to by one single name throughout the whole novel, for example, Serena or Rachel. Characters can also be referred to by pronouns such as she, he, her or him. In the case of the mountain, there are multiple referents for only one reality, which makes it all the more difficult to discern what it is. The Appalachian Mountains are not often referred to as a whole, which would otherwise have led to more occurrences of the term “mountains<sup>370</sup>”. The mountain, by definition, a natural place swarming with life, can only be apprehended in its multiplicity. The reality of the mountain is embodied in the many non-human beings that compose it. The mountain is a physical and mineral entity composed of earth, rocks, rivers. But it is also plant

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<sup>367</sup> Clepton, Miller. *op.cit.* p.113.

<sup>368</sup> Rash, Ron. *Serena. op.cit.* p.111.

<sup>369</sup> *Ibid.* p.123.

<sup>370</sup> *Ibid.* p.3 p.123. p.197 etc.

life, which is more or less large in size: “the woods<sup>371</sup>”, “the trees<sup>372</sup>”, “a tree<sup>373</sup>”, “branches<sup>374</sup>”, “leaves<sup>375</sup>” etc. The mountain is finally embodied in all the animals that compose it, to name only a few examples: a “possum<sup>376</sup>”, “deer<sup>377</sup>”, “kits<sup>378</sup>”. The fact that nature is in every living thing that are part of the mountains entails a whole other reading of the novel. What would otherwise have been seen as a mere background, or could have been interpreted as mere local color, constitutes one of the main characters of the novel. Indeed, if one only looks at reference, the mountain is certainly the character which is the most referred to in the novel.

Secondly, a character is an entity fulfilling actential functions within the plot — as agent or desired object, as helper or opponent. In *Serena*, the landscape is as much an agent as a desired object. What ought to be said right away is that the mountain is certainly the desired object of the novel because it is the reason why all the events take place. If the Pembertons have come to Appalachia in the first place, it is to harvest entire chains of mountains and transform as much trees as possible into timber to make a substantial amount of money. The state and environmentalists battle with them to preserve the mountain and its precious forests from future abuse. Surprisingly, the mountain is not only the desired object of the novel but also an agent of the story. The mountain’s behavior alternates between the passivity characteristic of the non-human world and small punctual actions. It mainly translates into powerlessness and extreme suffering especially since humans carry out a permanent aggression throughout the novel. But the mountain can also engage in fierce retaliation as it will be discussed in the following chapter, the Mountain Fights Back. Otherwise, the mountain is overall an attentive witness of the human drama happening within its hills and valleys, especially when the character of Rachel is concerned: “The crows had settled into the trees and the squirrels tucked deep in their nests. The woods were hushed and attentive, the trees seeming to huddle themselves closer together, as if awaiting not just the rain but some story about to be told.<sup>379</sup>” In this excerpt, Rash plays on an ambiguity: the mountain could be naturally preparing itself for heavy rainfall, or could be waiting for Rachel, again represented as an earth goddess or mother nature, to tell a story, just as a mother would do for her child before it goes to bed. Either way, the mountain’s actions are not random, and the fact that they are endowed with a consciousness brings the mountain

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<sup>371</sup> Rash, Ron. *Serena. op.cit.* p.193.

<sup>372</sup> *Ibid.* p.81.

<sup>373</sup> *Ibid.* p.78.

<sup>374</sup> *Ibid.* p.195.

<sup>375</sup> *Ibid.* p.301.

<sup>376</sup> *Ibid.* p.77.

<sup>377</sup> *Ibid.* p.70.

<sup>378</sup> *Ibid.* p.269.

<sup>379</sup> *Ibid.* p.81.

even closer to the status of character. The mountain is thus a witness to the human drama but it does not mean it never intervenes in human affairs. Throughout *Serena*, it was as though the mountain wanted to establish communication with the other characters: “A squirrel began chattering in a tree farther up the ridge and was soon answered<sup>380</sup>”; “A woodcock burred in the woods behind the cabin<sup>381</sup>”; “The men paused to listen to a staccato tapping coming from the deeper woods.<sup>382</sup>” The sounds emanating from the mountain may not be in a human language, but their redundancy and the fact that they are always listened to show an attempted communication between the mountain and the other characters of the novel. What is important here is not the quality of the noise but the capacity of the characters, Rachel and Snipe’s crew, to see a human-like presence in this natural rumor. Secondly, the mountain is as much a helper as an opponent, it all depends on the characters involved. For Rachel, the mountain is a reassuring presence that helps her overcome many struggles. On the contrary, for the loggers of Snipe’s crew, the mountain is mostly an opponent as they are often depicted as making war against each other.

Thirdly, a character is endowed with inner states and can be considered as a consciousness. In *Serena*, the mountains’ subjectivity is quite different from the other characters. The mountain does not have thoughts, as other human characters would. However, the mountain shows emotions and behaviors which are worthy of a fictional character. As soon as the first pages of the novel, Pemberton and Serena ride past “a granite outcrop<sup>383</sup>” with “water trickling down the rock face<sup>384</sup>.” The use of the word “face” is ambiguous because it can be considered as the outcrop’s rocky surface as well as a human characteristic. In the case of the second interpretation, the water trickling down can thus be considered as tears. What is seen as a natural phenomenon can be interpreted as a sign of the mountain’s expressiveness. Another example of the mountain’s subjectivity would be the reaction of the animals to deforestation, which is thoroughly highlighted by Snipe’s crew:

“Ain’t as many critter tracks as you’d think.”

“They’ve hightailed on over to Tennessee,” Ross said. “That’s the direction we’re herding them and they’ve given up fighting it.”

“Maybe they got word of the new park over that way,” Snipes said, “figured they’d be left alone there since all the two-legged critters have near been run out.”<sup>385</sup>

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<sup>380</sup> Rash, Ron. *Serena. op.cit.* p.78.

<sup>381</sup> *Ibid.* p.193.

<sup>382</sup> *Ibid.* p.218.

<sup>383</sup> *Ibid.* p.13.

<sup>384</sup> *Ibid.* p.13.

<sup>385</sup> *Ibid.* p.63.



In this excerpt, the loggers of Snipes crew speculate about the absence of animals in the area surrounding them. Ross thinks the migration of the animals is triggered by human aggression. Nonetheless, the behavior of the animals is not represented as a result of their primal instincts as they are said to have fought before finally yielding to human domination. Snipes adds that the animals could have been reasonable enough to intentionally flee to park land, as though they were conscious of the project. The discourse of Snipe's crew represents animals as having a consciousness. The idea that the origin of animal behavior is intentional grants the mountain the status of fictional character.

Finally, a character is the bearer of general ideas and functions as an allegory. As demonstrated before, the mountain can sometimes be an allegory of beauty, especially when linked to the character of Rachel, as it is also an allegory of death, mostly during the description of the clear-cutting of the forests. The mountain also sometimes represents fate as it is shown in the following excerpt:

By the time the last man made his ascent to the ridge, the warming ice had begun to slip free from the branches. Smaller pieces at first, tinkling like bells as they hit the frozen ground. Then came water-clear downfalls that quickly covered the understory, crackled and snapped beneath every footstep. Men walked through them as they would the remnants of a vast shattered mirror.<sup>386</sup>

In this passage, the sound of the men stepping on the damp understory is compared to the sound of trampled pieces of glass. This creates the image of a vast shattered mirror that calls to mind the idea of a curse, as though the men's enterprise will end by some sort of retribution. It is not the first time that the mountain embodies the idea of a curse, since a few pages before, "a raven flew overhead, wing shadow passing over the men like a dark thought<sup>387</sup>". As the mountain embodies a general idea and functions as an allegory of fate, it reinforces the idea that it is a fictional character.

The intuition that the mountain is a character in *Serena* has been demonstrated in this chapter. Another reason for that statement would be that, like other fictional characters of the novel, the mountain has its picture taken by Frizzell: "The photographer had set up his tripod on the railless track where the skidder boom had once sat, his camera aimed not at any living worker or the dead but the decimated valley.<sup>388</sup>" This quotation tends to show that the mountain is a dynamic character that has been changed through constant clear-cutting, the photograph being a sign of its irremediable death at the end of the novel.

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<sup>386</sup> Rash, Ron. *Serena. op.cit.* p.173.

<sup>387</sup> *Ibid.* p.107.

<sup>388</sup> *Ibid.* p.351.

### 3.1.2. The Mountain Fights Back

At first sight, the mountain's condition in *Serena* is hopeless — the Pemberton's enterprise turns the forests into vast wastelands of stump and slash, clogs rivers with silt and destroys the natural habitat of mountain wildlife. But despite its propensity to suffer, the mountain ultimately retaliates in the form of timber rattlesnakes, swirling creek currents or harsh climactic conditions. At the end of the novel, it has even avenged itself from its evil aggressors. If the words of Doctor Cheney are true and “the most beautiful creatures are so often the most injurious<sup>389</sup>”, then the mountain is a dangerous force to be reckoned with.

In Rash's vision of the world, evil certainly comes from humans as it is shown through the character of Serena and her propensity for hubris, destruction and murder. However, evil can also be natural. In *Serena*, nature's evil is embodied by the timber rattlesnakes. Indeed, the men who fall prey to rattlesnake bites have the most horrible death — their legs swell “black and big around as a hearth log<sup>390</sup>” and their gums bleed “profusely<sup>391</sup>”. In the novel, those who suffer the most from nature's evil are not the entrepreneurs but the poor worker who has a daily contact with the mountain:

As the men made their way through the stumps and brush they called slash, their eyes considered where they stepped, for though snakes rarely stirred until the sun fell full on the slopes, the yellow jackets and hornets offered no such respite. Nor did the mountain itself, which would send a man tumbling, especially on a day such as this when recent rains made the ground slick and yielding to feet and grasping hands. (...) Most of all the sharded limbs called widow markers that waited minutes or hours before falling earthward like javelins.<sup>392</sup>

The mountain is full of dangers for the workers. Most of all, it is nature's contingency that offers the workers no rest. If the workers have to be very careful with every step they take, it is because they can unintentionally come across poisonous animals or don't know exactly when the limbs or “widow markers” are going to fall. Since the workers cannot predict when nature is going to strike, their death is almost inevitable which makes the mountain an even stronger character. They cannot even count on the ground to support them anymore because the earth has turned into mud, a fact that is further developed in the novel: “Recent rains had slowed down progress, not just forcing men to slog through mud but causing more accidents as well<sup>393</sup>”. If the rains are dangerous for the workers, heavy snowfall and winter frost are deadlier. Again, it is the

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<sup>389</sup> Rash, Ron. *Serena. op.cit.* p.59.

<sup>390</sup> *Ibid.* p.59.

<sup>391</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>392</sup> *Ibid.* p.24.

<sup>393</sup> *Ibid.* p.176.

mountain, in the form of “denuded forests”, that is the culprit of those harsh climactic conditions, at least according to the workers: “Several workers argued the denuded forests had allowed winter to settle deeper into the valley, so deep it had gotten trapped in the same way an animal caught in a rabbit gum or dead-fall trap.<sup>394</sup>” If the mountain was first said to suffer from the cold winter itself<sup>395</sup>, it seems to have taken control over the weather and has trapped the winter, to the great displeasure of the workers. The workers might destroy the mountain throughout the novel, but the mountain actively retaliates to its aggression in multiple forms.

The mountain defends itself through punctual actions against the workers. But if it wins over the Pembertons at the end of the story, it is mainly because the mountain and the human characters are different in nature. The enterprise conducted by the Pembertons still remains in the limited scope of human experience. The power of the mountain is much greater and dates back to immemorial times. For example, the rapidity with which the railroad moves onto the new tracks becomes a metaphor for the engines’ triviality in comparison with the underlying force emanating from the mountains: “When a new piece of track was set down, the Shay engine lurched forward immediately to cover it, as though the wilderness might seize the rails if they weren’t gripped and held by the iron wheels.<sup>396</sup>” Human progression is represented as greedy though fragile, especially since it is carried out in an endless space such as the wilderness. In *Serena*, the size of the mountains contrasts with the smallness of the human characters. The exceptional height of the mountains shakes Pemberton to his core: “Pemberton gazed at the peak a long time, then let his eyes fall slowly downward, and it was as if he was falling as well, falling slow and deliberate with his eyes open.<sup>397</sup>” The mountain is so impressive in scale that it messes up with the impressions of Pemberton’s body. If the mountain and the human characters differ in size, they also don’t last through time in the same manner. The mountain has always been and will always be, at least compared to the human characters whose life is temporary. This means that the Pemberton’s enterprise is transitory whereas the mountain’s power is timeless. The contemporary reader knows that the clear-cut mountain represented in the novel is verdant again in reality, even more so now that it belongs to a protected area. There is a textual hint at this capacity of the mountain to regenerate itself over time, when Pemberton has had too much to drink and has a hallucinogenic-like experience: “The world blurred, and it seemed possible that the crossties would leap onto stumps and become trees again, the slash

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<sup>394</sup> Rash, Ron. *Serena. op.cit.* p.102.

<sup>395</sup> *Ibid.* p.101.

<sup>396</sup> *Ibid.* p.54.

<sup>397</sup> *Ibid.* p.261.

whirl upward to become branches. Even a dark blizzard of ash paling back in time to become green leaves, gray and brown twigs.<sup>398</sup> Pemberton could not care less about the well-being of nature so the mountain regenerating itself before his eyes might as well be a nightmarish vision. This appearance of the mountain growing verdant again has a proleptic quality which is hinted at earlier in the novel by editor Webb: “it may take forty or fifty years before the forests will grow back. But when it does, it will be part of the Great Smoky Mountain National Park.<sup>399</sup>” Pemberton won’t be there anymore to witness it from his own eyes, not only because he dies at the end of the novel, but because the mountain’s capacity to survive through the ages is eternal.

Finally, at the end of the novel, the mountain avenges itself for the massive wound the Pembertons have inflicted to its core. Even if Pemberton’s death was supposed to be on Serena’s hands, it is the mountain who has the final word and kills him at last. Using the excuse of the panther hunt, Serena tasked Galloway to bring Pemberton to the mountains, give him a poisonous sandwich and let him die. But as Pemberton climbs onto a ledge, a snake bites him and he feels “its fangs strike his boot, snag a moment, and pull free<sup>400</sup>”. Left to die in a meadow by Galloway, he hears, on the verge of death, “a cry like that of an infant<sup>401</sup>”. For the attentive reader, this cry attests to the presence of the mythical mountain lion, its sound described by Galloway earlier in the novel as that of “a baby crying<sup>402</sup>”. The fact that Pemberton is killed by the same animal he was hunting throughout the novel is ironical. In the end, the rattlesnake bite and the presence of the mountain lion or the attacks led by the mountain, reinstate the natural order of things that was gone since the beginning of the novel. In *Serena*, the mountain might be represented as a fragile being but a closer look reveals that it fiercely fights back to the aggressor.

### 3.1.3. Destiny

The mountain is not just a fictional character who suffers and reacts to human occupation. It affects the human characters so much that it changes their being. In his fiction, Rash includes the anthropologic idea that follows: the mountain affects the psychology and behavior of its human occupants. This idea is reminiscent of Montesquieu’s old climate theory that argues geography affect the nature of men, even though they are not actually the same.

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<sup>398</sup> Rash, Ron. *Serena. op.cit.* p.339.

<sup>399</sup> *Ibid.* p.242.

<sup>400</sup> *Ibid.* p.359.

<sup>401</sup> *Ibid.* p.367.

<sup>402</sup> *Ibid.* p.122.

Under Rash's pen, the idea that the mountain affects human psychology is encapsulated in the catchphrase "landscape is destiny"<sup>403</sup>, which also appears as such in Leonard Shuler's consciousness in *The World Made Straight*. In *Serena* as well, the mountain has a specific impact on the human characters and it can be either positive or negative, conscious or unconscious. If the workers try to actively find meaning in the mountains and search "the sky night and day for signs of the season's end, a laying down moon, geese headed north, creasy greens on the stream bank"<sup>404</sup>, they are mostly passive and subjected to their surroundings since, for example, the "low gray sky (adds) to their somberness"<sup>405</sup>.

"Landscape is destiny" is a leitmotiv in Rash's fiction. In *Saints at the River*, Maggie Glenn has left the mountains because she has become extremely claustrophobic. The reader learns in a flash-back that young Maggie felt "as though the mountains had moved together (...) and would keep on moving closer until they finally suffocated (her)"<sup>406</sup>. But this claustrophobia may as well come from the traumatic events that happened in her childhood and that she has projected onto the place. In *The World Made Straight*, Leonard Shuler's life has also been affected by the mountains. He thinks that the Pentecostal ideas he was brought up with derive from the mountain's "brooding presence"<sup>407</sup>, the "ghosts" created by the mountain's "light-starved ridges and coves"<sup>408</sup>. The fact that he moved to the Midwest with his ex-wife gave him a strong sense of his origins, of being from the mountains. Once back in Appalachia, he realizes the place gives him a "sense of being closed-in, of human limitation"<sup>409</sup>. Since all his novels are set in Appalachia, Rash has had plenty of opportunities to further express this idea of landscape as destiny.

Before analyzing the traces of Rash's theory in *Serena*, the fact that the human characters and the mountain have strong similarities ought to be demonstrated first. After all, if the mountain affects human characters, it is because they are one with their surroundings. The mountain and the characters are inextricably linked textually, especially through Rash's use of similes. According to Marie-Christine Agosto, Rash favors "comparisons over metaphors to emphasize the connection between man and environment"<sup>410</sup>. This connection, as envisioned by the theory of landscape as destiny, is psychological. But this connection can also be physical

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<sup>403</sup> Clepton, Miller. *op.cit.* p.133.

<sup>404</sup> Rash, Ron. *Serena. op.cit.* p.102.

<sup>405</sup> *Ibid.* p.246.

<sup>406</sup> Rash, Ron. *Saints at the river. op.cit.* p. 130.

<sup>407</sup> Rash, Ron. *The World Made Straight*. Picador, 2006. p.72.

<sup>408</sup> *Ibid.* p.72.

<sup>409</sup> *Ibid.* p.156-157.

<sup>410</sup> Agosto, Marie-Christine. *op.cit.* p.68.

as it is shown through the use of various natural elements in the elaboration of the characters' bodily descriptions. For example, this is what Joel Vaughn's says to Rachel about Jacob getting taller: "That young one of yours is sprouting up like June corn."<sup>411</sup> This simile draws a parallel between living beings as they both obey to the principal of life and have an inner capacity to grow. In life, as in death, humans and nature do not seem to differ, a fact that is highlighted by Galloway's chopped hand whose "fingers curl inward like the legs of a dying spider"<sup>412</sup>. Later in the novel, his nubbed arm is "dandling like rotten fruit clinging to a branch"<sup>413</sup>. These two similes show that death and decay can be found as much in the human world as in the natural world. Henryson's portrait is more flattering than that of Galloway since his eyelashes are described as "fluttering a few moments like insect wings vainly attempting to take flight"<sup>414</sup>. By showing the mountain and the characters have a strong physical resemblance, Rash proves they have the same nature and paves the way for his "landscape is destiny" theory.

According to Rash, human psychology is the product of its environment. In an interview with Alden Mudge, Rash exposes his theory by giving us two human reactions to mountain life. He has drawn this conclusion by carefully observing his family:

But if you live in the mountains—I've seen this in my own family—two things can happen. One is that you feel protected by the mountains, almost like it's a womb that protects you from the outside world. But the other thing that can happen is that the lack of light does something physically to people who live in a cove. There's always a sense of your smallness, your puniness and insignificance compared to these mountains that have been here millions of years and loom over you.<sup>415</sup>

The two feelings produced by the mountains on the Appalachian — the feeling of being protected and the feeling of being insignificant — seem to be opposites but are not said to be exclusive. Those two phenomena described by Rash during this interview can be found in his novel *Serena*, especially during a conversation between Rachel and Widow Jenkins. In this conversation, Rachel learns that her mother has left the mountains because the absence of light in the cove alienated her: "The farm land being so rocky and hilly, the long winters and the loneliness. But she told him the hardest thing was the way the mountains shut out the sun. She said living in the cove was like living in a coal mine."<sup>416</sup> As a reaction, Rachel tries to put herself in her mother's shoes and reaches the conclusion that they are completely different:

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<sup>411</sup> Rash, Ron. *Serena. op.cit.* p.129.

<sup>412</sup> *Ibid.* p.179.

<sup>413</sup> *Ibid.* p.200.

<sup>414</sup> *Ibid.* p.300.

<sup>415</sup> Clexton, Miller. *op.cit.* p.148.

<sup>416</sup> Rash, Ron. *Serena. op.cit.* p.196.

Rachel tried to imagine what living here had been like for her mother, but it was impossible because what had felt like being shut in to her mother felt like a sheltering to Rachel, as if the mountains were huge hands, hard but gentle hands that cupped around you, protecting and comforting, the way she imagined God's hands would be.<sup>417</sup>

Rachel and her mother, though being from the same family, embody the two different reactions to mountain life Rash was talking about in the interview. Whereas her mother felt oppressed by the mountains to the point where she had to leave, Rachel feels the mountains' presence as a daily gift. For her, the mountains are more than a reassuring human presence, they turn out to be the earthly form of the divine. This has been true for Rachel because she was born in Appalachia and has always lived among the mountains. But the feelings the mountains convey to its occupants are far from being permanent and they can come up punctually. Even if they have only spent two days in a cove, Snipe says that the lack of light already has a bad influence on the loggers of his crew:

Though it was early afternoon, little light fell into the gap. The sparse-leaved trees rose around them bleak and skeletal, particularly sycamores that the winter had bleached white. The men had been in the gap since noon yesterday, and Snipes believed the unrelenting gloaming put the workers in a darker more fatalistic state of mind, less careful than they otherwise might be.<sup>418</sup>

Snipes thinks that there is a correlation between the luminosity of the cove and the workers' mood and reactivity. The absence of light not only darkens the trees but also the workers as their moods become much somber, both senses of the verb to darken being applied here. Underneath Snipe's thought, one can feel the presence of Rash, spreading his theory. By the way, this vision of surrounding darkness establishes a link between logging and mining. This idea that Appalachians live and work in the dark is also expressed later in the novel by Widow Jenkins who says that Rachel's mother thought that "living in the cove was like living in a coal mine<sup>419</sup>".

The Appalachian Mountains influence the character's psychology so deeply that even when they have left the place it still has an impact on their conscience. Indeed, if you are "born (there) they're a part of you. No other place will ever feel right<sup>420</sup>" to quote Widow Jenkin's words. Rachel's new city life in Seattle does not suit her completely since she misses "the sound

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<sup>417</sup> Rash, Ron. *Serena. op.cit.* p.197-198.

<sup>418</sup> *Ibid.* p.184.

<sup>419</sup> *Ibid.* p.196.

<sup>420</sup> *Ibid.* p.197.

of a creek or rain on a tin roof or a mourning dove's call<sup>421</sup>” but rejoices that “at least there are mountains<sup>422</sup>”.

## 3.2. A Story of Resistance

In *Serena*, the Pembertons' economic monopoly in Appalachia empowers them to harm the mountaineers — as owners of a company, they have an institutional power over their employees and have more than enough money to buy off the local coroner and law, but, most of all, they do not hesitate to murder whoever stands in their way. The resistance against the Pembertons is latent, but real. May they act individually or collectively, the Appalachian characters have decided to question the Pemberton's alleged superiority and evil in multiple ways. The final and fatal act of revenge against Serena is carried out by Jacob who has become a weapon of his birth-place.

### 3.2.1. Individual Resistance

Three individuals embody the resistance against the Pembertons: Rachel, Reverend Bolick and Sheriff MacDowell. Rachel, who represents goodness, is the only character who escapes Serena's wrath, showing that the forces of evil are not that overwhelming in the end. Reverend Bolick embodies the divine force above who cannot but judge the Pembertons' evil actions. As for Sheriff McDowell, he is not merely the local law but is the novel's true figure of righteousness.

Rachel is the character who evolves the most in the novel. This transformation of a frail young girl into a strong empowered woman will be studied, to show how she finally won over the evil Pembertons. In the incipit of the novel, Rachel does not even exist as an individual, she is either the girl Pemberton has impregnated or Harmon's daughter: “the daughter sat on the bench, her posture upright to better reveal her condition<sup>423</sup>”. In this first scene, she appears as a figure of powerlessness as shown by her hopeless interventions: “Let's go home, Daddy<sup>424</sup>”; “Daddy, please<sup>425</sup>”. Moving on to chapter three, Rachel is presented as an anti-heroine: her mother has left when she was a child, her father just died, she is poverty-stricken and just gave

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<sup>421</sup> Rash, Ron. *Serena. op.cit.* p.330.

<sup>422</sup> *Ibid.* p.329.

<sup>423</sup> *Ibid.* p.4.

<sup>424</sup> *Ibid.* p.8.

<sup>425</sup> *Ibid.*



birth to a child at age seventeen. At this early stage of the story, she is not able to get over her love story with Pemberton, despite her guilt for still caring about her father's murderer:

It wasn't the Packard, and she felt ashamed that a part of herself, even now, could have wished it was Mr. Pemberton coming to Colt Ridge to somehow set things right. The same as when she'd gone to the camp's church service the last two Sundays, dawdling outside the dining hall with Jacob in her arms, hoping Mr. Pemberton would walk by.<sup>426</sup>

This excerpt shows Rachel's propensity to sentimentalize her life, which may be due to her young age. It might be an unconscious mechanism that protects her from the harshness of reality, as she comes to find hope in a hopeless situation. Most of all, it shows that, at the beginning of the novel, she has not accepted her condition and that her whims take precedence over reality. However, this initial situation will be reversed as the novel unfolds.

Rachel evolves so much in the novel to the point where she has the courage to confront Galloway, Serena's henchman. Throughout the novel, Rachel proves herself to be a hardworking woman: she harvests ginseng, works in the kitchen, makes repairs on her house all by herself while watching over her son Jacob at the same time. Even if she is forced into working because she has to feed herself and her son Jacob, manual work proves to be life-saving in the end — it has forged her mind to become more resilient. But as soon as chapter nine, her courage had already saved her and her son Jacob from a fever. Given that her survival verge on the miraculous, the doctor, who should have established a scientific diagnosis, speaks from the heart: "You cut up yourself 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."<sup>427</sup> According to the doctor, Rachel has won the battle over sickness because of her mother instincts — the love she bears for her child. This strong willingness to protect her beloved child surely explains Rachel's perseverance throughout the entire novel. It also explains why she gathered so much strength to hit Galloway on his head at the end of the chase, in chapter thirty-one:

Galloway shoved himself halfway into the car, his head and belly on the metal floor, legs yet dandling. Rachel raised the stock to ear level. She paused, willing the pound of glass and steel to be enough, then brought it down as hard as she could on Galloway's leering face. His eyes went white. For a moment his body balanced half in half out of the car. Then Rachel pressed her shoe heel against his forehead and shoved him earthward. Galloway tumbled into a gully. Rachel

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<sup>426</sup> Rash, Ron. *Serena. op.cit.* p.42.

<sup>427</sup> *Ibid.* p.97.

leaned out and watched as the caboose passed where he'd fallen. She kept watching the tracks, but he did not rise<sup>428</sup>.

This excerpt is one of the novel's many climaxes, the confrontation between Rachel and Galloway being carefully prepared by Rash since chapter twenty-six. Galloway's relentless hunt ends rather abruptly as Rachel hits him on the head while he tries to climb up in the train. The reader is relieved Rachel makes it in the end, especially since in the short-story "Pemberton's bride" on which the novel is based, Rachel suffers another fate — she is found dead in a river alongside her baby whose throat is cut off. In *Serena*, Rachel's escape gives another moral orientation to the novel as goodness finally triumphs over evil. Indeed, Rachel and Serena may be two powerful women, yet, contrary to Serena, Rachel uses her power to do good. Even if the two characters embody a moral polarity between good and evil, the novel should not be oversimplified. The image of Rachel as a pure innocent child is definitely tainted at the end of the novel when she tells Sheriff MacDowell that she would "kill (the Pembertons if she) didn't have Jacob to look after<sup>429</sup>". After all, her desire for revenge is natural and makes her even more human. Little by little, as the novel unfolds, Rachel gains more and more confidence. In the end, she has challenged the Pembertons and questioned their moral superiority.

Reverend Bolick is little mentioned in the novel, but when he makes an appearance, he leaves a mark on the reader's mind. He first appears using his position as preacher to ask for a raise of salary for the workers which explains why he is so "bothersome<sup>430</sup>" for the entrepreneurs. Bolick's vain attempt to defend the worker's rights as soon the 1920's makes of him the precursor of a unionized resistance. When the entrepreneurs call him to order and remind him that he is their subordinate, he responds that he serves "only at God's indulgence<sup>431</sup>". Since his requests are unanswered, the preacher let the Holy Scriptures speak for themselves and quotes the book of Obadiah during one of his services: "*The pride of thine heart hath deceived thee, thou that dwellest in the cleft of the rock whose habitation is high, that saith in his heart, who shall bring me down.*<sup>432</sup>" Through this verse, the preacher directly addresses the entrepreneurs and implies that their position of power is artificial as they are blinded by pride — one of the seven deadly sins. This is not the first time Rash uses religion to denounce the wrongdoings of a company. In *Among the Believers*, the poem "A Preacher Who Takes Up

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<sup>428</sup> Rash, Ron. *Serena*. *op.cit.* p.312.

<sup>429</sup> *Ibid.* p.296.

<sup>430</sup> *Ibid.* p.170.

<sup>431</sup> *Ibid.* p.134.

<sup>432</sup> *Ibid.* p.171.

Serpents Laments in The Presence of Skeptics in His Church” already exposed the Champion Paper Company for pouring its poison in rivers. The speaker of the poem is also a preacher who intends to reveal “man’s wickedness<sup>433</sup>” that can be seen “less than a mile from here<sup>434</sup>” where “the stench of sulphur rises/ like fog off the Pigeon River<sup>435</sup>”. The figure of the preacher is efficient in denouncing the companies because it embodies the sacredness of the Word. What would otherwise be a mere human denunciation turns into the divine judgement of the force above. In their own ways, Rash’s fictional preachers denounce what the foreign companies inflict to Appalachia and become a strong figure of resistance.

Sheriff McDowell represents more than the local law of Haywood County, he is the true hero of *Serena*. The novel functions with pairs and if Rachel is Serena’s foe, McDowell is obviously Pemberton’s virtuous double. McDowell might indeed be the only one to oppose Pemberton since, according to Snipes’ crew, he put him in jail once for driving too fast: “But he put him in there, and there’s not another in this country would have done that.<sup>436</sup>” McDowell’s anger towards Pemberton grows as the novel unfolds: he is first seen performing his duties as sheriff and arresting Pemberton for disorderly conduct, then he threatens to arrest him again for “trespassing<sup>437</sup>” or “hunting out of season<sup>438</sup>” but this time he seems to be using the law to harm Pemberton personally and finally, he is enraged by Pemberton’s murderous activity and even says to him, revolted, “Do you think you people can do anything?<sup>439</sup>”. Sheriff McDowell is incorruptible and this makes his status as sheriff very fragile. In the end, if he has been sheriff during the whole novel, it is because Wilkie said it would “mollify the locals to have one of their own in the position<sup>440</sup>”. At some point, Pemberton gives Sheriff McDowell the choice: “You want to keep your job or not?<sup>441</sup>”. Yet, McDowell stands true to himself and stays on the side of goodness until the end, even if that got him replaced by Edmund Wagner Bowden. Sheriff McDowell’s sense of justice is the major reason Rachel and Jacob make it at the end of the novel. He embodies more than the local law; he is a true figure of righteousness. He even tries to kill the Pembertons by putting fire to their house in chapter thirty-two which shows that even if the law has failed him and a way to punish the Pembertons cannot be found, he is still willing to render justice no matter what. This choice of the justice of the heart over

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<sup>433</sup> Rash, Ron. *Among the Believers* (Oak Ridge (Tennessee): Iris Press, 2013), p.19.

<sup>434</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>435</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>436</sup> Rash, Ron. *Serena. op.cit.* p.64.

<sup>437</sup> *Ibid.* p.121.

<sup>438</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>439</sup> *Ibid.* p.255.

<sup>440</sup> *Ibid.* p.253.

<sup>441</sup> *Ibid.* p.258.

legal justice makes of him a great figure of resistance against the evil Pembertons. Moreover, he suffers a tragic though glorious end as he dies as a martyr, suffering for his sense of duty. Galloway tortures him into telling Rachel's whereabouts but the sheriff's moral conscience is so strong that he does not give it away, not even under torture. His greatness follows him after he dies since Galloway confesses to Pemberton that he regrets torturing him: "If I had to do it over, I'd as lief have killed him quick."<sup>442</sup> Even in death, Sheriff McDowell has won the battle over Pemberton — as he was being tortured, he told Galloway that Pemberton helped Rachel to escape, which is the reason why Pemberton got killed in the end.

### 3.2.2. Collective Resistance

The highlanders' reaction to the invasion of their land by foreign entrepreneurs is not described very often in the novel. The only trace of resistance might be in chapter twelve, when Pemberton drives his ostentatious Packard around a group of mountaineers: "As Pemberton passed these highlanders, they characteristically lowered their eyes so as not to meet his, a seeming act of deference belied by their refusal to sidle to the road's shoulder so he might get around them easier."<sup>443</sup> Pemberton's momentary display of power makes the mountaineers lower their eyes which can be interpreted as a sign of respect but mostly reveals that they don't want to surrender to his superiority. This passage questions the interpretation of the mountaineer's reaction to foreign invasion. Rash intends to debunk the idea that the mountaineers were complicit in their own oppression by showing that appearing submissive does not mean being submissive at all.

*Serena* is a collective drama in both senses of the expression. It is a collective drama because the events of the plot have an impact on the highlanders as a group since they form a holistic community that shares the same past, sufferings and fate. It is also a collective drama because, like a play, the loggers of Snipe's crew function as a Greek chorus that comments upon the actions of the Pembertons. However, contrary to a chorus, each member of the crew has its own individuality which makes them more likable to the reader. The crew is indeed composed of the "philosophical Snipes, illiterate lay preacher McIntyre, McIntyre's gullible parishioner Stewart, (...) the cynical argumentative Ross and the impressionable Dunbar, the crew's youngest member at 19"<sup>444</sup> who is replaced by the inquisitive nature-lover Henryson when he

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<sup>442</sup> Rash, Ron. *Serena. op.cit.* p.364.

<sup>443</sup> *Ibid.* p.119.

<sup>444</sup> Lang, John. *Understanding Ron Rash. op.cit.* p.90.

dies in chapter nineteen. However, they are not merely individuals, nor are they just a chorus that helps the reader discern the events of the plot, they form a group of dissenters that resist to the foreign oppressor. The manner they express their dissent is not traditional and differs from what the reader would have expected — the loggers never retaliate physically, nor do they revendicate their rights as workers. But the crew’s almost omniscient knowledge of the Pembertons’ actions, their moral condemnation of their evil rampage and their lighthearted conversations that never yield into pathos are a true though subtle act of resistance. Rash’s representation of the loggers functions as an alternative vision of the world than that of the evil Pembertons which reinvigorates the reader with faith. As John Lang says in *Understanding Ron Rash*, the “horror (of the Pembertons) is counterbalanced (...) by the moral insight, good-natured humor, and simple humaneness of Snipe’s Crew<sup>445</sup>”. In the evil world of *Serena* imposed by the Pembertons, the crew’s strong sense of morals and casual propensity for humor is a reclamation of their humanity, and a true statement of their superiority to the Pembertons.

The resistance of the mountaineers to foreign invasion is thus carried out collectively by the loggers of Snipe’s crew. These workers never oppose the Pembertons overtly — it would have been anachronistic of Rash to make them act so. According to Stephen Fisher, a few studies show that some Appalachian mining communities were already class-contentious in the 1920’s and 1930’s. However, he emphasizes the fact that we know little about collective resistance prior to the 1960’s<sup>446</sup>. At the time *Serena* takes place, there were too many obstacles to picket lines and mass movements. The only behavior Snipe’s crew could adopt then, as loggers at the end of the 1920’s, and which is represented in the novel, is staying united whatever the hardships the bosses bring upon them. In *Serena*, one of the loggers’ way to resist the supremacy of the ruling classes is by spreading rumors. For example, Stewart says about *Serena* that “come the night she bares her belly to the moon, soaking in all its power<sup>447</sup>” which explicitly identifies his boss is a witch. They can also engage in backtalk, an action which is carried out by the character of Bilded who questions *Serena*’s superiority by spitting on the ground. Through the characters of Snipe’s crew, the novel shows that there are other ways to express dissent such as gossip, backtalk or holding to one’s dialect. This more subtle expression of dissent is what James Scott refers to as the “hidden transcript” of the oppressed. The absence of revendications of their rights don’t make of the workers a submissive workforce, on the

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<sup>445</sup> Lang, John. *Understanding Ron Rash. op.cit.* p.96.

<sup>446</sup> Fisher, Stephen L. *Fighting back in Appalachia: traditions of resistance and change* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1993).

<sup>447</sup> Rash, Ron. *Serena. op.cit.* p.201.

contrary. It just forces the reader to redefine his idea of resistance and imagine what it meant to be an Appalachian logger in the 1920's.

What makes of the loggers a Greek chorus is their knowledge of the Pemberton's evil wrongdoings. They are very conscious of the extent of the damage the Pembertons make them inflict to the land. They could have seen a bargain in the arrival of Serena's eagle since it eradicates their worst enemies — the rattlesnakes — but have the benefit of hindsight to say that it upsets the “yen and the yang<sup>448</sup>”. They also know about the Pembertons' frequent use of corruption: “You can count on Harris and the Pembertons fattening every wallet from the country courthouse up to the governor's mansion<sup>449</sup>”; “I doubt they'll be looking for any other kind of evidence since the sheriff's on the Pemberton Lumber Company payroll.<sup>450</sup>” More importantly, they discuss every murder the Pembertons have committed and foreshadow the tragedies that are bound to happen: “They'll not abide his taking off like that.<sup>451</sup>” Even if they are the inferior to the Pembertons in status, the fact that they know what their bosses are up to throughout the entire novel grants them with a certain kind of power.

Not only does the crew know what the Pembertons have done and will do, they also condemn their actions morally. Exposing the Pemberton's crimes was already a great role, but since they judge the behavior of the Pembertons as well, the crew becomes the true moral conscience of the novel. Snipe says that “they's two kinds of humans, your good and bad<sup>452</sup>” which may sound reductive but is more than accurate when applied to the Pembertons' case. As for Stewart, he qualifies the Pemberton's conduct as a kind of “meanness<sup>453</sup>”, identifying them with evil incarnate. Even if the crew cannot possibly change the course of events and intervene in the Pemberton's affairs, they have decided they should not make it easier for them, a fact that is made clear by Ross when he says that “maybe there's nothing (he) can do to stop them, but (he) damn won't help them<sup>454</sup>”. The loggers of Snipe's crew have never approved the Pemberton's actions whatsoever. Their ability to discern what is right from wrong puts them in a position of power in the eyes of the reader, who cannot but listen to these improvised judges. Intervening being impossible, the loggers' way to resist the Pembertons is the utter condemnation of their actions, even if they do so behind their backs.

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<sup>448</sup> Rash, Ron. *Serena. op.cit.* p.158.

<sup>449</sup> *Ibid.* p.64.

<sup>450</sup> *Ibid.* p.217.

<sup>451</sup> *Ibid.* p.228.

<sup>452</sup> *Ibid.* p.178.

<sup>453</sup> *Ibid.* p.228.

<sup>454</sup> *Ibid.* p.285.

The loggers' strength is to never yield to the worldview the Pembertons impose upon them. Their true act of resistance, which is also the more subtle, might be their willingness to stay true to themselves and engage in humoristic altercations. The lightness with which Snipes' crew takes life counterbalances the grim realities of the Pemberton's conduct. Instead of emphasizing the pathetic aspect of their condition, Rash caricatures the loggers of Snipes' crew which makes *Serena's* reader smile. There are two metatextual hints at this capacity of the loggers to entertain the reader. When the eagle slains the dragon of Komodo, Snipes wins his bet and gets a "cap and bells<sup>455</sup>". The acquisition of this trivial accessory, mostly used by clowns, exemplifies Snipes' ability to cheer the reader and captivate his attention. In chapter thirty-three, a comparison identifies dirty loggers to entertainers: "They passed exhausted workers washing soot off their faces and arms, the men looking not so much like minstrels unmasking after a performance<sup>456</sup>". The workers' propensity for acting humorously turns into a philosophy of life that clashes with the Pemberton's calculating worldview. Humor also adds another layer to Rash's novel. Even if their dissent is not what we would traditionally expect, the loggers of Snipes' crew collectively resist to the Pembertons be it by gossiping, condemning their actions or acting as comedic entertainers.

### 3.2.3. Jacob and Revenge

Jacob's role in the novel may appear insignificant until the coda, but the opposite will be proven in this chapter. Yet, it is true that in the coda he has a decisive role and his action will determine the moral orientation of the entire novel. As a toddler, his influence on the plot was very minimal, but as a grown man he becomes an almost divine instrument. The final act of intradiegetic resistance against greedy outside forces is the utter annihilation of them. When he kills Serena, Jacob becomes an allegory of revenge. The end of Rash's novel could be a warning to all the evil forces in the world, as well as Rash's unconscious desire to eradicate every alien force that plagues his dear Appalachia.

Jacob is a flat character in the novel. He mostly functions as the allegory of persecuted innocence, which is traditionally feminine but works here because of his young age. From the status of a doomed bastard baby, he becomes, in the italicized coda, a powerful avenger of his family, a place, the world. The purity of Jacob is finally subverted by time as, in forty-six years,

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<sup>455</sup> Rash, Ron. *Serena. op.cit.* p.292.

<sup>456</sup> *Ibid.* p.324.

he has become the “large figure framed by the doorway<sup>457</sup>”, looking like Pemberton — “the man in the picture<sup>458</sup>” — who kills Serena. His resemblance with Pemberton is not only physical as he turns out to be capable of killing someone. However, this murder takes another significance than the murders Serena and Pemberton have committed.

Jacob may seem to be an insignificant character but a closer look reveals that his existence is crucial. At the time of the story, he has the status of a toddler who cannot act nor speak and which does not seem to have an influence on the plot. However, he is the desired object of the novel. Serena’s wrath and bloody rampage is caused by her incapacity to have a baby, especially since Pemberton already had one with Rachel. As for Rachel, her primal mission is to keep her son alive and save him from persecution. Finally, if Pemberton is first insensitive to his son, he identifies himself to his physical attributes and quickly realizes he wants him to live — a desire that will doom him to the most horrible death. Being the center of the characters most profound desires grants Jacob the quality of important figure of the novel.

Jacob’s dual nature make of him a living testimony of history as well as the perfect character to embody the universal allegory of revenge. Jacobs’ eyes reflect a resemblance with both of his parents, Rachel and Pemberton. They are first said to be “brown as chestnuts<sup>459</sup>” which links him directly to the Appalachian Mountains. However, as he grows, his eyes turn “dark as mahogany. Pemberton’s eyes<sup>460</sup>”. This duality is key in the novel because Jacob carries in his being the mark of Appalachia’s invasion by foreigners. Jacob’s Appalachian roots will enable him to avenge an entire land and its people. As Pemberton’s son, Jacob embodies revenge as well as repentance because not only does he avenge his father’s death, he also accomplishes an act of repentance for all the wrongdoings his father has committed.

Jacob’s act of retribution is also tinted with irony. The episode of the coda was indeed foreshadowed by reverend Bolick who, by quoting the book of Obadiah during one of his services, had implicitly warned the Pembertons that “as you have done, it shall be done to you, your deeds shall return your own head”. Furthermore, to kill Serena, Jacob uses a “huge pearl-handled knife<sup>461</sup>” which the reader recognizes to be the “bowie knife<sup>462</sup>” his grand-father, Abe Harmon, had once carried in order to kill his father when he was not even born. Jacob’s use of the same knife is a textual hint at Abe Harmon’s initial death which Jacob also avenges. It also

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<sup>457</sup> Rash, Ron. *Serena. op.cit.* p.371.

<sup>458</sup> *Ibid.* p.371.

<sup>459</sup> *Ibid.* p.39.

<sup>460</sup> *Ibid.* p.171.

<sup>461</sup> *Ibid.* p.371.

<sup>462</sup> *Ibid.* p.3.



conveys the idea that, as intricate as human life may be, human actions have consequences. As the same object is used twice in different eras, the emphasis is made on the resurgence of the past in the present. Rash may be implying that human life is a continuum where past and present cannot be separated. What is also ironical is that it is Serena who gives the bowie knife to Rachel herself. It was as though she had instrumentalized her own death — a fact which is true given her absence of morals and the cruelty of her actions.

Jacob surely avenges his family but he also comes to embody the timelessness of the act of revenge. Since *Serena* borrows from the tragedy, Jacob could be seen as a tool of Nemesis, the Greek goddess that restores the natural order of things and punishes humans guilty of hubris — which is the case of Serena of course. According to John Lang, Jacob killing Serena in the end is also an act of revenge which is reminiscent of the Bible: “The novel’s italicized coda, set in October 1975, records an act of retribution consistent with the biblical motif of divine judgement and punishment of evildoers.<sup>463</sup>” Jacob’s final act of retribution also echoes *Serena*’s status as an eco-fiction. Since Jacob was born and upbrought in Appalachia, him killing Serena comes to embody the retribution of Rash’s spirit country, the place where everything has started. Before she left Appalachia, Rachel reminds baby Jacob of his roots by engaging in a kind ritual:

Rachel kneeled beside Jacob. She took the child’s hand and pressed it to the dirt. Her father had told Rachel that Harmons had been on this land since the before the Revolutionary War. “Don’t ever forget what it feels like, Jacob,” she whispered, and let her hand touch the ground as well.<sup>464</sup>

Rachel is heartbroken since she has to leave a land that her ancestors have lived in for centuries. When baby Jacob touches the land, he establishes a spiritual connection with the place so that even if he leaves, he will still remember his heritage. This reinforces the idea that, at the end of the novel, Jacob has avenged his birthplace for the destruction of a land and the sufferings of its inhabitants.

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<sup>463</sup> Lang, John. *Understanding Ron Rash. op.cit.*

<sup>464</sup> Rash, Ron. *Serena. op.cit.* p.272.

### 3.3. Poetics of Resistance

The fictional dramatization of trans-local forces destroying an entire place — its natural landscapes and human culture — becomes an act of resistance of the author. On the first level, the novel is meant to be a denunciation of outside forces who have constantly plundered Appalachia throughout history, destroyed its landscapes and mistreated its population. But it also becomes the revelation of the hidden face of our current capitalistic economy and a universal manifesto in favor of a more sensible use of the land and respect towards human life. By writing *Serena*, Rash has captured the essence of resistance for fiction has always been a subtle way to show the injustice inherent to human and natural history.

#### 3.3.1. A Historical Novel

The events taking place in *Serena* resonate in three different time zones. They are obviously valid for the period of the Great Depression in Appalachia — a period which becomes a leitmotiv in Appalachian history and has a worldwide appeal as well, a universality characteristic of the greatest pieces of literature. Rash's favorite quote when it comes to explaining why he sets most of his works in the past is from Kierkegaard: "This backward movement is a forward movement, in so far as going backward is going deeper into something."<sup>465</sup>

*Serena* is a historical novel. As such, the novel is deeply grounded in Appalachia in the era of the Great Depression. It conveys the spirit of the era with great fidelity. As a background for the human drama, Rash chose the great historical event that is the creation of the Great Smoky Mountain National Park. The novel contains a mixture of fictional characters and historical figures such as Horace Kephart, Secretary Albright or the Cecil's of Ashville. Everything from the past is recreated with great accuracy such as the language, the social conditions and even the smallest details such as clothes, furniture or the worker's equipment. John Lang says in *Understanding Ron Rash* that "Rash's intricate knowledge of the tools and equipment of the logging industry, as well as the fatal occupational hazards the men confront, imbues the book with gritty realism, a vividness and authenticity that testify to the author's extensive historical research"<sup>466</sup>. As John Lang says, Rash took the habit that consists in doing research before writing a novel. In *Serena*, even the most unbelievable situation, such as Serena

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<sup>465</sup> Lang, John. "The Power of Blood-Memory" *op.cit.* p.347.

<sup>466</sup> Lang, John. *Understanding Ron Rash. op.cit.* p.90.

hunting the rattlesnakes with her eagle, is actually the product of the author's personal research. In an interview, Rash says that he has met a trainer who confirmed that Serena could hunt rattlesnakes with an eagle, and that it would still be realistic:

I do a huge amount of research. I love to meet people who actually do what I'm writing about. For Serena I actually found one of twelve people in the United States who hunt with an eagle. He was very helpful in my understanding of how you would train an eagle to hunt rattlesnakes, the first person to say "Yes, you could do that."<sup>467</sup>

Research is essential in the making of a good historical novel because it confers the novel with realism. If the past is recreated with great accuracy, it is for the reader to remember what happened, especially since Rash knows that "memory is illusory and denies the reality of all which is lost"<sup>468</sup>. Rash records a whole world dying at this crucial time of the Great Depression: he mentions plant and animal species that have disappeared, or brings back to life Appalachian traditions long gone, as well as capturing the spirit of rurality that has now been replaced by urban life. His role is that of a witness who recaptures the life of a time and a place. If the obvious reason for this backward movement along the timeline is the urge to remember, the second one might be the denunciation of a reality which cannot be reduced, and is not only relevant to the 1920's.

It is not because historical novels take place in the past that their meaning is of no consequence for the present. On the contrary, the best historical novels use the past in order to talk about a phenomenon contemporary to the time the novel has been written. As Rash says himself: "That backward look is an important dimension of Appalachian writing because it demonstrates a sense of history, a sense that what has happened before may happen again. We have a country which needs a lesson right now, a sense of history"<sup>469</sup>. Rash goes against the human propensity to solely take into account the present for he knows that "we live in a culture that doesn't value an understanding of the past"<sup>470</sup>. For the author, the past is of great importance because it can shed light on actual events. *Serena* can thus be seen, among other things, as a denunciation of the numerous corporations that have come to Appalachia to extract natural resources and impoverish its residents. If Rash has chosen this specific time for his novel it is because he is conscious of a pattern that repeats itself throughout history. Foreign companies have been plundering his birthplace ever since the Great Depression and even before, as soon

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<sup>467</sup> Clepton, Miller. *op.cit.* p.133.

<sup>468</sup> Lang, John. « The Power of Blood-Memory » *op.cit.* p.347.

<sup>469</sup> Lang, John. *Understanding Ron Rash. op.cit.* p.57.

<sup>470</sup> Lang, John. « The Power of Blood-Memory » *op.cit.* p.347.

as the 1880's. Joyce Compton Brown is very conscious of Rash's desire to pinpoint an Appalachian problem and he says in his article that "Rash takes us to the thirties near Waynesville, North Carolina, reminding us all the while of other destroyer-takers who have come and gone from Appalachia, the absentee landlords of mill villages, the coal company collusions, the railroads built to carry resources, not people, still carrying and burning Appalachia, the chip mills, the dead railroad depots<sup>471</sup>". Nowadays, Appalachia still remains in the hands of absentee foreign extractive companies. When Robert Birnbaum asked Rash if Appalachia was "at risk from industrial assault<sup>472</sup>", he responded that "(they) have to worry about that more than anything<sup>473</sup>". Extractive companies are detrimental to Appalachia for multiple reasons: they own a large amount of land that is taken from the Appalachian community, create unemployment because the jobs they provide are precarious and they scar and pollute the Appalachian landscape — facts that are already present at the time *Serena* takes place. If in the 1920's the solution was to build a National Park, organizations have been created since to overcome this invasion and continue to spread awareness nowadays. As an example, the 1994 Central Appalachian Network's purpose is to build a sustainable economy in the Appalachian Mountains. As for The Woodland Community Land Trust, it was created in 1979 to advocate for community ownership and to try to recover Appalachian land.

*Serena* talks about events that happened in the past but that still resonate throughout Appalachian history. However, if what happened in Haywood county in the 1920's is a constant in Appalachian history, it also makes sense on the scale of human history. The best pieces of literature are those who make us apprehend the universal through the particular. Rash wishes he achieves that in writing his novels and says: "By writing about a particular place, I also hope I'm writing about all other places as well.<sup>474</sup>" Indeed, *Serena*'s particular events have been taking place throughout history and are still happening today. As Joyce Compton Brown says, *Serena* "offers relevance to the saga of robber barons of any age and place<sup>475</sup>". As it specifically echoes the history of America, when robber barons were exploiting the land during the western conquest, *Serena*'s story also exemplifies the timeless phenomenon of colonialism. For example, the Appalachians being dispossessed is reminiscent of the Highland Clearances, when scots had to make place for cattle under English domination. If the story of *Serena* has been repeating itself throughout history, it may as well be relevant to analyze our present time. This is the

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<sup>471</sup> Brown, Joyce Compton. *op.cit.* p.63.

<sup>472</sup> Clexton, Miller. *op.cit.* p.60.

<sup>473</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>474</sup> *Ibid.* p.111.

<sup>475</sup> Brown, Joyce Compton. *op.cit.* p.61.

opinion of Joyce Compton Brown who adds that *Serena* is “clearly addressing our own time of greed run amuck<sup>476</sup>”. At a larger scale, the novel exemplifies what Northern countries are inflicting to Southern countries: how North America plunders South America or how Europe and China invade Africa. What is striking is that what happened in Appalachia in the 1920’s is still happening nowadays, including the pattern of foreign companies enslaving an entire fragile population. The ruthlessness with which the foreigners treat the natives is exemplified by the character of Serena, who does not hesitate to murder people to establish her domination. Contemporary capitalism uses the same argument as Wilkie to establish its dominion — an argument which consists in saying that it provides jobs for the dominated: “Be grateful your congregation has work when so many don’t.<sup>477</sup>” There is also the same compliance of the natives who willfully work for the foreign companies: “Men seeking work came to the camp in a steady procession now.<sup>478</sup>” Even if the workers are not paid enough, it is still improving their lives and they comply because they have poor living conditions. Whatever the significance we give to the novel *Serena*, it remains in any case a strong denunciation of the capitalistic economy which is blind to the sufferings of the land and the people.

### 3.3.2. An Environmentalist Plea

*Serena* functions as an environmentalist plea on many levels: it raises awareness of the past struggles that have led to the creation of the Great Smoky Mountain National Park, it denounces the numerous environmental catastrophes that have been happening in Appalachia and raises the ontological question of man’s relationship with the land. The clear-cutting of the forests in the Haywood and Jackson Counties in the 1920’s has a universal appeal and echoes contemporary environmental disasters — even more so in our modern world and its sense of ecological urgency, a world where the damage to the environment has never been so great, now that Pemberton’s dreams have come true that “someday soon there’d be a poison to eradicate such valueless trees and shrubs and make it easier to cut and haul out hardwoods<sup>479</sup>”.

In 2005, when he was asked by Robert Birnbaum which issues preoccupied him the most, Rash replied: “I am certainly concerned with environmental issues, but at the same time you have to be very careful because if you are too didactic that can kill a novel.<sup>480</sup>” In 2006, to

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<sup>476</sup> Brown, Joyce Compton. *op.cit.* p.61.

<sup>477</sup> Rash, Ron. *Serena. op.cit.* p.134.

<sup>478</sup> *Ibid.* p.199.

<sup>479</sup> *Ibid.* p.231.

<sup>480</sup> Clepton, Miller. *op.cit.* p.59.

Karen Spears Zacharias' question "Do you consider yourself an environmental champion?" Rash responds in the affirmative: "it is an important issue to me"<sup>481</sup>." Rash's preoccupation for the environment is indeed already present in the origins of his work. Whereas the background for Rash's first novel *One Foot in Eden* (2002) is the artificial flooding of the Jocassee Valley, an environmental debate is at the center of *Saints at the River* (2004): whether to build a dam or not to retrieve a young girl's body in the Tamassee River — a river protected by law — knowing that the family would do anything to bury their daughter while environmentalists categorically refuse, since a breach of the law would possibly open the river to all sorts of industrial dangers. With *Serena*, Rash furthers his environmentalist stance by putting the destruction of nature at the core of his novel.

"If you are too didactic that can kill a novel"<sup>482</sup>" Rash said to Robert Birnbaum. Rash obviously avoids didacticism in his novel *Serena* — never is it said explicitly that clear-cutting is bad. Rash's worst nightmare is if his novels were to read like propaganda. He prefers to compare his role as an author as that of a witness: "What I hope to do, instead of telling my reader what to think, is to *show* the reader. I think my role is more that of a witness. I show what happened."<sup>483</sup> Being a "witness" to events is not a way for Rash to say that he is being totally objective, on the contrary. Even though the novel is not didactic by any means, it nonetheless actively produces politically oriented meaning, especially during the act of reading. Rash is very conscious he uses devices that are meant to act upon the reader's mind and create an immediate reaction. As an example, when Rash describes nature, he depicts a tree as a suffering human being: "the cross-cut saw resumed, the blade's rapid back-and-forth like inhalations and exhalations, a sound as if the tree itself were panting."<sup>484</sup> The two literary devices used here are anthropomorphism and pathos. Rash makes of the tree a suffering human being for the reader to identify with the tree. This identification makes the reader feel pity and then indignation. In the end, he has realized how barbarous and murderous clear-cutting is. Rash thus uses the emotions of the reader to prove a point, without ever crossing the line that would make his novel didactic. Another example would be when Preacher McIntyre says "I think this is what the end of the world will be like"<sup>485</sup>. Rash uses the apocalyptic trope which is, according to environmental critic Lawrence Buell, "the single most powerful master metaphor that the

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<sup>481</sup> Clepton, Miller. *op.cit.* p.67-68.

<sup>482</sup> *Ibid.* p.59.

<sup>483</sup> *Ibid.* p.134.

<sup>484</sup> Rash, Ron. *Serena. op.cit.* p.111.

<sup>485</sup> *Ibid.* p.336.

contemporary environmental imagination has at its disposal<sup>486</sup>. The vision of the end of the world has a great impact on the reader who has no other choice but to imagine the utter annihilation of everything that is dear to him, all because of human foolishness. The essence of *Serena* as a literary work differs from the mere objective description of history. Rash's use of literary devices and images makes the reader *feel* that nature is valuable and ought to be preserved.

Ron Rash's *Serena* is a deeply Appalachian work because it centers on man's relationship with the environment. Moreover, it shows rather explicitly the utter annihilation of every living thing that was part of an Appalachian biosphere in the 1920's. The environmental disaster described throughout the novel and which reaches its climax in chapter thirty-five, with the use of the image of the apocalypse, is reminiscent of Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* or Ann Pancake's *Strange As This Weather Has Been* which also both feature apocalyptic natural disasters set in Appalachia. But Rash's originality resides in *Serena's* hybridity of genre. It is true that as an eco-fiction, it focuses on the destruction of the landscape. But as a pastoral, the novel describes the feelings nature's beauty conveys, mostly through the character of Rachel. The two different genres complement each other as *Serena* becomes an efficient environmentalist plea. On the one hand, Rash incorporates the old feeling of nature and shows the intrinsic value of nature for human beings. On the other hand, he depicts nature as a dying entity destructed by the hands of the humans themselves. This produces an aporia in the mind of the reader as the inconceivable has become possible. If *Serena* were to raise one question it would be: how can humans destroy something that has so much value for them? The two genres are more than compatible, they come to highlight each other mutually: the looming presence of an enchanted past reveals the flaws of an already unbearable present and as the beauty of nature is put alongside its demise, the sense of loss becomes even more tragic to the eyes of the reader.

As *Serena* shows, the lumbermen hold the honor of being the first large-scale despoilers of Appalachia. But since then, mountaintop removal or strip mining, a radical form of surface mining, has started on a big scale in Appalachia in the 1950's. *Serena's* description of a past environmental catastrophe thus echoes this new kind of evil that plagues Appalachia nowadays. Mountaintop removal consists in blowing up entire mountains to extract a relatively thin seam of coal. The consequences on the environment are unprecedented. The debris of strip-mining (top soil, dirt, rocks and trees) are pushed into the valleys, burying trees and animals, poisoning the streams and crushing houses on the lower slopes. This is known as "valley fills". As in

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<sup>486</sup> Garrard, Greg. *Ecocriticism*. London; New York: Routledge, 2012.

*Serena*, the profit of strip mining goes to foreign companies whereas the habitat of the locals is destroyed. The excuse that consists in saying that people need jobs can no longer be applied here, because mountaintop removal does not require as many employees as deep mining or traditional mining due to mechanization. The clear-cutting of the forests in *Serena* stands for the countless enterprises that have been degrading the Appalachian environment. If environmental injustice still thrives in Appalachia and if Rash probably had strip mining in mind when he was writing *Serena*, the novel mostly exemplifies the timelessness of human's destructiveness towards nature. Denton Loving says in a review of the *Appalachian Journal* that the depiction of the "destruction of the natural world is the universal strength of Rash's novel"<sup>487</sup>. The novel thus opens a debate on how humans should treat their environment no matter the place or time. Rash is very conscious that his novel raises timeless environmental issues:

Oh, I think it's very much about the questions we are asking today around environmental issues: whether we want to drill in the Arctic, the questions of power and who has it and what can be done with it. Because it's about the Smoky Mountains National Park, it reflects a common fight between people as far as how land should be used. Actually, when I was writing the book three years ago, I felt I was writing more about today than 1929 or 1930.<sup>488</sup>

In this interview with Marann Mincey, Rash develops the idea that even if his fiction is specific to a time and a place, it should nonetheless be envisioned with a broader perspective. According to him, *Serena* is more than relevant to apprehend what is happening in our contemporary times. As readers and citizens of the world, we are all concerned by the ontological question of man's relationship with the land. Rash understood that and created a novel that would resonate enough to encapsulate multiple realities, all in favor of a more sensible use of the land.

### **3.3.3. A Manifesto in Favor of Appalachia**

Ron Rash's *Serena* can be seen as a product of Appalachia for Appalachia and the fact that it has become more than that, as I have shown earlier, is also beneficial for the region. By subverting the stereotypes the foreigners have about the natives of the region, Rash inverts the power play at stake between those two categories and creates a new vision of Appalachia nationwide. The novel conjures up a place in its smallest details to the reader's mind, and ultimately raises awareness about the Appalachian problem. The representation of a hopeless

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<sup>487</sup> Beilfuss, Michael J. *op.cit.* p.384.

<sup>488</sup> Clextton, Miller. *op.cit.* p.112.



Appalachia at the hands of the Pembertons echoes its contemporary fragility, a fragility Rash intends to mitigate through his fiction. As the Great Smoky Mountains National Park was in great danger under the Bush administration, at the time of the creation of *Serena*, the novel was designed as a last shield against contemporary greedy global forces.

“The South continues to be a sacrifice zone<sup>489</sup>” says Michael Beilfuss in his article *Rootedness and Mobility*. This sentence shows how *Serena*, even if it depicts a past colonial enterprise, still functions for a contemporary reality. Rash creating a novel about an environmental disaster in Appalachia is a huge political statement in itself. As Michael Beilfuss says, “the literary and cultural dismissal of the South (as provincial, “mere local color,” backward) — whether real or imagined — aligns with a tradition of environmental disregard, or even degradation of the southern landscape<sup>490</sup>”. *Serena* overtly reads as an Appalachian novel and takes the risk of being branded as “local color”, a label which is often used to dismiss the work of Southern authors. As it focuses on the environmental injustice that plagues Appalachia, it takes the risk of being reduced to its political denunciation. However, *Serena* is more than a mere political denunciation and a provincial novel: its resonance in the United-States and worldwide, with a readership that keeps increasing, has proven that Rash has countered all the odds that were against him. With *Serena*, Rash has become the voice of a sacrificed region.

Rash has seen the emergence of the Appalachian Renaissance, a movement that began in the 1970’s and that consists in a scholarly, literary and cultural reinvention of Appalachia through the creation of a new discourse, mostly carried out by natives of the region. From the 1970’s onwards, on the Appalachian literary scene, authors have begun to question the image of a backward Appalachia — an image which foreigners had spread for centuries. To do so, Appalachian authors dramatized the economical domination and cultural destruction of their region by outside forces. Rash is the heir of what has become a literary topos in Appalachian literature. Furthermore, Rash’s *Serena* clearly exemplifies the thesis of Helen Lewis, the “grandmother of Appalachian studies”, that sees Appalachia as an “internal colony” of the United-States which is economically exploited, politically dominated and culturally denigrated. *Serena* is a novel that is typical from its region. As it transcends Appalachia and has become at least an American novel, at best a part of the literary heritage of mankind, it awakens consciousness about a region worldwide.

To understand the impact of *Serena* for Appalachia, one must take into account the image of Appalachians in the American collective consciousness. According to Stephen L.

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<sup>489</sup> Beilfuss, Michael J. *op.cit.* p.379.

<sup>490</sup> *Ibid.* p.378.

Fisher, “Appalachians are generally viewed as backward, unintelligent, fatalistic, and quiescent people who are complicit in their own oppression. But, at the same time, these « submissive » mountaineers are seen as among the most vicious and violent people in the United States<sup>491</sup>”. Rash, through his fiction, debunks the hillbilly stereotype and restores the image of a true Appalachia, one that tends to mirror reality. Rash never truly yields into idealization as he does not describe Appalachia before the coming of the outsiders as a garden of Eden nor does he hesitate to depict the region’s violence, poverty and environmental distress. The novel questions the power play between Appalachians and Americans by showing that the true violence that plagues Appalachia does not come from the Appalachians themselves but from the outsiders who use the place and its people as if they were mere objects whose life did not matter, all for the sake of the economy. As for the loggers of Snipe’s crew, they are the opposite of complicit of their own oppression as I have shown in the chapter “Collective Resistance”. Even if they have willingly destroyed their own natural surroundings, they are very conscious they have made a mistake and even discuss the reason which has led to this tragedy: “We had to feed our families<sup>492</sup>”, Henryson says at the end of the novel. What strikes the most may be their exemplarity, which was already noticed by John Lang when he says that “the chorus of loggers helps to illustrate Rash’s belief that Appalachia and Appalachians have much to teach those from outside the region<sup>493</sup>”. By subverting the traditional power play between Appalachia and America, Rash elaborates a true political manifesto in favor of his region.

Rash’s aim — reconstructing Appalachia in the 1920’s as intimately as possible — is a double act of resistance. By recording the events that happened in the past, Rash is resisting against the erasure of time. By conjuring up an entire place to the eyes of the reader, its peculiar landscapes and exotic human customs, Rash raises awareness about an entire region worldwide. He dramatizes the Appalachian problem, a region torn between the agrarian model of production which is meant to disappear and the capitalistic model of production which scars the landscape and enslaves the locals. Rash just exposes the problem as no solution can be found in his novel for the future of Appalachia. Besides, the region is represented as doomed no matter its choices. Numerous descriptions of abandoned farmhouses show that Appalachians are fleeing the region. Rachel, whose ancestors have lived in Appalachia since the Revolutionary War, has no other choice but to escape to continue living her life. Rachel moving to Seattle at the end of the novel can be seen as a final act of resistance, as Stephen L. Fisher qualifies

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<sup>491</sup> Fisher, Stephen L. *op.cit.*

<sup>492</sup> Rash, Ron. Serena. *op.cit.* p.335.

<sup>493</sup> Lang, John. *Understanding Ron Rash. op.cit.* p.92.

“migration<sup>494</sup>” as one of the forms of protest against the foreign oppressor in *Fighting Back in Appalachia: Traditions of Resistance and Change*. Indeed, Appalachian emigration is a reality Rash wanted to question. The late opening of the region to the rest of the country has brought many changes which can be either seen as positive or negative, but this is not the point. What will happen to central Appalachia if its native residents keep leaving the place? Rash shows that under the terms of “progress” and “modernization”, Appalachians’ lives are at stake. The national interest for resources is one thing, but it exists at the expense of a place and its population.

The struggles for the creation of the Great Smoky Mountains National Park is at the core of Rash’s novel. If he chose that subject matter it is because he knows the park is artificial and there is always a risk that what happened in the past may happen again. What motivated him in writing *Serena* was the possible re-opening of the park to logging activities. He explains in an interview with Christophe Dupuis how his worst fears were about to come true at the time he was writing *Serena*:

The Bush Administration was about to ruin it all since [George W. Bush] wanted, just like *Serena* and her husband, to put an end to national parks, the importance of which he did not see. At the time I was writing *Serena*, Bush appeared to be so determined to destroy it all that I was truly afraid he would do it. But, fortunately, people managed to stop his project.<sup>495</sup>

The struggles that led to the creation of the park in *Serena* reflect its contemporary fragility for there will always be global forces who are willing to end it all. As greed will always exist, *Serena* can be read as a last bastion to safeguard the park and thus become a political manifesto in favor of Appalachia.

The chapter “Politics of place” envisioned the Appalachian Mountains as a place where power imbalances are at stake. In the novel, the Pembertons’ aggression towards the place is minimized by a fierce resistance which is carried out by the mountain itself or its inhabitants, the Appalachian characters. The intradiegetic resistance against alien forces echoes the author’s resistance, through the act of creation, to the constant mistreatment of his birth place. Indeed, Appalachia is still being plundered by foreign companies, some getting involved in mountain top removal, an activity that not only destroys the mountains but chases away the locals and

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<sup>494</sup> Fisher, Stephen L. *op.cit.*

<sup>495</sup> Clepton, Miller. *op.cit.* p.112.

irremediably pollute the environment. What Rash denounces in *Serena* is a “policy of profit and human loss<sup>496</sup>” as Marie-Christine Agosto says in her study of Rash’s fiction. This denunciation is more than needed today. Our contemporary societies may be consumerist societies of opulence thanks to capitalism but Rash exposes the cost of this way of life, which is usually hidden from view: the utter annihilation of plant and animal life, the enslavement of entire populations.

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<sup>496</sup> Agosto, Marie-Christine. *op.cit.* p.66.

## Conclusion

What first appeared to be a contradiction — that critics see Rash either as a mere objective witness to Appalachian history or a voice for the Appalachian minority, the hillbillies — is in fact possible logically since *Serena* is so rich that it enables both interpretations. However, it would be more accurate to say that one interpretation leads to the other. It is only because Rash acts as a witness who reconstructs Appalachia as intimately and realistically as possible that he has become the voice for a people and a region. Indeed, it is because of the Appalachian Mountains' status as an isolated, ignored and plundered region of the United-States, whose inhabitants are seen as backwards and violent, that makes Rash realism even more necessary in the re-establishment of the truth — a role which is ironical for an author of fiction that essentially makes up stories. The simple description of a place shaped by trans-local entities has thus become a manifesto in favor of Appalachia.

In *Serena*, the mountains and the Appalachian characters, who are the soul of the Haywood and Jackson Counties, are falling prey to global forces: on the one hand, the mountain is utterly annihilated and has become, under Rash's pen, a gigantic suffering being as if it were a wounded human, on the other hand, the Appalachians characters are either reduced to cheap replaceable manpower or displaced from their ancestral homes to make way for the national park. As such, the Appalachian ecosystem where man and nature depended on each other can no longer exist. Rash not only describes the clear-cutting of the trees but shows a whole world dying since the destruction of nature by extractive companies and the creation of the national park correlates with the emigration of the mountaineers: "No longer able to range hogs and cattle in the woodland commons, trap fish in free-flowing streams, or gather chestnuts on the hillsides, the rural mountaineers turned increasingly to mill towns and urban centers for economic salvation."<sup>497</sup> The use of the apocalyptic trope at the end of the novel also conveys this idea that an entire world has disappeared.

As I have shown, the end of the novel is synonymous of utter destruction for the place but, for the two main characters, it is synonymous of new beginnings as they both achieve in leaving, Serena because she had "no apples left to pluck" and Rachel because she had to flee to survive. These two main characters embody the binary opposition on which the novel is constructed. Two distinct worldviews clash within the Appalachian Mountains: the modern imperial attitude towards the place, which is embodied by foreigner Serena, who does not

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<sup>497</sup> Davis, Donald Edward. *op.cit.*

hesitate to destroy nature or murder people to make her daily profit, cannot be reconciled with the traditional way of inhabiting the place which can be seen in Rachel's symbiotic relationship with her home-place — a relationship that involves a profound respect for the past and the ability to see the inner beauties of the native land. One worldview imposes itself at the expense of the other and rugged capitalism has destroyed the place and chased away its inhabitants — annihilating all sense of place. Between the novel's two worldviews, Rash has a particular fondness for Rachel's pastoral world — a world that has become more than a mere motif for his work, but the sign of a moral obligation to depict the customs and habits that are irremediably fading from the surface of the earth. As he also fictionalizes a colonial situation, Rash emphasizes the socio-economic differences between the workers and the Bostonian entrepreneurs and the cultural othering of the natives by the outsiders, further proving the incompatibility of the two worldviews. None of these worldviews are envisioned for the future of Appalachia which makes the novel purely aporetic as far as the place is concerned: Serena's short capitalistic venture was not meant to last as she relocates in Brazil, leaving a destructed Appalachia, and Rachel has to escape to survive, her situation echoing the emigration of the other Appalachian characters in the novel but also the extra-diegetic emigration of the mountain population in the last decades. Rash rightfully depicts Appalachia as a place people have come to flee, all because of global forces who do not take into account the life of its native residents in the first place.

Even if the future of Appalachia seems to be doomed in the novel, the Appalachian characters and the mountain itself are still represented as resisting to their aggression. This vision subverts the usual stereotype that consists in seeing the Appalachians as a docile workforce and the Southern landscape as a dumpster companies can pollute with impunity. On the contrary, Rash shows that behind the national interest for natural resources, the life of nature and people are at stake. But *Serena* is more than a mere environmentalist plea; it functions as a warning for humans who are not aware that they are inextricably linked to the natural world. The novel, through the playful form of fiction, exemplifies the harsh maxim Wendell Berry pointed out as soon as 1987: "A culture that does not measure itself by nature, by an understanding of its debts to nature, becomes destructive of nature and thus of itself."<sup>498</sup> The destruction of nature indeed echoes the destruction of culture in the novel. Rash ultimately denounces a "policy of profit and human loss"<sup>499</sup> which is certainly applicable to the Haywood and Jackson Counties in the 1920's, but also echoes the constant invasion of Appalachia by

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<sup>498</sup> Berry, Wendell. *op.cit.* p.144.

<sup>499</sup> Agosto, Marie-Christine. *op.cit.* p.66.

foreign companies. This denunciation is more than needed in our contemporary societies — a fact that makes of Rash more than a witness of events that can be considered as over or relevant to only one place but an actual visionary who shows the unfortunate reality that has plagued the world since the advent of capitalism. Michael Beilfuss says that *Serena* suggests that “a regional, local focus can in fact function as an antidote to the actions and ontology of a powerful global elite<sup>500</sup>”. It is also through the local focus that Rash has achieved in making a manifesto in favor of Appalachia and denounces its past and present sufferings.

Frederique Spill has published an interesting article about the intertextuality between *Serena* and *Macbeth*. Even if this study of place has enabled the analysis of many aspects of the novel, there is still room for other studies: it could take the form of a literary and stylistic analysis of the metaphor, a generic analysis of the poetic and the detective or even a cultural analysis discussing tradition and modernity in Ron Rash’s *Serena*.

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<sup>500</sup> Beilfuss, Michael J. *op.cit.* p.393.





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