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Portrayals of Hillbillies: Humorous or Serious?

Country singer Blake Shelton once said, “We all got a hillbilly bone down deep inside,” (“TOP 25 HILLBILLY QUOTES”). Whether or not what Blake Shelton said is true, one can examine stereotypes and cultural expectations set by different depictions of “hillbillies.” While “The Beverly Hillbillies” and other television adaptations of people from Appalachia display cultural expectations such as a lack of connection with the world beyond the house and therefore a lack of activism, written depictions such as *The Coal Tattoo* show the opposite.

Television representations of “hillbillies” such as “The Beverly Hillbillies” allude to people from Appalachia lacking knowledge of the outside world. For example, in “The Beverly Hillbillies,” the Clampett family was unaware of planes or telephones; when the man from the petroleum company said he needed to phone to Tulsa, Jed Clampett replied, “Maybe you better sit down for a spell,” (5:47). The Clampetts were aware that their swamp contained a wealth of oil, but they did not seem to realize the true monetary value of the oil until the petroleum company offered them a fortune to pump it out of the swamp. Jed Clampett did not know that money could be referenced in billions of dollars; instead, he thought there was a new currency (10:56). The Clampetts were so out of touch with the world that they did not think about the possible consequences of the petroleum company pumping the oil out of their swamp. The

company could have taken advantage of the land after they left, and judging from their connection with their land, that may have upset the family.

In addition to a disconnection with the modern world, the Clampetts also were not regularly updated with pop culture. Jed inquired about a movie star who he did not know had been dead for years. He and the grandmother of the family were unaware of the star's passing because they had not been to town or seen a movie in a long time (16:29). Going to town or seeing a movie was a rarity for the Clampetts. The Clampetts were also unsure about the appeal of living in California until they were told that movie stars lived there. Finally, at the end of the episode, the Clampetts thought that the mansion they purchased was a prison because it was so large and had gates, when in fact it looked similar to all of the other houses in the area ("The Beverly Hillbillies").

In *The Coal Tattoo*, protagonists Anneth and Easter (as well as the other minor characters) were aware of their surroundings beyond their home in Free Creek, Kentucky. Though she had never been, Anneth knew that aspiring musicians moved to or visited Nashville to pursue their dreams. She knew what the city would be like before she went with Matthew Morgan, so other than the normal initial awe, she was not surprised. The sisters also knew popular music; they often sang when they visited parties and honkey tonks (House). The mention of music was prominent in *The Coal Tattoo*; a reader can use this to infer the characters' knowledge of pop culture outside of Free Creek. When Anneth and Easter were apart, they called each other on pay phones, and Anneth listened to the radio toward the end of the novel and heard a song that Matthew Morgan wrote about her, so they understood modern technology (House 254).

Not only were the characters in *The Coal Tattoo* aware of pop culture and modern technology, but they also knew and despised that the Altamont Mining Company was going to start strip mining their land. Anneth and Easter were activists against strip mining. They knew it was going to take place, which inspired their activism. Easter and Anneth (who was pregnant) laid in front of bulldozers to protest the strip mining, and Easter even went to prison for acting out against the mining (House 293-300). The sisters' activism was also clear when Anneth was dating Liam and had dinner with him and his parents. She spoke her mind to Liam's father, who was involved in the company's leadership, about how the strip mining was not justified (House 180-183).

Through their knowledge of music, radio, and telephones, along with their activism, Easter and Anneth were in tune with the world outside of Free Creek. Silas House, the author of *The Coal Tattoo*, did not write the novel in such a fashion that the reader would want to laugh at the sisters' and other supporting characters' every day lives. The portrayal of people from Appalachia in *The Coal Tattoo* was serious, and led a reader to respect the characters along with the people they represented. Conversely, "The Beverly Hillbillies" was meant to be humorous. The show portrayed a family with no knowledge of life beyond their home. The depiction inspired the audience to laugh and to realize that they knew much more than the Clampetts. In turn, depictions such as "The Beverly Hillbillies" lead audience members to believe that the characters were not smart, which then leads the audience to believe that the people who were portrayed were neither smart nor connected to the outside world. The manner in which characters are portrayed and the cultural expectations they create lead to opinions on the people who the

characters were portraying. This was especially evident in “The Beverly Hillbillies” as opposed to *The Coal Tattoo*.

Works Cited

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