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# Divergent Worldviews in Ron Rash's "Serena"

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Divergent Worldviews in Ron Rash's *Serena*

by

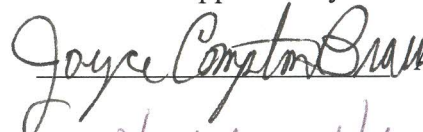
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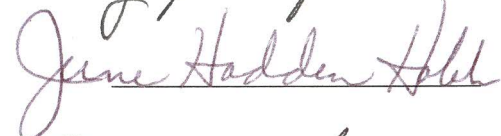
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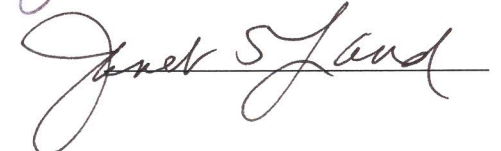
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## Abstract

Ron Rash, through *Serena*, captures the often misunderstood complex nature of the Appalachian people in the early twentieth century and the effects of human centered environmental changes on this culture and natural landscape. The focus of this analysis involves viewing *Serena* through the lens of ecofeminism and introducing Rash's vision of the important interrelationship between landscape and culture, particularly in light of the historical outsider vision and its impact upon the people of Appalachia.

The culture and natural environment of the Appalachian people are revealed through the gazes of the characters. Through the fictional viewpoints in *Serena*, Rash creates a microcosm of humanity, reflecting varying intellectual and spiritual responses to the natural world. Erasure of boundaries between humankind and the environment as well as traditional gender roles occurs repeatedly throughout *Serena* as the reader follows the sightline of the characters. *Serena* offers particular emphasis on both parallel and dichotomous viewpoints of two women, Rachel and Serena.

Brenda D. Stephens

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Divergent Worldviews in Ron Rash's *Serena*

Ron Rash, through *Serena*, captures the often misunderstood complex nature of the Appalachian people in the early twentieth century and the effects of man-made environmental changes on this culture and natural landscape. In this novel, the contrasting impetus or cultural perception of individuals ignites complex interplay between characters and the natural environment. The narrative conflicts mirror Rash's view of historical events during the lumber boom of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, as well as contemporary environmental issues. Two women, Rachel and Serena, permeate the novel exhibiting uncanny physical strength and inner drive for survival; however, Rachel, a native of Appalachia, forms a symbiosis with the landscape and the people she encounters while Serena, an outsider, is a wielder of death and destruction to both man and nature. Serena, along with her husband Pemberton, is an icon of a timber baron tearing down the landscape that is home to Rachel and the other inhabitants of the Appalachian Mountains. This surface observation reveals stark contrast in these women; however, Rash chooses to bind these women together, each reflecting back towards the other. As these characters clash yet intertwine, Rash focuses the reader on their sightlines. Serena stares through the darkness of a barn with "her grey eyes glassy as marbles" as she comments on

the power of her trained eagle that “takes not just the earth but the sky to contain it”(88). Serena, like her eagle, cannot be contained by human means, and her gaze on the world is cold, calculated, and heartless. In contrast to Serena, Rachel’s vision focuses on the beauty and mystic of the natural world. Rachel gazes into a dark barn searching for an animal, but instead of harboring an eagle, she prizes an old horse named Dan her father had bought the year before Rachel was born. She envisions the path she and Dan will take by the Pigeon River, “narrowed by sprawling poke stalks that drooped under the weight of their purple berries and goldenrod bright as caught sunshine” (42). Like Rash himself, Rachel’s vision extols the beauty and reciprocal resources of nature rather than viewing nature and non-human beings as entities with power to be harnessed.

The natural landscape permeates the novel as a living, powerful, yet vulnerable entity. This poignant image of the lead chopper sawing a tree illustrates the living quality of the forest: “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” (111). Therefore, landscape and natural creatures are not just backdrops to the action, but a vital part of this tale where life and death are constantly hanging in the balance, with creatures and the natural environment acting as both allies and adversaries to mankind.

### **I. Ecofeminism Defined**

The focus of this analysis will view *Serena* through the lens of ecofeminism and will introduce concepts Rash views as crucial in this novel about Appalachian people, their culture, and natural environment through the gaze of the characters. Danny Miller in *An*

*American Vein* states that a few questions must be posed in an ecofeminist reading: How does the author construct nature and then how does the author's discussion of race, gender, and class intersect with that construction? (343). Miller's definition is a place to begin. However, considering Ron Rash's depth of passion and multifarious themes in this novel, a deeper reflection is necessary. Many branches of ecofemist theory exist, stemming from the early creators of this term. In 1978, William Rueckert first used the term *ecocriticism* in a now famous essay, "Literature and Ecology" (Waage 135). At the same time, in the 1970s the environmental movement began to branch into feminism and to examine gender in male-authored texts. This shift in the environmental movement is reflected in the writing of scholars such as Annette Kolodny and Joseph Meeker (Sarver 106). From the study of gender, the *ecofeminist* movement branched into other relationships between the human and nonhuman world.

A few scholars from the 1970s, such as Sherry Ortner and Gretchen Legler, analyzed culture in relation to nature in defining the male/female/nature relationship. Ortner equates culture with, "the notion of consciousness, or with the products of human consciousness (i.e., systems of thought and technology), by means of which humanity attempts to assert control over nature" (72). Ortner asserts that on a universal level, in every known culture, women are considered inferior to males. Even though cultures are varied in the particular treatment of women, there is a commonality in regards to women viewed as second class citizens. Ortner posits that culture can often give conflicting images or symbols of women as either a goddess or dispenser of salvation or a witch or evil eye (86). One part of Ortner's theory claims that males are analogous to culture while

women are correlative to nature or the natural landscape: “Culture at some level of awareness asserts itself to be not only distinct from but superior to nature, and that sense of distinctiveness and superiority rests precisely on the ability to transform-to ‘socialize’ and ‘culturalize’-nature” (73). According to Ortner, culture creates and defines a value system placed on individuals in society. Instead of considering an egalitarian community, men assume that women, along with nature, need to be governed or controlled by men: “The distinctiveness of culture rests precisely on the fact that it can under most circumstances transcend natural conditions and turn them to its purpose” (73).

Ortner’s theory is reversed in this novel as Serena, a woman, acts as the cultural force as she bends marginalized creatures, nature, and individuals to her will. Therefore, Ortner’s culture verses nature paradigm can be useful in a close reading of *Serena*; however, to truly unravel the complex themes it is essential to build a base on Miller’s questions regarding the construction of nature and characters and expand on this base to consider the far reaching life and death implications. A definition of culture that is useful in an *ecofeminist* analysis focuses on the way humans interpret and perceive artifacts:

Most social scientists today view culture as consisting primarily of the symbolic, ideational, and intangible aspects of human societies. The essence of a culture is not its artifacts, tools, or other tangible cultural elements but how the members of the group interpret, use, and perceive them. (Banks)

Therefore, the life and death struggles in *Serena* center on the sacred or spiritual, but these conflicts are most evident as characters physically engage nature and characters. This spiritual quality is intertwined with profane, manmade logic and reason. This mixing of the sacred and profane evident in *Serena*, negates an ecofeminist approach that looks solely at the traditional culture/nature binary.

Blurring of the sacred and profane in the novel focuses the reader to envision the connectedness in all life forms, human and non-human, a common precept of ecofeminist theory. *Ecofeminist* Ophelia Selam, discusses the alienation of mankind from the natural world and posits *ecofeminists* seek to join these two worlds. Selam states that there must be mutual respect for all beings on the planet, including trees and plants, and a realization that they are all alive (85). Elizabeth Engelhardt, an Appalachian scholar and ecofeminist, in *The Tangled Roots of Feminism, Environmentalism, and Appalachian Literature* further defines *ecofeminism*. Engelhardt portrays ecological feminist theory as assigning complicated identities to humankind, as opposed to other theories which presume the commonality of humankind (4). As Rash depicts the unique and complex qualities of Appalachian people, culture, and natural resources, Engelhardt's definition is applicable. Unlike Engelhardt, Selam does not focus on the unique qualities of individuals; instead, she speaks of groups of people and the natural world as a whole. Selam's views are supported by Susan Griffin, Carolyn Merchant, and Michael Zimmerman, who suggest the nonhuman world needs to be regarded as a living being. Selam expounds on the ideology of the ecofeminist: "Within an ecofeminist perspective, nature does not stand outside of our lives, but



stands at the heart of society (88).” Selam further states, “The ecofeminist practice pushes one outside of oneself, it highlights the presence of anthropocentrism, and includes, without reservation, the notion of ‘nature’ (including animals), within a typical human discourse” (88). Clearly, to regard nature as a living being would necessitate awareness and purging of anthropocentrism as Salem advocates. The exploits and sightlines of Serena, Pemberton, and their associates demonstrate the destructive results of anthropocentrism while Rachel’s encounters and envisioning demonstrate respect for the non-human world.

## **II. Ecofeminism and the Author’s Vision**

I asked Rash about the traditional concept of some ecofeminists who will define ecofeminism in terms of patriarchal versus matriarchal society. According to Charles Bressler, ecofeminism asserts that patriarchal societies are new and that societies were originally matriarchal. In this matriarchal society women were protectors of nature and children, unlike patriarchal societies that dominate women and nature and plunder and destroy our planet (181). I posed the following question to Rash: If one views patriarchal dominance as a society where there is violence, destruction, and a need to control and matriarchal society as nurturing, would you say that Serena has too much of the masculine creating an imbalance with her? Rash’s response:

Sometimes it’s a little too easy to say men are destructive and women aren’t and I think what is interesting about Serena’s situation is here is a woman who has power, and what is she going to do with it? And in a

sense she follows what we traditionally think of as a male way, but I think of as a human way (Personal Interview).

However, as Rash has stated, Serena ultimately estranges herself from humanity because of the way she wields her power. To state that Serena acts in a “human way” instead of a “male way” brings out the concept that she embodies the selfish, cruel, unnatural, qualities present in all human beings. Serena acts on these vicious impulses whereas Rachel, who also possesses these negative qualities of the human condition, suppresses the murderous thoughts she has against Serena. Physically, Serena is genderless in the sense that she cannot conceive and give birth; her female organs can no longer support life. On the outside, physically she is a woman, but she responds in a manner that is not characteristic of women in most traditional American fiction. Serena mirrors and embodies the human fears or forces within the human mind and body that can spiral out of control. In her quest for power, Serena is consumed with the present. The past is of no consequence. Rash, in an interview with Jesse Graves and Randall Wilhelm, says he begins novels with a specific image. Here is his visual inspiration for *Serena*:

The image was of a woman astride a large white horse. I knew from the way she carried herself that she was supremely confident, tall and physically strong. She and the horse were on a ridge crest at dawn. Wisps of fog swirled around the horse’s feet, and the morning sun shone on her blond hair, making it appear her hair had been burnished with gold. I didn’t know who she was or what the image meant. I did know, however,

that someone, someone watching her at that very moment, believed her more a goddess than woman. Eventually, I came to realize that this someone was her husband, and he was viewing her with a mixture of awe, love, and fear.

Several times in the novel the gaze of the characters alludes to Serena as a goddess figure molded to the landscape, evoking awe as well as fear. As Pemberton observes Serena on her Arabian horse, he thinks, “the men ascribed all sorts of powers to Serena, some bordering on the otherworldly” (68). The reader is reminded of the majesty and power of a woman and the natural environment that can either give life or destroy life, major themes in this novel.

In an ecofeminist reading, the views of the author in relation to natural landscape in the text are significant. In an interview with Anna Dunlap Higgins, Rash reflects on the mystical quality of landscape as he describes Aho, a place where he spent his summers as a child: Rash feels that the “mystery of every day, awakened by the landscape itself, was intensified by the Pagan/Christian fusion that is also a part of his southern Appalachian heritage” (Higgins 52). Another way to view these polarizing entities is through the binary lenses of spiritual versus intellectual knowledge. Susan Griffin posits that mankind tends to perceive intellectual knowledge as separate from sensual knowledge and “the spirit as a different realm entirely. The result is henceforth predictable-our experience of the world is fragmented” (*Reweaving the World* 87). Through the fictional viewpoints in *Serena*, Rash creates a microcosm of humanity reflecting varying intellectual and spiritual responses to the natural world.

As the novel progresses there is a strong connection between the author and reader as Rash creates an emotional and disturbing journey. This journey focuses the readers' sightline on the destruction of natural resources and humankind through Rash's eyes. In speaking about ecological fiction in general, ecocritic Don Scheese claims the nonhuman environment is a character both inside and outside the narrative in relation to the author. As the author interacts with this nonhuman environment there is often a shift in the "consciousness of the protagonist from an ego-centered (anthropomorphic) view of the world to an eco-centered (biocentric) perspective" (8-9). However, this expected transformation is not what Rash gives the reader; Serena, the protagonist, grows only more anthropomorphic and remorseless as the story unfolds. Observed in the natural world, Serena is complex; while she is diabolical, she is also revered, like a goddess who has reached into a realm forbidden for humans to enter. As Serena interacts with the nonhuman environment, her goddess-like qualities emerge. A few loggers watch Pemberton, Serena, and Galloway, her henchman, from a distance: "Their vanishing forms appeared to wobble and haze, mirage like. Then they were gone as if consumed by the air itself" (229). As if Serena is a goddess, she has the power to kill mankind at will with no consequences to herself; she seems to transcend human physical bounds. The goddess-like nature of Serena will be further discussed in "Erasing Boundaries" section.

Perception of the natural world as a living being, at the heart of society, is a theme reinforced throughout *Serena*. Therefore the most useful definition of ecofeminism involves closely examining the evidence of nature as a living entity

and recording the role women play in relation to nature, individuals, and the community with a focus on who or what is viewed as powerful and viable by society. To link ecofeminism to a piece of literature requires a close reading of the imagery, diction, and narration in regards to the characters' vision or sightline. Equally significant are the methods the author has chosen to intersect and intertwine characters to each other and to the natural world. Through this process, Rash's view of nature, women, and society as well as his thematic purpose will become apparent.

### **III. Humankind and the Natural Environment**

Interviews with Rash show he opposes ideology which involves a severing of humanity and the natural environment. Creating distinct separations between man and nature creates a culture that destroys whatever interferes with its own created anthropomorphic, unnatural design. Jean Arnold suggests, "If in the past ecocriticism has appeared tangential to mainstream literary criticism, that view expresses the conceptual gap between nature and culture that inhabits our reasoning apparatus" (1090). Arnold elaborates on this point suggesting that if one views culture as created by human beings and therefore separate from nature, the fact that all human culture resides in the natural landscape is lost. All economic worth is created through the resources in the natural world and humankind owes its very existence to these resources (1090). *Serena* exemplifies, through individual characters and plot, Arnold's ideology about culture and nature. According to Rash, the natural world is "the most universal of languages....I don't see how you can ignore your connection to the natural world.

You ignore it at your own peril and society's peril; if you think you can destroy it and it's not going to affect you, you're deluded" (Bjerre 223). In *Serena*, the characters interrelate with the environment and each other; those in power, perceiving themselves as agents to constrain nature, end up oppressing and abusing those in their path. As a result, everyone reaps the consequences of a culture and landscape shattered.

The cold gaze of Serena in the opening scene of the novel depicts the fracture between humankind and nature leading to a dehumanized view of death. Rash's theme of dominance of the industrial over the individual is represented by Serena and her associates' treatment of individuals. Serena, a non-altruistic, ego-centered nemesis, heralds violence and death the moment she enters the Appalachians and grows stronger in her resolve as the novel progresses. As Pemberton and Serena step off of the platform, "Cinders crunched under their feet, made gray wisps like snuffed matches" (11). This image foreshadows what this couple will leave in their wake at the close of the novel; it also reveals Serena and Pemberton are immune to the laws that govern society. As the newly married couple enters the train platform in Waynesville, Harmon and his daughter Rachel, pregnant with Pemberton's child, are waiting. When Harmon challenges Pemberton to a fight, Serena tells him to get his knife out, the one she gives him as a wedding present. Right in front of his daughter, Pemberton proceeds to gore him as if he is an animal. Then Serena offers the knife used to kill Harmon to Rachel who has tears flowing down her face. Seemingly blind to the pain Rachel is experiencing, Serena tells Rachel that she can sell the knife to help provide her

needs when the child is born (10). Rachel does not raise a hand to take the knife, and instantly the reader is sympathetic to her situation and is captivated by her courage and pride. As Rachel defies the wishes of Serena, she begins the transformation from a girl to a woman.

During Rachel's transformation, she is analogous to the natural environment in the path of human-centered industrialization. Rash creates an eerie image of Rachel's adversaries, who represent the power of the industrial over the individual and societal law. Rash speaks about Rachel's transformation as she grows in strength while Serena remains constant: "In a sense you see Serena as not exactly a role model for strong womanhood, but in her own way Rachel shows superb strength" (Brown, "A Mountain Landscape"). Rachel's superb quiet strength is pitted against the ruthless brutal force of Serena and Pemberton.

From the first scene, the ineffectiveness of the law to control this menace to humankind and the natural environment is evident. Pemberton claims the killing of Rachel's father is self defense, and Sheriff McDowell can charge him only with disorderly conduct, fining him ten dollars. Pemberton and Serena continue their killing spree for the next two and a half years. When Serena leaves one night to begin the chase for Rachel and Jacob, she whispers to a confused Pemberton, "just us," but Pemberton later reflects that she could have said "justice." At this point she is not only immune to the law, but she actually becomes the law. In the end a replacement sheriff, paid for by the Pembertons, "serves as a reminder that American capitalism has historically managed to make the law work for the industrial rather than the individual good" (Brown, "Rev. of

Serena” 64). Serena is a complex character who is able to extract submission and awe from individuals with her gaze.

It is the gaze that reveals the intent of the characters toward others and to the natural environment. In the case of Serena, her eyes have an alluring power with her Basilisk-type of killing gaze. She mesmerizes Pemberton: “He gazed at her [Serena’s] body, into her eyes that had entranced him the first time he met her, irises the color of burnished pewter. Eyes that did not close when their flesh came together, pulling him inside her with her gaze as much as her body” (20). Serena’s eyes captivate her victims and are described in the same manner as her eagle’s eyes. Snips, one of the lumbermen says the eagle’s eyes “Don’t blink nor nothing” linking its eyes to Serena’s eyes which also do not close (105). There is a lack of warmth and compassion in the glances of Serena and a cold detachment between her and the world around her. Through Rachel’s eyes the reader views the rich, life-giving qualities of the landscape: “Rachel saw the trees as they walked toward all their fall colors now, their canopy bright and various as a button jar” (78). When Rachel goes into town, the glances of many of the townspeople condemn her, but compassion is found in the eyes of the Sheriff: “Rachel met the Sheriff’s eyes, noting again their unnatural hue. A warm comforting color. She looked for the least hint of judgment in the Sheriff’s gaze and saw none” (45). The Sheriff has the ability to see through people to read their motives and to stand by his convictions.

As characters and the omniscient narrator record the events, Rash establishes the importance of the gaze and vision to his overall themes. Pemberton



looks out of the train window and describes the attire of the men who are waiting, revealing their occupations and personality traits. As he exits the train, it is Buchanan who “caught Pemberton’s eye first” giving him a warning glance toward Harmon and his daughter (5). As Pemberton and Harmon engage in conflict, Harmon’s “blue eyes glared at Pemberton” while Serena’s eyes are described as gray. The blue eyes of Harmon, very alive and full of emotion and love for his daughter, contrast with the cold, hard gray eyes of Serena, with no spark of life. Serena’s gray eyes, suggestive of the grayness of industrialization, link here to the historical, cold calculated, decisions made for the sake of progress and industry during the early twentieth century, resulting in physical, emotional, and cultural death of individuals and a scarring of the natural environment.

Viewing Serena with an *ecofeminist* perspective focuses the reader on her ruthless, obstinate drive to conquer humankind and nature. Rash chooses a female to play this villainous role, a choice which sets this novel apart from most other classic American novels. The obvious contrast between the two main female characters is evident in the descriptions of nature in relation to each of these women and in their responses to life, death, and nature; however, as previously noted, there are some parallels between these women. Women in the Appalachians in the 1900s were typically physically and mentally strong. In traditional Appalachian fiction, women, especially young women “respond to life in a nurturing and preserving way, recoiling from the horrors or the destruction of nature and the taking of life” (Miller, *Wingless Flights* 11). Other Appalachian fiction, such as Harriet Arnow’s *The Dollmaker*, chronicles the strength of

Appalachian women. In the *The Dollmaker*, Gertie is described as having more physical strength, stamina, and perseverance than a male military leader whom she forces to help her in her quest to save her son's life. She stops his vehicle by forcing her mule to carry her and her child into the middle of a paved road directly in front of an approaching car. As the car approaches and swerves off the road, narrowly missing her, Gertie holds her ground. When the officer refuses to give her aid, the life of her child is her focus, and through her tenacious efforts and physical strength, the officer complies with her wishes to take Gertie and her child to a doctor (2-17).

The traditional image of Appalachian women described in Arnow's fiction is evident in Rachel. For instance, Rachel perceives a connection between the events in her life and the natural environment. She hesitates before killing a raccoon that has been stealing the eggs that she and Jacob need to survive. When she sees a spider web amidst the Queen Anne's lace, she decides not to look closely at the web in case it foretells of death. This reaction to details in the natural world is repeated when she sees tadpoles in the stream. The contrast between natural beauty and new life in death foretells the danger that Rachel and Jacob will face; it also sets up the maternal qualities of Rachel. She realizes, "she'd have to protect him [Jacob] because there was nobody else to" (276). Later, Rachel has to protect Jacob in the face of great danger, exhibiting physical strength and moral fortitude.

Serena, an outsider, has the strength and courage of the traditional Appalachian woman; however, her strength and courage do not enrich the lives

and environment that surround her. She does not see or feel the deep connection to people and the natural environment that Rachel does. For instance when Pemberton kills Harmon, Serena wants to know how it felt for him to kill another person. Later she says, "We have both killed now. What you felt at the depot, I've felt too. We're closer than we've ever been before" (278). She views people and nature, even her own family members, as merely resources to be used for her own pleasure. Both women are capable of murderous thoughts; however, Rachel, in contrast to Serena, realizes the value of human life. Rachel treats her dead father and his grave with reverence and respect; she rides for half an hour on her old horse to place a stone on her father's grave. Serena, on the other hand, creates death as she arranges for the killing of many with no remorse. Because Serena is devoid of any human emotion and reverence for the dead, she is succumbing to an animal-like existence. The contrasting visions of these women become clear as they interact with the environment.

What Rash does with these characters is a goal of the *ecofeminist*: "Through this concoction of stories, voices, and language, *ecofeminism* becomes an almost soothing expression of confusion and paradox. It inhabits this paradox and enables the feeling of expression" (Selam 85). Rash creates paradox and confusion with Serena and Rachel who are sometimes mirror reflections of each other. For instance, Rachel sees Serena through the dining hall window; as Serena moves to the woods on her horse, Rachel sees her own reflection in the window. The two women are united in this image, suggesting Rachel is equal to Serena in

power and beauty. At this moment Rachel realizes that she has the desire and ability to kill Serena, but she has chosen not to do so:

She remembered again the afternoon at the train station when Serena Pemberton held the bowie knife by its blade, offering the pearl handle to her. Rachel thought how easily she might have grasped the bowie knife's handle, the blade that had just killed her father pointed at the woman's heart. As Rachel continued to stare at her own reflection, she suddenly wondered if she'd been wrong about having had only one real choice in her life (132).

This moment is a watershed for Rachel and the reader as Rachel finally says to herself, "don't think such a thing that terrible" (132). When the urge to seek justice on her own through taking a life enters her mind, Rachel chooses to respond in a selfless manner, unlike Serena. The mirror image of Serena and Rachel vanishes, and Rachel then goes back to her duties in the kitchen where she discovers that Serena has requested a pot of coffee. The head cook's eyes pass over Rachel, and she selects another woman to complete the task; Serena has instructed that Rachel is not allowed to prepare food or drinks for her or Pemberton, fearing that Rachel might poison their food. Thus, allowing the reader to enter the mind of Rachel, Rash is able to show parallels in the two women and to build on the point that both women have the choice to give life or take life. Together these women embody the paradoxical qualities of humankind.

Traditional boundaries surrounding women are defined and challenged in this novel. The self-sacrificing aspect of Appalachian women clashes with

Serena's hegemony. Horace Kephart a historical figure and a well known proponent of creating a national park in Appalachia is used as a minor character in *Serena*. Kephart spent time in the Appalachian Mountains during the time frame of the novel, the early 1900s. He recorded his observations in the mountains, publishing *Our Southern Highlanders*, now considered a classic in Appalachian studies. Kephart describes an Appalachian woman similar to Serena but without Serena's destructive nature. This woman, known as Long Goody, was six feet three inches tall. She walked eighteen miles across the Smoky Mountains into Tennessee, crossing an elevation of 5,000 feet merely to shop more advantageously there than she could at home. The next day she shouldered fifty pounds of flour and some other groceries and bore them home by nightfall (290). Serena never commits to this sort of self sacrifice. Instead of walking a great distance, prepared to sacrifice her life for someone else, she sits astride her Arabian horse looking down at the workers she has employed. Serena, an outsider, does not possess the humanitarian moral fortitude of the traditional Appalachian woman. In the novel, Serena expresses her anti-altruistic view when referring to the supposed sacrifices Kephart has made in order to preserve the forest: "My experience has been that altruism is invariably a means to conceal one's personal failures" (136). Serena does not extend herself to save someone unless that person is of use to her; her vision is focused on power, viewing humans simply as a way to make a profit. Therefore Serena is set apart from all others in the camp, other worldly and unaffected by the chaos she has created.

Serena exhibits peace and tranquility in the midst of violence and turmoil, but there is a breaking down of barriers that Rash illuminates. Paula Allen posits that the ruling class has serenity: “If they can make the rules for human behavior – in its inner as well as its outer dimensions--they can be tranquil indeed and can focus their attention on reaching nirvanic bliss, transcendence or divine peace and love” (53). Even though Serena is not born to royalty, she acquires this status. Serena is not simply tranquil to achieve “nirvanic bliss.” She is fueled by adversity, becoming stronger as she endures pain to herself or inflicts pain on others; eventually she enters into an unnatural almost inhuman existence. For instance, when Galloway’s hand is cut off, Serena acts quickly to stop the blood and then rides swiftly to the doctor with Galloway in front of her. When she dismounts, the loggers see she is pregnant. Pemberton notices that several of the men, “stared at her stomach in amazement. He suspected the workers thought of Serena as beyond gender, the same as they might some phenomenon of nature such as rain or lightning” (180). Dealing with this adversity, Serena has little emotion and enters a level that is neither male nor female as she calmly takes care of the situation. In this way she is goddess-like, even above mere human royalty.

On another level Serena pushes boundaries as she transcends normal human limitations. She is able to experience unfettered sensual pleasure; Pemberton says Serena is never coy in “coupling,” the term he chooses to express their physical love making. Pemberton’s word choice “coupling” gives their sexual encounters a sterile, scientific, yet animalistic quality. With this diction, Rash creates distance even in this most intimate of human relations. When they

are coupling, there is “a sense of being unshackled into some limitless possibility, limitless though at the same time somehow contained within the two of them” (15). The tension between them is infinite yet clearly grounded in Serena. In *Women and Nature*, Susan Griffin states, “The old texts read that where there is death there too is sexual coupling and where there is no death there is no sexual coupling either” (13). Death is a part of the human world where Serena and Pemberton reside, and in this act where creation of life can occur, there is a reminder of death. Serena describes their coupling as “a kind of annihilation” and Pemberton agrees with her words (20). In this statement death and life, violence and rebirth, merge.

The qualities of the human condition Rash addresses through the gaze of the characters, covers the full range of the best and worst in humankind. Allen suggests the sort of peace and tranquility the ruling class acquires from enslaving the masses is not what our planet needs; instead mankind must fully embrace every facet of the human form: “frail and fragile, strong and passionate, neurotic and balanced, diseased and whole, partial and complete, stingy and generous, safe and dangerous, twisted and straight, storm tossed and quiescent, bound and free” (57). Allen’s list of human qualities can be applied to *Serena* as Rash demonstrates the paradox of the human condition. Throughout this novel those who initially appear frail and fragile are eventually valued for their hidden strength.

Rachel, who appears frail and fragile, is eventually revealed as strong and passionate. Sheriff McDowell realizes that Serena will send Galloway to kill

Rachel and Jacob. McDowell moves Rachel and Jacob to Kingsport, a nearby town, to stay with a relative of his, Lena Sloan (274). When Rachel sees Galloway at the train station asking about her, she hides until Galloway is out of sight and then quickly purchases a train ticket. She thinks they are safe on the train until Galloway strives to enter the train car they are in. Rachel hits Galloway in the face with a sock containing a toy train and then shoves him out of the train with the heel of her boot against his forehead (312). Instead of the shy young girl at the beginning of the novel, Rachel exhibits strength and ingenuity.

Serena, on the other hand, who appears to have superhuman strength, devoid of emotion, at times exhibits weakness. When Pemberton is almost killed by a bear, she appears to shed a tear: "Pemberton watched as tears welled up in Serena's eyes" (73). However, after her miscarriage she leaves the hospital "sooner than the doctor's or Pemberton wished" and she begins working even from her sickbed (213-15). Serena and Rachel encompass both spheres of the human condition: neurotic and balanced, diseased and whole, partial and complete, bound and free. However, Serena dismisses her frailty and weakness, viewing her inability to have an heir as insignificant. Rash again shatters the traditional preconceived notions about women and gender roles. Both Serena and Rachel are complex individuals with ambiguous personas. They each have the capacity to break through any physical or societal barriers to achieve their goals.

Examination of Serena's eyes indicates that she does not tolerate frailness or weakness in anyone or anything, especially if her authority is threatened. As Serena strives to rule over the masses, she exterminates those who



do not agree with her philosophy or who interfere with her plans. Both Dr. Cheney and Buchanan state that women are beneath men in intelligence and analytical skill; these men are killed by Serena's assassins, Galloway and Pemberton. When Buchanan is asking Pemberton's opinion about selling some of their land to the government Serena steps up to answer, but Buchanan stops her: "I'm asking your husband's opinion, Mrs. Pemberton, not yours" (69). Serena's eyes glared and she appears possessed as her "pupils receded into some deeper part of her" (69). The gaze reveals the inner emotions of Serena. After the deaths of Buchanan and Cheney, Pemberton recalls the same look in Serena's eyes when she discovers that Kephart tricked Harris by planting rubies in a stream: "Serena's face remained placid, except for her eyes. Pemberton thought of Buchanan and Cheney, who'd received similar looks" (238). Shortly after giving Buchanan "the look" Serena tells Pemberton that Buchanan is ranked among the "timed men" and "the sooner you and I are shed of them the better" (76). On a hunting trip Pemberton kills Buchanan as Serena has instructed him to do, making the death look like a hunting accident. Serena's heartless nature is evident in her response to the killing of Buchanan. The sheriff remarks to Pemberton that Serena does not "seem particularly distressed by the loss of your partner" (149). This scenario is repeated throughout the novel as Serena continues to orchestrate murders.

Dr. Cheney makes Serena's hit list when he says, "The nature of the fairer sex is to lack the male's analytical skills, but, at least in this instance, you have somehow compensated for that weakness" (34). He is allowed to live for a while until he misdiagnoses Serena's stomach pain as excessive gas, resulting in the

death of her child. Later, Cheney is found in a bathroom stall with his “tongue cut out and a peppermint in each hand” (217). The killing is morbid and gruesome, devoid of dignity for human life even in death. Serena only gains in her resolve to purge the world of “timid men” and women, as the death toll mounts. Controlled solely by human intellect and desire for power, Serena becomes a diabolical force clashing with life-giving forces of Rachel.

Rash creates other scenarios forcing the spirit and intellect to intersect and merge constantly. Sometimes, instead of the character’s vision, Rash uses the gaze from the omniscient narrator who describes what one would see looking on the scene, unobserved. This shattered world between humans and the natural environment is illustrated by the narrator as the loggers are entering Noland Mountain. Pieces of ice begin to drop slowly at first; then there is a steady downpour as showers of ice fall from the trees. As the loggers trudge on the ice, they are intrusive, with their heavy shoes crushing the beauty and spirit of this natural entity. Rash’s diction gives a living quality to the natural landscape: The loggers “walked through them [ice shards] as they would the remnants of a vast shattered mirror” (173). Intellectually, the loggers are focused on a job they need to complete, but the reader is reminded of the old adage that a broken mirror brings bad luck. Through the visual imagery of the loggers in nature, Rash directs the reader to realize the logger’s limited understanding of the interrelatedness of man and nature. The loggers do not respect the spiritual beauty of the mountains and view distinct boundaries between the human and nonhuman world. They have a devastating physical effect on the natural environment because of this

dichotomy between the spiritual qualities of the natural landscape and their own blind intellect.

Rachel resides in the same fragmented world as Serena and her loggers, but instead of crushing what is under her feet, she is cautious not to harm the natural environment. The vivid visual depictions correspond to Rachel's perception of the natural world. As she gathers bloodroot, she pulls the plants "carefully from the ground" and strives to not break any stems. If she does break one, the red juice stains her fingers (78). Spiritual allusions are suggested by the imagery of Rachel's stained fingers. This image is similar to a blood sacrifice and the sacrament of bread and wine in Christian ceremony. Rachel may be reminded of her father, a man who revered nature and who shed his blood for her sake: "She remembered how her father once told her never to bother salamanders in a spring because they kept the waters pure" (78). Water is a necessary component of life and of spiritual purification, as can be seen in the Christian sacrament of baptism. Rachel's reverence in this natural environment is in contrast to the violent death and bloodshed surrounding Serena's enterprise. Rachel kneels in front of a ginseng plant as she takes the blade of the mattock to rake dirt from around the stem before she pulls it from the root. She then takes the berries and plants them in the ground before moving to the next plant (79). Her actions are like a religious ceremony in which the plants are analogous to humans. Dignity is preserved in death, and a rebirth is enacted by the planting of the berries. A sharp blade is used to gently remove a plant and to plant seeds, instead of violently chopping down a forest with no regard for the human and non-human beings killed or maimed.

Rachel's placement in nature is calm, peaceful, and spiritual in contrast to Serena and her laborers positioned in a cold barren landscape.

The sightline of the reader is orchestrated by the narrative voice as the first winter of tree cutting, managed by Serena, is described: as ice clung to ridges, "several men died when they slipped trying to avoid falling trees or limbs. Another tumbled off of a cliff edge and one impaled himself on his own axe and still another was beheaded by a snapped cable" (101). Later, Serena has Buchanan, her business partner, killed by Pemberton when they are on a hunting trip. As a wagon carries the body back, "the scene appeared almost Egyptian, Buchanan wrapped inside an oilcloth, the Plots and Redbones gathered around the corpse like the animals of old pharaoh's accompanying their master to the afterlife" (148). After Buchanan's body has been taken from the wagon, this glorious Egyptian-like procession changes: "The dog hunched where the wagon had been, its long tongue licking dust moistened by Buchanan's blood" (151). The blood in this scene is mingled with the dust; life is drained and no rebirth is occurring. Instead a dog comes to lick up the lifeless blood.

This graphic bloody scene of the killing of Buchanan is a stark contrast to the nurturing life-giving spiritual elements in Rachel's encounters. The incident with Buchanan and the Pembertons is also similar to an Old Testament Biblical account. Ahab was going into a vineyard to take possession of it because Jezebel had ordered the owner of the vineyard, Naboth, to be killed. As Ahab entered the vineyard, the Lord sent messengers to tell Ahab "in the place where dogs licked up Naboth's blood, dogs will lick up your blood" (I Kings 21: 19). Later, Ahab is

killed and “dogs licked up his blood, as the word of the Lord had declared” (I Kings 22: 37). Jezebel is also thrown down as “her blood spattered the wall and the horses as they trampled her underfoot” (II Kings 9:33). Serena meets a similar demise. Perhaps to align Serena with an intellectual or perhaps pagan worldview while Rachel is paralleled with a more spiritual or Christian ideology is logical; however, Rash merges these concepts and characters, creating a complex web of antitheses. As illustrated, Serena has goddess-like qualities when she is molded to the landscape, an ethereal vision. Rachel, even though she has a reverence for relationship the natural world, will kill animals to protect and provide for her son (276). Rachel appears weak and vulnerable but she, like Serena, also has the ability to think of killing another human being; however, the loggers focus on Rachel as a victim.

The loggers and the omniscient narrator portray Rachel as an innocent victim, much like an animal in a trap. She is lured into a relationship with Pemberton and is now striving to raise her son alone with no financial aid from the father. As the lumbermen are on the commissary porch watching people purchase their Christmas gifts, they see Rachel. They comment on the fact that she purchases only a small piece of denim cloth and a single toy for her child; they go on to say that Pemberton should help her out. Ross is quick to state that Pemberton’s wife has something to do with the fact that Pemberton does not claim the child and his responsibility to support him. The crew watches as Joel Vaughn comes up to Rachel, and Dunbar comments about Vaughn. Dunbar says

Vaughn is a man who “treats her good,” giving the reader a glimpse of the budding romance while contrasting Pemberton’s treatment of Rachel (157).

As if a camera changes its direction, Dunbar turns to the window, and the lumbermen begin to appraise Galloway, a man in conflict with the natural world:

“What do you reckon Galloway got from Santa Claus?” Dunbar asks. “A set of fangs to go with them rattles he’s wearing atop his head?”

“Maybe some rat poison for to season his victuals,” Snipes suggested” (158).

As Pemberton has mistreated Rachel, Galloway, as he carries out Serena’s death sentences, goes even further in his perverse sinister treatment of the mountain people. The lumbermen comment on the fact that Galloway is tracking Rachel and Jacob and wonder if he will choose the right train line:

“I reckon we’ll know soon enough if Galloway picked right,” Ross said.

“You figure?” Henryson asked. “He could leave them in the woods for the varmints to eat or stuff them down a dry well and none would be the wiser.”

“He could but he won’t. These folks ain’t about you having any doubts concerning their meanness. They want it right there in the open” (301).

Galloway carries out the death commands with no remorse, even if the victims are an innocent teenager and a baby from his own community. This antithesis brings tension as the innocent seek freedom and safety from ominous predator-types, like Galloway.

The disparateness between Rachel and the villainous characters is shown in the visual depictions of her in nature. She is described in earthy terms by the

narrator as she appears to have grown and developed in unison with the trees and wildlife which must live with the intrusion of industrialization. As she walks the forest she easily moves through ferns and avoids harming the small creatures she encounters, but she is interrupted as she listens to the whistle she thinks might be from the lumber company train (78). It is as if she is an animal wary of unfamiliar sounds, and these sounds foreshadow a destruction of her home along with the plants and animals. Rash creates imagery to illustrate the symbiotic relationship between Rachel and nature. The trees form a canopy for Rachel and the ferns feel like “peacock feathers as she moved through them” at the same time, she checks to make sure she doesn’t harm the plants or even a small salamander (78-79). As she traverses closer to civilization, an automobile passes, leaving a gray dust in its wake in stark contrast to natural sights and aroma. Later as a wagon passes, some children stare at Rachel “gravely as if sensing all that had befallen her the last months” (43). After the wagon with the children gazing at her has passed, Rachel gazes toward the river which, “gleamed like a vein of flowing gold. Fool’s gold, she thought” (43). This description precedes her remembrance of how foolish she was to believe that the physical relationship with Pemberton was love. In this way, the river and other water spaces in this novel often reflect what is occurring on land as the river becomes both a nourishing life giver and a destroyer of life just as Serena and Rachel embody the same antithesis. On a deeper level, the river functions as a bridge between the profane and the spiritual as well as a liminal space between these two worlds. According to Rash, “In Welsh and Celtic folklore, water is a conduit between the living and the dead. I am very interested

in that kind of passageway between these worlds” (Bjererre). Water indeed is a passageway in this novel as characters enter into various bodies of water beginning with the splash pond created by the loggers.

The physical intensity of the manmade splash pond is evident when a teenager, with the same name as Pemberton’s son, is killed. Pemberton watches on shore as Jacob slips on a log in the water and then fights for his life, finally slipping under the logs, ending his life. The loggers notice that Pemberton is visibly shaken and encourage him to sit down as he looks as if he is about to lose consciousness (224). In a personal interview, Rash comments that one purpose of the response of Pemberton to the death of Jacob is to show that he is becoming more human while Serena is moving away from humanity. Rash also states, “It’s almost like a reverse action of going back into the womb” a reenactment of Serena’s miscarriage of Jacob. The name “Jacob” brings Pemberton back to the death of his own child, the one Serena miscarried, and that is why he is so visibly shaken (Personal Interview). Robert Sullivan comments on death and nature when he says, “Nature does not recognize it [death], she finds her own again under new forms without loss. Yet death is beautiful when seen to be a law and not an accident” (94). Jacob’s drowning is a tragic accident as a result of man’s unnatural actions; the logs hewn by men are placed in an unnatural dam created by man. Nature’s law consumes this boy who is sacrificed for the greed of a few individuals. His death is a consequence to nature’s law; however, there is no beauty in his death. Pemberton is visibly shaken by Jacob’s death as he is powerless to help him just as he was powerless to save his own son. Later



Pemberton reflects on the boy's struggle and what it would have felt like debating whether to let go and try and save himself or wait to be saved. Serena would never have felt this kind of emotion or empathy for another human being struggling with the forces of nature for survival.

Pemberton relates Jacob's encounter with the splash pond to a bear that attacked him in the forest; however, Pemberton is saved as Serena rescues him just before the bear is about to strike a fatal blow. Once he is safe from the bear, Pemberton feels "as if his body had been set gently upon the calmest water" (73). If witnessing this death reminds Pemberton of his near death experience with the bear, then it is as if Pemberton experiences a birth in his life and death fight with the bear, his savior being Serena. But Serena saves him because she has a use for him, not out of any altruistic motives.

Nature's taking of life, which is tragic but justified, is contrasted with Serena's human centered taking of life. Serena's actions are an attempt to usurp nature's laws as she is in battle with this natural entity. Serena speaks to Pemberton about her plans to continue in Brazil after leaving Carolina because there are "virgin forests of mahogany and no law but nature's law" (29). However, Serena does not realize the power of nature's law. The life of her unborn child is taken and she has no power to prevent this event. In this instance she would not prefer nature's law. Jacob's death, on the other hand, as an act of nature, brings at least partial rebirth in water as Pemberton becomes more human at this moment. Jacob's death also causes him to enter into an inevitable cycle of life joining him with nature. Pemberton, on the other hand, dies a long painful

death at the hands of Serena, and nature strikes back at him in the form of a rattlesnake. In Pemberton's death there is an absence of water as he dies thirsty with blood in his mouth. There is no beauty in Pemberton's death, but he, like all mankind, must succumb to the laws of nature. Human laws can be manipulated, but ultimately nature is more powerful than any human force. Even Serena must die in the end.

This theme of annihilation can be connected to Rash's views of Serena as an American innocent in disharmony with the natural world. However, Serena differs from most American innocents in that she does not want to re-create the past, and she goes to much greater lengths to accomplish her materialist goal. When I asked Rash to expound on Serena's obsession and what exactly estranges her from humanity, he stated:

I saw her as similar to Ahab in *Moby Dick*, and of course Gatsby, but also Thomas Sutpen in *Absalom, Absalom*. They are all in a sense American innocents-in the sense of believing that they have their own grand design, and that design overwhelms their sense of humanity. I'm talking about the magnetic chain of humanity; that happens with such characters. That delusional design ultimately breaks that human bond. What is interesting are those moments where the character is wavering; there are a few moments where Serena is like that. But ultimately I see her as a very American character with the belief, that it is possible to annihilate the past. Her goal is to live in the present. She also possesses the kind of destructiveness that goes with being quite willing to believe that things are

infinite. I see her going that way-believing the past can be annihilated and that the material world is all that there is (Personal Interview).

Rash also agreed that the wasteland themes and even Buchanan's name and character are purposefully drawn from Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*. As Rash knew his readers would probably be familiar with earlier American novels, especially those written in the time period of the 1920s and 1930s, he was able to use these connections to build his themes. When passages are repeated about characters forgetting the past or when descriptions of the valley of ashes occur in *Serena*, images from earlier American classics come to mind. Also the fact that Serena estranges herself from humanity reiterates a common theme from the American classics of the early twentieth century.

In contrast to Serena, Rash explains, "Pemberton becomes more human, just as Serena doesn't, also Rachel becomes more human" (Personal Interview). I asked Rash about the purpose of the scene where Jacob, the young man who is named after Pemberton's son, drowns and what this scene is saying about Pemberton. After explaining the drowning as reflecting back to Serena's miscarriage, Rash speaks about Pemberton's tragedy: "Pemberton's tragedy, really his Achilles' heel, is that he can't admit that kind of Biblical connection to someone (the connection of love between father and son), and his inability to want someone to carry on his name; there is a bit of vanity there maybe, but he cannot live in the present world" (Personal Interview). Pemberton, like Gatsby, is unable to live in the present and as a result is murdered. They both face the consequence of poor choices in love and obsession, and their own vanity and

greed. This selfish human-centered worldview creates spiritual and physical death for humankind and the natural environment.

Serena parallels Gatsby in her desire to reach her ego-centered goal at all cost; however, Serena contrasts with Gatsby in that she does not want to recreate the past. Henry James makes the claim that at the end of the nineteenth century, the United States was preeminently a materialistic civilization. He goes on to say, “It was materialistic philosophically in that it was built on a science and technology that regarded the material, empirically observable world as the ‘real’ world” (Marsden 194-95). Not only was the material world seen as all that was “real,” it was also solely in material prosperity that a person could realize happiness and the American dream. Horace Kephart worked to create The Great Smoky Mountains National Park. Kephart states the mindset of the time while rationalizing why he left his family to live in the Appalachian mountains: “It seemed that I might realize the past in the present, seeing with my own eyes what life must have been to my pioneer ancestors of a century or two ago” (27). Kephart goes on to say he wanted to “match my woodcraft against the forces of nature” (27). Kephart voices two themes often found in American novels published in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century: 1) humans can re-create the past 2) humans can control or build a structure to protect them against the forces of nature. Gatsby wants to go back to the past in his relationship with Daisy; he builds a structure similar to the Biltmore house in *Serena* in order to protect himself from the forces of nature. However, Gatsby is murdered in this mansion where human-

made materials could not stop death. Likewise, Serena is murdered in a human-made structure.

In contrast to Gatsby and Pemberton, Serena's perception of humans and nature leads her to live only in the present as she views her current life as infinite. Serena's quest is like a masculine hero's journey; however, she is missing the traditional altruistic heroic qualities. Maureen Murdock discusses the plight of modern women who live primarily in the present, acting out a masculine role to attain material success. According to Murdock, women who take on this masculine role, "have assumed to be successful they have to keep their edges sharp, and in that process may have ended up with a hole in their hearts" (7). Unlike the women Murdock describes, Serena does not visualize herself as the weaker sex existing in the male dominated world. She does not become manly in order to be successful. Her gender is of no consequence; her edges are sharp because she views herself as a self imposed ruler, to subjugate those weaker than herself. Serena's vision of the world so consumes her that she overlooks her own mortality, and instead of a hole in her heart, she ends up with no heart at all. She says to Pemberton, "the world is ripe, and we'll pluck it like an apple from a tree" (Maslin). Like a misguided Eve, Serena purposefully destroys this forest paradise along with its inhabitants. What she doesn't grasp is the reality of the connectedness of all living forms, and her actions circle back to her.

The bond between mankind and the natural world is continually seen in Rash's landscape images. According to Rash, "There's a wonderful term the Welsh use, *cynefin*, for a primal, fierce attachment to a part of the landscape," and

Rash's goal is to create that kind of intimacy with the landscape. Rash goes on to explain how this intimacy with the landscape, "allows the reader to enter the story more fully-to understand that place as fully and in as many ways as possible, which includes how the place influences the characters' sense of reality" (Graves). Pemberton looks out to the newly constructed railroad beams that blend with the landscape as to be "barely discernable." As he looks at this landscape he envisions that time is reversed:

The world blurred, and it seemed possible that the crossties would leap onto stumps and become trees again, the slash whirl upward to become branches. Even a dark blizzard of ash paling back in time to become green leaves, gray and brown twigs. (339)

The novel progresses in a linear time sequence with flashbacks to the past. These flashbacks give details about past events that tie into the major theme of the novel: if one forgets the past, a community, culture and all that separates humans from animals, will be lost. In Pemberton's vision, the blurred world where the damage he inflicts on the landscape is reversed is just a dream. The past cannot be undone. The fact that he realizes the negative impact of his actions on the environment links him with humanity; however, he refuses to linger in the past. Thus, he does not learn from his past mistakes and continues on a destructive path.

Serena also has a vision where there is a blurring between the landscape and her physical form. Serena has no family; she says they all died of an illness, and she ordered the home be burned to the ground with everything inside. She reflects

on the burning of her family home. She goes to the site to make sure that everything is destroyed. Once she has investigated and gets back on her horse, she looks back at her footprints: “They were black at first and then gray and then white, growing less visible with each step. It looked like something had moved through the snow before slowly rising” (89). This flashback marks a time in which Serena’s past is erased, symbolized in the disappearance of her footprints. The diction, “slowly rising” indicates Serena feels as if she rises literally above the earth as she mounts her horse, but she also removes herself emotionally and spiritually from her past, above humanity.

Serena is also seen as otherworldly as Pemberton describes the way she looks on her Arabian horse. The first time she is introduced to the camp’s workers, she is dressed in black and blue and is seated upon the white Arabian, so white it was almost translucent. Later on Pemberton describes her on her horse thirty feet ahead where she seems to be “blending so well with the snow that for a moment she appeared to ride the air itself” (68). The landscape also blurs with the man-made in the description of Doctor Chaney’s bar. The bar was cut from one single chestnut tree that measured one-hundred and twelve feet (32). As nature is brought into human-made structures, mankind is also carried back into nature at the end of mortal life. Trees serve not only as furniture but also as coffins. Ledbetter, one of the loggers killed while cutting trees is entombed “in the very thing that had killed him” (124). This irony reinforces the ideology that man and the natural world are forever bound together in an infinite sphere. A similar analogy is seen when Pemberton comments that Kephart told him that it pleased

him to know “that I’d die and eventually my coffin would rot, and how then I would be nourishing the earth instead of destroying it” (117). This is the ultimate blending of man and the landscape as the materials decompose bringing new life in the never-ending cycle where nature is rejuvenated even by the human creature that sought to destroy it. Again, Rash uses a visual impression to impress upon the reader the undeniable relationship between humankind and the natural world.

The tension between the progress of humankind and the natural environment, between industry and the individual, introduced in the first scene of the novel, culminates at the conclusion of the novel with the reappearance of Jacob, Rachel and Pemberton’s son. Jacob, the one Serena strives most to eradicate from the earth, uses a knife to kill her, the sort of instrument she provided to take the life of his grandfather. The final action is narrated with the same violence and death in the opening of the novel; however, in this instance justice has been enacted where the law failed. The narrative voice again portrays the graphic images of murder, but the victims are far from innocent. In the coda, Jacob first appears on a train platform and later that night enters Serena’s house with a knife, probably the one used to kill his grandfather. It is probable that Rachel must have picked up the knife Serena left at the train station after killing Harmon because later in the novel, Rachel makes a point of keeping her bowie knife with her (307). Jacob slashes Galloway’s windpipe; then the reader sees him, “sawing across the vertebrae to make sure” (370). Jacob then stabs Serena, who dies standing up in the doorway of her hacienda. As Serena wavers in the



doorway between life and death, the narrator leaves the reader with a ghostly image that echoes the major life and death themes in the novel.

What Serena leaves behind is “a wasteland of stumps and downed limbs” (369). The choice of the words “downed limbs” is significant as the limbs of the loggers are also left, not to mention the lives that were slain by these self-centered, careless people. To reinforce the major themes, the author speaks with acumen through the narrative voice and the “gaze” of the lumbermen. As a chilling end to the tale, Serena gives orders to be buried in a lead coffin because it will not rust and decay. Even in death she wishes to remain detached from the natural world so that her flesh will not mingle with the earth. Instead, her body will rot within a cold metal container where her remains cannot nourish the soil. If she had been encased in a wooden coffin, a tree would be supporting her; Serena would not retain her dominance and superiority if she decomposed along with the wood like an ordinary mortal.

Humankind and the natural world mirror each other to reinforce their reciprocal relationship. Animals, like the landscape, are harbingers revealing the nature of individuals. Rash depicts birds as symbols for women in this novel; however, the normal nurturing life-giving elements associated with fowls evident in Rachel are absent in Serena. Danny Miller records that Emma Bell Miles refers to the mountain woman of this time as the “silent wingless mate” of her husband and stated that these women’s lives were filled with constant sacrifice. Miller comments, “Though ‘wingless,’ the Appalachian mountain woman often flies to heights of courage, endurance and heroism” (Miller, *Wingless Flights* 14). Miller

posits that these women are wingless because their “lives of victimization overshadow them; they are victims of the patriarchal system of hard work, of childbearing, and of the loneliness inherent in the unbridgeable gap between them and their husbands” (Miller, *Wingless Flights* 14). This depiction of Appalachian women is true of Rachel. She is a victim of the mandates of society and the greedy egocentric nature of Pemberton, who takes advantage of her youth and innocence, leaving her to provide for their child alone. However, like a wingless fowl, she does not grow weak in the face of these abuses; instead, she becomes more courageous and endures for the sake of her son. Rachel is depicted as bird-like in the way nature provides what she needs with wild herbs and berries; she even patches her house with manure and rocks much as a bird would repair a nest. As she moves in the forest under the “jay-bird blue sky” the “trees formed a canopy bright and various as a button jar” (78). She is in harmony with nature as she sees nature as her sanctuary, protecting and providing for her.

Serena, on the other hand, is usually seen in the setting of the wasteland that she has created. She is aligned to her eagle which, Ross says, “had been brought in to peck out the eyes of any worker who closed them on the job” (86). She eats berries and honey that Galloway keeps in jars and gives to her as they travel through the forest. As Serena and Galloway are hunting down Rachel and Jacob, Rachel hears a yellowhammer pecking on a tree and then hesitating as if waiting for an answer. The yellowhammer is a species of woodpecker that spends more time on the ground than most woodpeckers; it has dark brown eyes, grey legs, a dark grey bill and talons that are quite sharp. The yellowhammer enjoys

berries especially the berries of poison ivy (AL. Dept. of Archives). There are parallels between the yellowhammer and Serena: Serena is described several times as having gray skin or a grey featureless face with her “irises the color of burnished pewter and eyes that did not completely close” (20). Serena also trains her eagle to kill rattlesnakes, one of the most dangerous predators to the yellowhammer. The yellowhammer illustrates the nature of Serena as she is in constant motion seeming to feast on poison, and is pecking at trees until her death. At the end of her life, with a knife in her abdomen, Serena is seen in her doorway as she, “moved one foot tentatively forward and then back” as a mortally wounded bird would respond (371). In the end, Serena has become like a rabid animal, seeking to gain control and power over every other animal only to encounter death, a foe that cannot be stopped. Death and treatment of the dead is a theme in this novel which illuminates cultural viewpoints and reinforces the undeniable fate of all living creatures.

Treatment of the dead, as in tending cemeteries, is a way of maintaining a space on the landscape and preserving a culture. This action unites humankind with the natural world. Humans, in contrast to other natural creatures, bury their dead and leave markers to memorialize them. In a lecture on twentieth century American beliefs about death, June Hobbs asserts, “Memorialization is about control over memory in the face of death, which cannot be controlled.” Rachel, in the act of commissioning Mr. Surratt, the stone mason, to engrave her father’s name on a thirty pound slab of marble, has control over his memory whereas she was powerless to power control his death. At the age of seventeen, she is so

determined to have a marker on his grave that she is going to carry the marker and plant it by herself. Mr. Surratt, understanding the importance of this memorial, carries the stone for her and plants it on the grave of Abraham Harmon. Chris Bolgiano records the Appalachian culture and reverence for the dead. Bolgiano's accounts parallel Rachel's urgency to attend to her father's grave. In the 1930s the mining companies could not carry operations any closer than 300 feet to a cemetery. People came by each year to care for the graves (133). Respecting the dead is way of showing value for individual life, and at times in American history, such as war, when mass graves had to be used or men were buried in shallow graves without markers, there is revulsion and unspeakable loss. Rash acknowledges these deep cords that connect humankind as he orchestrates the actions of Serena. Her actions are horrifying to the reader as she has no respect or reverence for the living or the dead while Rachel celebrates and honors life and death in harmony with the landscape.

Throughout *Serena*, Rash connects humankind and nature by giving focus to the treatment of the dead. Stewart, one of the loggers, comments about a young boy who is killed by a "skidder boom" before he even received his first paycheck. No one even knows how to get in touch with his family members, and the loggers lament the fact that he will not have a marked grave: "That's a terriblesome thing. There'll be never a flower nor teardrop tough his grave" (247). The loggers, acting as Greek chorus, go on to reflect that in the Confederate War soldiers would pin their names on their uniforms so their family would know what happened to them. Snipes shares a personal account about his grandfather: "He

got killed over in Tennessee fighting for the Lincolnites. They buried him right where he fell, but leastways his mama known where he was laid” (247). The loggers, viewed by Serena as almost sub-human, show wisdom in their simple yet profound statements. Rachel, like the loggers, is considered poor and uneducated by society, but she acts with a more grace and dignity than those who are materially wealthy. Viewing how these characters act and respond to their environment, uncovers their cultural perception. Rachel, compelled to mark her father’s grave, preserves his name; this act links her with humanity. She knows her memories will fade, but there is a tombstone that will last longer than her lifetime and “outlast her grief” (50).

The human and non-human worlds merge in Rachel’s encounters. As Rachel gets close to her father’s grave, “no birds sang and no deer or rabbit bolted in front of her” (48). As the landscape echoes her reverence and her grief, there is a howling sound “like a whippoorwill or a far-off train” (49). These foreboding, yet reverent, elements of nature encase Rachel and bind her to the natural world which reflects her mood. As she touches the tombstone, she thinks of the cradle that her father made for Jacob, again joining death with life; a piece of nature is molded with the hands of a man who is no longer living. This cradle, made of wood, will provide for the grandson Harmon never holds. As Rachel reflects on these memories, the reader is reminded of the cycle of life and the legacy that one leaves behind. As she is about to leave the grave, she remembers one happy remembrance of her father. Even though her father was a hard difficult man, Rachel reflects on a moment of gentleness and love. This memory takes place in

the natural world as Harmon directs Rachel's attention to the beauty of a moth at twilight. She remembers her father's large hand on her shoulder as he pointed to a "large silver-green moth" (51). The touch of his hand is significant to Rachel, but there are larger implications. Hands can demonstrate love and hands can issue violence, death and destruction. Rachel reflects on the physical qualities of her father as he used his hands to provide for her and to point her toward the beauty of the natural world. In the same way, Rachel chooses to use her hands to edify the people and the natural world around her. Serena's hands, the same instruments used by Rachel, are displayed in conflict with man and nature. These differing actions illustrate the effect one person can have in the human and non-human world, even a person who is considered weak by society.

Serena is dehumanized and separated from the natural world as her hands respond in an animal-like fashion. The widow Jenkins, a neighbor who helps care for Rachel and Jacob, is murdered. Sheriff McDowell states the widow Jenkins was killed with a knife by someone with two hands, so it could not have been Galloway who killed her. McDowell implies that Serena is the killer (258). Serena's hand is often physically on top of Pemberton's symbolizing that he is like her puppet, moving as she decides. As Serena asks details about Pemberton's killing of Buchanan, he replies "He's dead. That's all that matters. It's over and done with and we've got all we wanted" (152). Pemberton's response to Buchanan's murder mirrors what Serena says about her own father. In reply to a comment that her father sounded like a remarkable man, she says, "He's dead now and of no use to any of us" (39). When Pemberton realizes that he doesn't

really remember his father's funeral, only recovering from it, he rationalizes that he is "freeing himself of the past, as Serena advocated" (261). He also no longer has contact with his mother or two sisters, throwing away the letters they send without reading them. Later, as Serena and Pemberton cling together while jumping out of window of their home to escape a fire, Pemberton says, "At that moment, the world had finally revealed itself to him, and in it there was nothing but himself and Serena, everything else burning away around them. A kind of annihilation" (316). The outside world is annihilated at this moment. Pemberton's sole companion and source of strength, Serena, encloses him with her hands as they escape death, in an embrace that proves to be fatal.

Ironically, in the end, it is Serena who annihilates Pemberton as the reader views his death. Antithesis is apparent between humankind and nature, shown in the death of Pemberton. Serena has poisoned him and left him alone to die, suffering in the elements of nature. As Pemberton is striving to make his way across the meadow, he uses his hands to drag himself forward resting a minute with "his head against the earth" but when he tries to move again "the world gave way beneath him, as if trying to pull away" (366). The material finite world is slipping away as he is losing consciousness. As he grips onto some broom sedge he hears Serena approaching. He "let go of the earth itself as he waited to feel Serena's firm calloused hand embrace his" (167). And this is where the story ends, with Pemberton reaching for the hand of the one who annihilated him, the goddess whom he served. The reader is reminded of the reverence he has for her as he remarks earlier in the novel, "He'd never been a man easily awed, but that

was the only word for what he'd felt as Serena and the horse lifted and then hung aloft for what seemed like seconds before falling on the barriers' far sides" (25). This goddess, who was to lift him with her, not only refuses to raise him, but extinguishes his life. In reality, Serena is not the type of goddess he visualizes as he gazes at her against the landscape at the beginning of the novel. The paradox is clear when Serena destroys Pemberton's individuality as she insists the two of them are as one; when Pemberton's views don't align with hers, she takes his life. Pemberton is unable to save himself from an unnatural death at the hands of Serena. This encounter solidifies the inhuman and perverted nature of Serena, in disharmony with the natural world and her fellow human beings while Pemberton is still capable of human feeling and compassion.

#### **IV. Erasing Boundaries-The Sightline of the Characters**

Erasing of boundaries occurs repeatedly throughout *Serena* as the reader follows the sightline of the characters. Through the erasure of boundaries, Rash demonstrates the interconnected relationship of man and nature even with characters who do not acknowledge this relationship. Patrick Murphy suggests "Writers, who want to redefine nature and human relationships should follow a series of steps one of which is "erasing the boundaries between inner (emotional, psychological, personal) and outer (geographical landscape, or the erasing or blurring of self-other (human/nonhuman, I/Thou) distinctions (230). For instance, toward the end of the novel, Pemberton realizes what he and Serena have accomplished in over two years of tree cutting. As he sees a "vast dark gash"



they have created, he looks up to Mount Mitchell which appears to reach the clouds and he “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 slowly downward and with his eyes open” (261). Pemberton’s emotional state and the nonhuman landscape merge in this scene as his body experiences the sensation of falling, just as the many trees have fallen because of his choices. Yet he knowingly continues to adhere to Serena’s wishes, violating the earth he stands on and on which he focuses his gaze. Pemberton and Serena view themselves as rulers over the loggers and the natural environment in a hierarchy sort of relationship which denies spiritual connection or reciprocal respect. Rash purposefully blurs the two spheres to illustrate a connection that cannot be denied. In other words, humankind and the natural environment cannot be separated into living and non-living compartments. The actions of each one affects the other. The negative results of striving to control nature in a logical manner, without regard for the heart or spirit of nature, are seen through the actions and visual focus of Pemberton and Serena.

Florence Krall compares the habit of animals of living in transitional spaces between forest and clearing with the actions of humankind:

To an ecologist, the “edge effect” carries the connotation of the complex interplay of life forces where plant communities, and the creatures they support, intermingle in mosaics or change abruptly. Likewise, margins in social and cultural contexts are not necessarily areas of isolation where we balance between two worlds, looking out or looking in, without legitimacy

or equality. Although they can become boundaries that separate-chasms that block our movement toward fulfillment and joy in living, or frontiers where we wage power battles- they may also be dwelling places that connect rather than separate. Much like the ecotones in biotic communities. (4)

The interplay between forces is significant as the worlds of Serena and Rachel intersect blurring the boundaries between the human and non-human world and life and death. As Rachel steps from the forest into a pasture on her way back home, instantly she hears the barking of wild dogs. She remembers a story about wild dogs that carried off a child set on the edge of a field; the child was never found, “only tatters of its blanket” (79). Rachel keeps the tree line in her sight until they are safely out of the pasture. The landscape illuminates not only the physical danger of wild dogs in open spaces, but also the danger from Serena, whose actions can be correlated with the actions of a wild dog. Rachel reflects that in life a person often has one choice, “like trying to wade a river. You take one wrong step and set your foot on a wobbly rock or in a drop-off and you’re swept away, and all you can do then is try to survive” (83). Ordinary choices made by the characters bring either spiritual or physical life or death. The picture Rachel sees in her mind, wading across a river, refers to the literal drowning of the young teenager also named Jacob. When a bear attacks Pemberton, Galloway and Vaughn stand at “the woods’ edge” while in the meadow the bear swings first at the dogs and then goes straight for Pemberton (71). Pemberton feels the creature’s heart beat as he is squeezed by the bear. It is recorded in folk lore that

some loggers would brag that their foreman was so tough that “when he was tired after a day’s work that he rode a bear back to the shanty rather than walk” (Adams 41). The reverse happens, as the bear would have killed Pemberton if Serena had not shot the bear just above his eyes. When Pemberton and Buchannan begin the killing spree of the deer, they are at the “meadow’s edge” before the others join them. At the end of the hunt, “Galloway made a mound of carcasses in the meadow’s center, and blood streaked the snow” (70). Each time Pemberton, Serena, Rachel, or Jacob face a life and death combat, it takes place in a natural “ecotone” or dwelling place as the human and the non-human world, life and death, physical connect and intertwine.

Water, as stated previously, serves as sort of womb or as a transitional space in this novel. Greta Gaard views water as a home that is not a static place or destination. Instead, home is a place of constant flux and motion where creation and re-creation takes place for both creatures and humans (199). Rash forms a bridge with man and nature through water, as both mankind and animals seek a nearby water source to build their homes. Without water all life would perish as humans, plants, and animals require water to survive and to re-create. This shared life source is a sort of “ecotone” and boundary where there are dangers as one enters or exits this environment. The loggers in the novel, as well as the real loggers during this time period, used the power of water for their own gain, but were aware of the dangers. Water in this novel is a constant reminder of the physical force of nature that both destroys and gives life and humans’ reliance on nature for survival. Through water, Rash reiterates the connectedness of

humankind and the natural world and the need to see beyond the boundaries that divide.

Serena creates an invisible hedge around herself, creating boundaries that only a few can cross. She is an elusive spirit detached from the general populous, viewing herself as superior to human and nonhuman life forms; the gaze of those around her reflect Serena's self imposed superiority. Even though Rash depicts Serena as intermingled with the natural landscape, she retains her pagan goddess-like aura. After Serena shoots a bear, Galloway is amazed as he has never seen a woman do this: "He turned his gaze from the bear to Serena, letting his eyes slowly take in Serena's boots and breeches and hunting jacket, finally her face, even then appearing to look not only at Serena but beyond her into the woods" (74). The woods and Serena merge in this scene as Serena transforms into a goddess through the eyes of Galloway.

Galloway is not the only one mesmerized by the calm goddess-like nature of Serena. When Reverend Bolick travels to the Pemberton's home to ask the Pemberton's to consider giving the workers a raise, his request is denied. Toward the end of Bolick's visit, Serena is described by the narrator as the characters gaze at her out of a window. Her hair has the "appearance of shone brass" as she sits upright on her gelding with "the eagle perched on the leather gauntlet as if grafted to her arm" (134). Wilkie, their senior partner, responds by saying "There is a true manifestation of the godly. Such an image gave the Greeks and Romans their deities. Gaze upon her, Reverend. She'll never be crucified by the rabble" (134). This picture of Serena contrasts with the Christian-servant, altruist image,

Reverend Bolick represents in his plea for assistance for the laborers. On a larger scale, there is an intermingling of the human form of Serena and the animals and landscape that surrounds her. Rash is erasing boundaries between humans and the natural worlds, but at the same time establishing boundaries around Serena. He molds Serena to the landscape and to her pet eagle in a manner that estranges her from the rest of humanity but yet merges her with nature. Rash also illustrates Serena's immunity to society's wrath or system of justice with the invisible yet strong fortress surrounding her.

#### **IV. The Gaze-Ties to Greek and Renaissance Tragedy in *Serena***

Rash draws on Greek and Renaissance tragedy to structure this novel in a way that discloses the worldview of the characters. The lumbermen, who work for Pemberton, Serena's husband, form a sort of Greek chorus who observe events and form their own unique interpretations. Rash purposefully incorporates aspects of the Shakespearian tragedy in this novel and placing the loggers as a chorus is one device he implements:

Rash says, in placing the loggers as a Greek chorus he was, playing off the wise fool, in Shakespeare, but also, I hope it is very clear their philosophical discussions are talking about what's going on in the world around them and about these characters and the nature of the world.

Certainly, I see those discussions being very relevant to the action, a commentary on the action and on the philosophy that's going on (Brown, "A Mountain Review").

The loggers also appear in motley renaissance style fools clothing: “Snipe’s crew was a bright-spangled assemblage now. Henryson stuffed his hatband with goldfinch and jay and cardinal feathers to create a variegated winged halo around his head while Stewart wore green patches on his shoulders like chevrons and white handkerchief sewn onto his bib, crayoned in its center” (217). As Rash speaks through these loggers, the intelligence, common sense, and values of the mountain people, as well as Rash’s own beliefs about the relationship of humans and the natural world, are revealed. For instance, a few of the lumbermen: Snipes, Dunbar, and Stewart, and Ross are discussing if the panther Pemberton wants to hunt really exists. In reply to the statement that there is no physical evidence of a panther in the mountains, Snipes states that some things that are real such as love and courage cannot be seen. He goes on to support his assumption using nature as he says, “You wouldn’t be alive a minute if there wasn’t air, but nobody’s ever seen a single speck of it.” Then he makes a profound statement that clues the reader to be cautious of Serena and her apparent success: “All I’m saying is there is a lot more to this old world than meets the eye” (66). Rash states, “Though I consciously evoked *Macbeth* in the novel, I see the book as more in the tradition of Marlowe’s plays, which are always about the will to power. Serena strikes me as more like a character such as Tamerlane than Lady Macbeth” (Graves).

When Serena decides to purchase an eagle from Mongolia that she trains to kill snakes, the statements from the lumbermen sum up the effects of this action. Dunbar, a lumberman, comments on the exorbitant number of rats since there are no snakes to exterminate them: “The way things are balanced.

Everything in the world has a natural place, and if you take something out or put something in that ought not be there everything is lopsided and out of sorts” (158-59). Serena, like her pet eagle, is not indigenous to this region and is in a constant battle with nature. She and her eagle do not belong in this environment; Serena is an outsider, not born in these mountains, but she forces her way into this society, creating an unnatural and unstable environment. Rachel and Jacob are the objects of Serena’s wrath, the individuals Serena wants most to exterminate. When the lumbermen gaze at Serena, they see an unnatural being, disturbing the natural order.

Galloway’s mother who serves as a blind prophetess can be paralleled with witches who issue prophecies in Shakespearian tragedy. Like Serena, she does not have a semiotic relationship with nature or humankind and her sightline often looks toward death. Galloway’s mother stands apart from the action, issuing her prophecies. Her “eyes were the color of pockets of morning fog the workers called bluejon, like mist filling two inward-probing cavities” (71). Mrs. Galloway’s prophetic insights and lingering blind glances are taken seriously by her son. Galloway knows he will not bleed to death when his hand is cut off in an accident. He says, “I’ll live. It’s done been prophesied” (180). Pemberton is also affected by his encounters with this prophetess: “Pemberton remembered how those eyes had turned in his direction and lingered. A way to stupefy the credulous, he knew, but done damn well” (71). Later, as Galloway’s mother turns her head in Pemberton’s direction, she prophesies that Pemberton will die not by gun, knife, or rope and says simply, “They ain’t one thing can kill a man like you”

(344). At this point Pemberton realizes her prophesy about his death is just a “jape” and the power of this woman’s prophesies is questioned by the reader.

Galloway’s mother is never a part of the natural landscape or the people who are native to the Appalachians. Her only human connection is her son, Galloway. When Galloway and Pemberton go on a scouting trip for animal tracks, Galloway’s mother goes along. Pemberton says, “She wore the same austere dress as last summer and a black satin bonnet that made her face recede as if peering from a cave mouth. 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” (118). Instead of joining in the scouting expedition, she sits in the car and sucks on horehound candy, Galloway purchases for her. When they return to the car, Galloway brings his mother water. Water, a refreshing, life-giving natural resource is described in grotesque terms as Galloway issues it to his mother: “The old woman made sucking sounds as her son slowly tilted the container, pulled it back so she could swallow before pressing it to her lips again” (123). Mrs. Galloway is childlike, yet repulsive, and her psychic powers are in question as she seems rather helpless. Rash demonstrates the futility and powerlessness of human vision that is focused on the selfish livelihood of humankind instead of the connectedness of all living beings, human and non-human.

Janette Hospital, in a lecture about *Serena*, describes this novel much like a Greek tragedy where women are depicted in a disturbing unnatural manner in encounters with human and nonhuman life forms. In Greek tragedy, the action



takes place off stage as the action is told by the Greek chorus; the logging crews perform this function. Hospital goes on to make comparisons between the specific Greek tragedies such as Euripides' play *Medea*. Serena quotes from *Medea* just after Pemberton has killed Harman: "Myself will grip the sword-yea though I die" (18). The fact that Serena grips a knife foreshadows her death at the end of the novel. Hospital suggests this quote connects Serena to the deadly "she lion" in the legend of Jason and the Argonauts as Pemberton is killed by Serena, the mountain lion in *Serena*.

Serena is often associated with beasts in a sort of bizarre supernatural manner. Toward the beginning of the novel, Serena puts her hand on Pemberton's heart as she "measured the beat of his blood" (30). Later, Galloway states that panthers are unique from other cats in that they eat the heart of their victims first. This detail further aligns Serena to the panther, a predatory animal. There is a morbid passion in both *Medea* and *Serena* that leads them away from humanity. In the end, Serena estranges herself from humanity in her quest to gain control and power over every other living thing, only to encounter death, a foe that cannot be stopped. In *Medea*, the tale concludes with *Medea* killing her own children, paralleling *Serena's* attempts to kill Pemberton's son and the actual killing of Pemberton. Both *Serena's* and *Medea's* family affections are perverted, leading to their gruesome actions that take them far from the typical nurturing mother stereotype. The affection that Pemberton and *Serena* have for each other is perverted by their selfishness and greed. Pemberton has been warned but enters into a relationship with *Serena* through a "self willed amnesia, a spell willingly

succumbed to” (261). While under her spell he kills Buchanan, their partner, and with no remorse says, “it’s over and done with and we’ve got all we wanted” as he watches the dogs lick Buchanan’s blood (152). This bizarre relationship, which Serena controls, poisons Pemberton; he turns into a villainous creature with a gray dusty wasteland in his heart just as the heart of the forest is left in lifeless ruin. The final scene in *Serena* resembles ancient Greek tragedy with unnatural death and a conclusion this is somber and reflective. The reader is left with a vision of a grey and dusty landscape in the wake of human actions and to reflect on the impact of choices humans make on the world.

## **VI. Ties to Appalachia Yesterday, Today, and the Future**

The anthropocentric vision of Serena and her associates mirrors historical treatment of the native Appalachians. Henry Shapiro describes how human-centered ideology created biased views about the native southern Appalachians, beginning in the late nineteenth century. These mountaineers were labeled as needy from the northern home-missionary standpoint because of their “nonparticipation in the civilization of modern America” (85). To achieve American progress, certain people, cultures and the natural environment must be seen as weak or needy so that a destruction of these entities is permissible. When the Great Smoky Mountains National Park project began, the local people were forced to leave their homes as the American government proceeded to build roads, creating a national park. While this action preserved the forest that was being stripped, the local Appalachians were displaced. A historian on a recent

PBS documentary states that the removal of individuals is rooted in the paradox of nation and democracy: “Parks stand for a nation’s national control over democracy, over local control, which is hardwired into the way we think democracy is” (*The National Parks*). Durwood Dunn explains how the inhabitants of Cades Cove were promised by the federal government that they would not have to leave their homes but in the end were forced to leave. The results of the exodus of the mountain inhabitants led to a loss of culture. (255-57). The loss of home and community, as well as the integrity and mystic of this lost culture is preserved in part through *Serena*.

These struggles for independence and preservation are complex, and the women in *Serena* represent the extremes of this national power versus the local residents and their landscape during this time period of American progress in the early twentieth century. These two women also embody capitalistic greed of humans juxtaposed with self-sacrificing nurturing human qualities evident in the struggle for power during the industrialization of the Appalachian Mountains. According to Engelhardt, many people view nature traditionally, constructed as dark, mysterious, with her resources seem never ending; thus she is exploitable (343). Rash demonstrates how this delusion about nature leads to catastrophic events for both nature and humanity.

The events Rash describes in the novel, can be paralleled to actual historical events in the Appalachian region. James Wilson, who served as secretary of agriculture under presidents McKinley, Roosevelt, and Taft issued a report in 1902 on the forests and forest conditions of the Southern Appalachian

region. In this report, he stated that the search for more valuable trees had extended into the most remote mountain coves. According to Wilson, “The home and permanent interests of the lumberman are generally in another state or region, and his interests in these mountains begins and ends with the hope of profit” (206). Ronald Eller states, “In the 1920’s most of the lumber companies abandoned the mountains, leaving a land and a people deeply scarred by their operation” (127). Horace Kephart quotes directly from one of the lumbermen in the 1920s: “All we want here is to get the most we can and then get out” (457). These statements by the lumbermen and spoken about them mirror Serena’s ideology.

In the novel, the threat of eminent domain is discussed as a threat to Serena and Pemberton’s tree cutting. Serena says, “We’ll have every tree in the tract cut down by then, and she plans to leave the area as soon as she has taken all that she can” (242). Indeed they do cut just about every tree in the area and then plan to move to Brazil where Pemberton brazenly states, “give us a lifetime and Mrs. Pemberton and I will cut down every tree, not just in Brazil but in the world” (346). Fortunately, this menacing couple has human limitations, even if they don’t realize it. However, in the end, a picture of Serena and Pemberton is described: “in the background lay a wasteland of stumps, and downed limbs whose limits the frame could not encompass” (369). This can be compared to true historical accounts. In a newspaper in 1911 a reporter stated, “Old-timers could not stand to look for too long on the desolate slashing and stumps left in the place of the original forest.” This reporter goes on to say that there is work for every man at

high wages, but for this material gain the citizens are paying dearly as the environment is like a wasteland (Lewis 264). The conditions were also dangerous for the loggers as “men were often injured by falling limbs and trees, and it was a rare woodsman who did not suffer serious wounds from saws and axes” (Lewis 140).

Serena and Pemberton are able to get what they want in spite of the law, but the mountain people are not as fortunate. Dunbar, one of the loggers, comments that eminent domain caused his uncle to leave his home as the freedom of the individual is sacrificed for the interests of industry. However, as Serena points out that there is a bill passed in the Tennessee legislature stating wealthy landowners would be exempt from eminent domain. Serena goes on to say the government has forced over 2000 farmers off of their land. There were farmers who did not want to sell their land or move. The wealthy would be allowed to keep their land inside the park and Serena asks for the same treatment (138). The individual rights of the common men to own property is denied while the wealthy continue to gain more and more control.

The fulcrum of Rash’s narrative is the precept that to ignore the fact that mankind is linked with nature produces a culture and society with a narrow vision resulting in great loss of magnificent landscapes and human life. As Susan Griffin states, “Nature is fundamentally, linked with our lives, it is where we are, what keeps us healthy” (*Reweaving the World* 88-89). Through *Serena*, Ron Rash reveals the need for a multifaceted understanding of the blended relationship of mankind and the natural world, where the sacred and profane merge, where the

actions of one affect the other. *Serena* is timeless as it speaks to the universal struggles to keep what has been fought hard to maintain and the importance of respect for all life forms. Rash urges the reader to look at what is happening in the Appalachians today and also at environmental concerns around the world. Rash says, "I wrote this novel because I was upset with what is happening. There was a pretty serious attempt to destroy what had been achieved in the national parks. There were actually some programs a few years ago that involved going in and doing some massive logging in national parks" (Brown, "A Mountain Landscape"). Appalachia is still a natural resource in which individuals and the natural environment are fighting for survival.

Grandfather Mountain is a part of the North Carolina landscape Rash is describing in *Serena*. Chris Bolgiano describes the challenges faced by Hugh Morgan, who owns a large portion of Grandfather Mountain: "In the past years he has struggled to balance the demands of tourism and development with conservation of Grandfather's rare species" (*An Appalachian Tragedy* 124). To reconcile the broken relationship between the human and non human life forms requires humankind to use intelligence, wisdom, and imagination: "Finding beauty in a broken world becomes more than the art of assemblage. It is the work of daring contemplation that inspires action" (Williams 385). Wilma Dykeman agrees, "To behold and cherish the beauty of the Appalachian Mountains, to bring forth and use the wealth of the Appalachian wisely, calls for power and imagination working together, not locked in battle" (32). The destruction and loss

that ensues when forces are in battle over control of a people and natural resources is evident in *Serena*.

Rash has created a story that is so visceral in the way it is told that it engages and transports the reader into another world where the impossible is made possible. The reader is transported through the gaze of the characters, actively inviting the reader into the action. This visual focus underlines the major ideologies Rash desires to chronicle. The lasting impression is that the impact of one evil individual on this paradise can be devastating; however, the impact of one caring individual can also save this natural resource and human lives. Rash is successful in creating a work that is universal; he accomplishes what he defines the real purpose of any novel: “All novels are about what it means to be a human being. What does it mean to be alive? So if the book’s any good at all, it has to transcend its place” (Brown, *A Mountain Review*). There is such a blending of the environmental concerns with ecofeminism and the universal fear of death and dying that this novel is one that causes lingering images and pondering long after the reading is complete. As the characters intersect, and at times clash with nature, the message of the need to respect life and nature is conveyed in a way that is not didactic but sobering. At the same time, Rash celebrates the spirit and strength of the mountain people as well as the natural beauty of this area, this natural Garden of Eden. To gaze into the future with an eye on the past, envisioning the positive life-giving potential in all humankind and the natural landscape is the ultimate impact Rash leaves with the reader at the conclusion of *Serena*.

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