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An Isolating and Repressive Force: The Image of the Southern Lady in the Work of Lee Smith

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An Isolating and Repressive Force:
The Image of the Southern Lady in the Work of Lee Smith

A Thesis
Presented to
The Faculty of the Department of American Studies
The College of William and Mary in Virginia

In Partial Fulfillment
Of the Requirements for the Degree of
Master of Arts

by
Deborah R. Wesley
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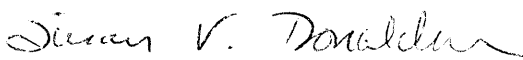
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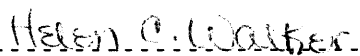


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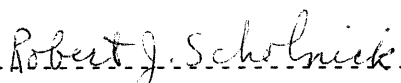
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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study is to explore manifestations of the the nineteenth-century image of the Southern lady in the work of Lee Smith, a contemporary Southern writer whose writings focus primarily upon Southern women. I have divided Lee Smith's heroines into three groups in their relation to the myth of the Southern lady.

The first group of female characters cling to the ideal of the Southern lady in reaction to the modernization and disintegration of order that they see around them. These women come to see themselves as upholders of the ideals of the Southern past, and by holding on to aristocratic notions of class, they isolate themselves from their communities.

The second group of women are searching for a sense of identity, and they try on the role of the Southern lady as one which their community approves. However, they ultimately discover that the image of the Southern lady hinders rather than helps their search for an individual identity.

The third group of women do not allow themselves to be trapped by the image of the Southern lady. They reject any stereotype that limits their individuality and self-expression. They refuse to become caught up in the class pretensions and social distinctions that isolate Southern ladies from their communities, and, therefore, they are able to become integral members of their communities.

By offering this third group of women, Smith gives hope for the future of the South. Smith's fiction reveals the corruption, destruction, and stagnation at the roots of the image of the Southern lady. Yet despite the influence that the image of the Southern lady still seems to exert over many of Smith's characters, her work also suggests that the strength of the image's hold upon the minds and lives of Southern women is weakening. Nearly all of Smith's female characters must confront the image of the Southern lady at some point in their lives, yet relatively few of them allow that image to dictate and control their lives. And Smith's strongest and most emotionally healthy characters are those who flamboyantly reject the image of the Southern lady.

AN ISOLATING AND REPRESSIVE FORCE:
THE IMAGE OF THE SOUTHERN LADY IN THE WORK OF LEE SMITH

CHAPTER I

THE LEGACY OF THE SOUTHERN LADY IN THE WORK OF LEE SMITH

In The Ethnic Southerners, George Brown Tindall claims that the American South and the ideas that make us view the South as a culturally distinct region of the United States are inextricably tied to mythology. Tindall uses Mark Schorer's definition of myth--"A myth is a large, controlling image that gives philosophical meaning to the facts of ordinary life; that is, which has organizing value for experience" (qtd. in Tindall 23). However, though Tindall admits that cultural myths are useful in that they help us to create meaning and organize our response to the world in which we live, he also sees the dangers inherent in creating myths: "There is, of course, always a danger of illusion, a danger that in ordering one's vision of reality, the myth may predetermine the categories of perception, rendering one blind to things that do not fit into the mental image" (Tindall 23). This danger is obvious in the myths that surround Southern women, especially the myth of the Southern lady.

Although the period when this particular myth was most powerful has certainly passed, we still see its influences in the works of contemporary Southern writers. In a 1987 article, Catherine Clinton, author of The Plantation Mistress, emphasizes the strong hold that symbols and images still have upon the Southern imagination, and she claims that an analysis

of symbolism and iconography is essential to our understanding of the roles played by women in Southern society. According to Clinton, "Images remain coercive forces within this society--not ephemeral or extinct relics" ("Women and Southern History" 45).

Following Tindall's and Clinton's lead, I plan to analyze the image of the nineteenth-century ideal of the Southern womanhood in the works of Lee Smith, a Southern woman who writes primarily about Southern women. Ms. Smith is currently teaching and writing at North Carolina State University in Raleigh, North Carolina. Her writings include two collections of short stories, Cakewalk (1981) and Me and My Baby View the Eclipse (1990), and eight novels, The Last Day the Dogbushes Bloomed (1968), Something in the Wind (1971), Fancy Strut (1973), Blackmountain Breakdown (1981), Oral History (1983), Family Linen (1985), and most recently Fair and Tender Ladies (1989). Despite the century and a half that has elapsed since the image of the Southern lady reigned supreme throughout the South, I find that the image remains a useful tool with which to explore Lee Smith's works, for many of her heroines act in response to vestiges of the image that remain in twentieth-century Southern society. In this essay, I will explore the manifestations of the tenacious myth of the Southern lady in Lee Smith's works and the implications of this strong hold that the image of the Southern lady exercises over the Southern community.

Lee Smith most often puts her characters in the setting she knows best, the contemporary South (1970s and 80s) in the varied regions of Virginia and North Carolina. However, Fancy Strut is set in Alabama, and both Oral History and Fair and Tender Ladies contain episodes occurring

in the late nineteenth or the early twentieth-century. Despite their various backgrounds and time periods, Lee Smith's heroines can be divided into three groups in their relation to the myth of the Southern lady. The first group of female characters clings ferociously to the ideal of the Southern lady in reaction to the modernization and disintegration of order that they see around them. These women are usually older, or heavily influenced by older women, and they fight the frightening changes taking place in their lives and in their communities by holding tightly to the untarnished ideal of the Southern lady. These "ladies" come to see themselves as upholders of the ideals of the Southern past, and they cut themselves off from their modern communities as a result. They view themselves as "a class above" the majority of their neighbors, and, therefore, the image of the Southern lady emerges as an isolating force in Lee Smith's novels.

When asked how the theme of the Southern lady works into her novels and short stories, Lee Smith offers these older characters as adherents to the image of the Southern lady (PC). However, I find that a second group of characters is also struggling with the constrictions of the myth of the Southern lady, for the image of the Southern lady is also a force that inhibits self-expression and individuality in Smith's novels. Consequently, the second group of Smith's heroines are young and confused, and they mistakenly attempt to discover their own identities by trying on a role that society presents as suitable, a role that clearly owes its origins to the nineteenth-century ideal of the Southern lady. Smith's writings show that the role Southern women are asked to play hinders rather than helps their search for an individual identity. When the

contemporary woman allows herself to become entangled in the myth of the Southern lady, she becomes either a passive victim unable to achieve self-fulfillment, or she destroys her opportunities to become a part of her community by isolating and distancing herself from those around her.

It makes perfect sense that the heroine will be unable to define herself as an individual if she takes on a role that the community has asked her to adopt. However, it is ironic that the heroine simultaneously isolates herself from the community when she takes on the very role that the community persuades her to play. As an emblem of racial purity, genteel aristocracy, and moral virtue, the nineteenth-century image of the Southern lady represented all that the reconstructed South romanticized about its lost past. Thus, the ideal of the Southern lady came to represent the community's ideal of itself, and Southerners ignored the cruelty and injustice in the slave system of the Old South as they chose to focus instead upon the pure, unsullied image of the Southern lady. Smith's works suggest that during the second half of the twentieth century, Southern women are still asked to mold themselves into the Southern lady's image as Southerners try nostalgically to cling to a rapidly fading past. Southerners who miss the days of strict class, race, and gender distinctions call upon Southern women to remember that they are "ladies" and to preserve the social hierarchy. Yet once the Southern woman has accepted her position on the pedestal she is isolated, both because she might buy into the idea of her own superiority and because icons are not expected to mingle with the people. Thus, the Southern woman is trapped. In order to be accepted by the community she must set herself apart from it.

Moreover, when the community demands that the Southern woman conform to the image of the Southern lady, it is sacrificing the Southern woman as an individual to the ideal of the Southern lady as a cultural phenomenon. Icons are not only isolated; they are also refused the freedom to be individuals. When Southern women allow themselves to be defined by the image of the Southern lady, they limit their sense of self to a facade turned to the community. However, Smith does see hope for today's Southern women, for her third group of women does not seem to be trapped by the image of the Southern lady at all. Instead, these mountain women or down-to-earth "good time" girls are either unaware of the behavior expected of the Southern lady, or they consciously reject a stereotype that they realize limits their individuality and capacity for living. Most importantly, these women ignore the class distinctions upon which the myth of the Southern lady is founded, and, therefore, they are able to participate fully in their communities. These women are appealing in their strength and vivacity, and Smith clearly sets them up in opposition to the women who become entrapped in the myth of the Southern lady. Rather than becoming caught up in the class pretensions and social distinctions that isolate Southern ladies from their communities, these women embrace their neighbors. Their honesty is refreshing when contrasted with the stiff, painted masks of the women who still hope to find meaning in the image of the Southern lady.

By giving us this third group of women, Lee Smith gives us hope for the South, for these women are no less Southern than the Southern ladies of the past. The South, fearful of change, has clung to the image of the Southern lady, for it would like to see itself as a pure and shining moral

bastion. But Smith reveals the corruption, destruction, and stagnation beneath the image of the Southern lady. Nevertheless, we are not left to wander endlessly in moral decay and worn-out images. The strong women in Smith's novels who reject the debilitating restrictions of the Southern lady image give the South its future.

CHAPTER II

THE MYTH OF THE SOUTHERN LADY

In examining Lee Smith's works, I will use the definition of the Southern lady that Ann Goodwyn Jones uses in Tomorrow is Another Day: The Woman Writer in the South, 1859-1936. She characterizes the mythical Southern lady as "compliant, deferential, sacrificial, nurturant, domestic, quietly and uncontroversially intelligent, chaste, beautiful, cultured, religious, and loyal to her region and its definition of herself" (Jones, Tomorrow 352). The Southern lady was expected to charm and attract men with her dazzling beauty and grace, but even more important were the moral strengths that composed her inner character. The image of the Southern lady called for a neat and clean appearance, but showiness and vanity were to be avoided. And while the Southern lady was expected to be morally strong, physically she was thought to be frail and weak.

The internal requirements that the Southern lady was expected to meet were demanding. She was to be intuitive rather than analytically intelligent. The Southern lady's feelings should naturally dominate any reasoning ability she might possess. In fact, she was expected to be so innocent and unworldly that cultivated ignorance was the result (Scott 4). Thus, the Southern lady was expected to be innocent of worldly knowledge; her piety and purity should be unquestionable. It was the Southern lady's

duty to counsel her husband and children so that they might grow as morally strong as herself, and she must work to curb the natural vices to which her husband, as a man, was more susceptible (Scott 5). According to the myth, pure women were not sexual beings--that they were "incapable of erotic feeling," and "that only men and depraved women were sexual creatures" (Scott 54).

Yet however morally superior the Southern lady, she was still expected always to submit to the will of her husband or father. As a wife, the Southern lady was never to oppose her husband's will or even show her displeasure, no matter how bad her husband's behavior was. She was always required to show complete confidence in her husband's judgment, and if she disagreed, she suffered in silence (Scott 6). Of course, this demand for submission placed the Southern lady in an awkward position, for how was she to counsel and uplift her husband if she could not disagree with him? Yet the the image of the Southern lady dealt with ideals rather than realities, and in the ideal situation, the husband would respect and care for his wife, children, and slaves so that the patriarchal system might endure.

Many scholars search for the roots of the myth of the Southern lady by analyzing the needs of the nineteenth-century Southern patriarch and his concern for the survival of the plantation system. For instance, Ann Goodwyn Jones claims that the image of the Southern lady was "born in the imaginations of white, slaveholding men" and that it was tied to these white slave holders' questions concerning race, sex, and class (Tomorrow 8). Many scholars, including W.J. Cash, Anne Scott, and Lillian Smith, have found the origin of the image of the Southern lady in the Southern

white aristocrat's need to assert racial supremacy. According to this theory, the Southern lady's purity keeps her from desiring sex, especially sex from a black man. And since the white man "protects her from the black man's presumably uncontrollable sexual desire, the Southern lady's genes are pure white" (Jones, Tomorrow 9). Thus in both the antebellum and postbellum South, the Southern lady was glorified as a symbol of the pure, white, legitimate line. However, the white man needed to release his sexual desires somewhere, and he chose to do so in the company of the black slave. To placate his guilty conscience, the white slaveholder raised the white Southern lady higher and higher on her pedestal as the black woman became a symbol of wanton sexuality (Jones, Tomorrow 10). Lillian Smith, author of Killers of the Dream, puts it this way: "The more trails the white man made to the backyard cabins, the higher he raised his wife on the pedestal when he returned to the big house" (Dream 103).

Jones sees even deeper roots of the image in the patriarchal western traditions brought over from Europe. The separation of women into whore or angel, total depravity or complete purity, originated in the western myths that evolved from Christian doctrine. This dichotomy of angel and whore manifested itself in the South by having the white Southern lady represent purity and virtue while the black slave woman represented sexual promiscuity and evil (Jones, Tomorrow 12). These theories concerning the roots of the image of the Southern lady suggest why Sara Evans claims that the image of the Southern lady "revealed more about the needs of white planters than about the actual lives of women, white or black" ("Women" 1353).

Thus even during the nineteenth century, the image of the Southern

lady was a myth rather than a reality, a myth that made paradoxical demands of women. It was a concept that defined and structured women's lives rather than a description of who and what they really were. Moreover, the image of the Southern lady has always been a luxury of Southern aristocrats. The poor white women and the slaves, who sweated in the fields and factories, had no time to worry about conforming to the lofty ideals of the Southern lady (Scott xi). In Within the Plantation Household (1988), Elizabeth Fox-Genovese supports Scott's contention, yet she also testifies to the power of the myth of the Southern lady to shape cultural ideas and conventions:

The figure of the lady, especially the plantation mistress, dominated southern ideals of womanhood. That slaveholding ladies were massively outnumbered by nonslaveholding or small-slaveholding women challenges any easy assumption about the relation between the ideal and reality but does not undermine the power of the ideal. (47)

Fox-Genovese has made an important contribution to the study of the ideal of the Southern lady in paying close attention to issues of race and class. She claims that despite the fact that nineteenth-century Southern women shared the "experience of life in rural households dominated by men" (43), most of these women did not feel themselves to be "sisters." According to Fox-Genovese, class relations between nineteenth-century Southern women remained "essentially hierarchical" (43). In most cases, white women who owned many slaves viewed white women who owned fewer slaves or no slaves at all as inferior, and all white women viewed black

women as inferior. Fox-Genovese insists upon the importance of class distinction to the ideal of the lady in her comment, "Women, to be ladies, have to have servants" (197). Thus, the image of the Southern lady not only shaped gender perceptions; it shaped class and race perceptions as well. If a woman was considered to be a Southern lady, by implication, she also belonged to a certain race and class.

Finally, the image of the Southern lady was such a lofty ideal that even the nineteenth-century Southern women who were in the position to try to conform to the image were bound to frustrate themselves in the attempt. Ann Goodwyn Jones asserts:

The image wearing Dixie's diadem is not a human being; it is a marble statue, beautiful and silent, eternally inspiring and eternally still. Rather than a person, the Confederate woman is a personification, effective only as she works in others' imaginations. Efforts to join person and personification, to make self into symbol, must fail because the ideal of Southern womanhood specifically denies the self.

(Tomorrow 4)

The ideal of the Southern lady was not only unattainable in its demands for perfection, but it also denied Southern women their natural human rights to individual thought and self-expression. Ideally, the Southern lady was to always agree with her father, husband, and social group, but if she should dare to disagree with her patriarchal guides, she was not expected to complain or assert an individual opinion. Rather, she suffered and submitted in silence (Jones, Tomorrow 37).¹ The image of

the Southern lady retained a powerful influence over the South by becoming a symbol of the South itself. Both before and after the war, an attack upon the image of the Southern lady became an attack upon the entire South (Jones, Tomorrow xii). In The Mind of the South, W. J. Cash asserts that to the Confederate South, the Southern lady became "the mystic symbol of [the South's] nationality in the face of the foe" (89). Rarely was a Southern sermon preached or battle call given without reference to the South's goal to glorify and preserve the honor of the sacred Southern woman. Cash claims, "At the last, I verily believe, the ranks of the Confederacy went rolling into battle in the misty conviction that it was wholly for her that they fought" (89).

This powerful identification of the Southern lady with her region is one way in which the image of the Southern lady differs from the British Victorian lady or the American true woman. Both Ann Firor Scott and Ann Goodwyn Jones admit that the image of the Southern lady has much in common with the British Victorian lady and the American true woman, yet they find that the image of the Southern lady is unique in two ways. First, the ideal of the Southern lady became integral to the South's conception of itself. Second, social roles of Southern women were even more confining than those of women elsewhere, and the ideal of the Southern lady seems to have lasted longer than the ideal of the lady that was present in nineteenth-century American and English culture as a whole.

Because the image of the Southern lady is so central to the nineteenth-century Southerner's regional identity, the image is a useful tool with which to measure Southerners' resistance to change. Lillian Smith insists that white Southerners have always had a special resistance

to change--"change was the evil word" (16). After their defeat by the North, Southerners (and also Northerners) tended to look back nostalgically upon the Old South as a glorious era that had been destroyed by new and vulgar economic and social changes. In resisting these changes, Southerners often called upon the image of the Southern lady as an example of the purity, honor, and moral sanctity that they felt characterized the antebellum South. By glorifying this image and promoting it as symbolic of the antebellum South, Southerners were able to ignore the gross social injustices and moral corruption that pervaded slavery and the plantation system.

Even into the twentieth century, Southerners clung to the myths of the Old South, especially the image of the Southern lady, as they resisted the disturbing changes that were taking place around them.² While modern scientific and social theories brought liberated moral standards, new ideas, and economic changes to the South as elsewhere, the elevated standards of the Southern lady, however impossible to attain, lingered on in the modern Southern mind. In an era of rapid social, industrial, and intellectual change, Southern men and women of the early twentieth century were drawn to the comforting answers that the myths and traditions of the Old South gave them. They found the old standards impossible to attain but nonetheless appealing in their promise of stability.

Women who have come of age in the 1970s and 80s may feel far removed from the standards imposed upon nineteenth and early twentieth-century women; however, I feel that an examination of a contemporary woman writer from the South, Lee Smith, suggests that the influence of the Southern lady's image is still felt by Southern women of the late twentieth

century. Although Lee Smith states that she consciously employs the image of the Southern lady only occasionally in her writing (PC), many of her female characters are responding to vestiges of the image of the Southern lady present in twentieth-century Southern society. The image of the Southern lady is an integral part of the contemporary Southern woman's received tradition. Therefore, the wealth of associations attached to the image of the Southern lady can shape Lee Smith's fiction and characters without the author herself being completely aware of the image's power.

Many of Smith's heroines are attempting to come to terms with the image of the Southern lady without losing their individual identities. Ann Firor Scott writes that Southern women have begun to "shake loose from the tyranny of a single monolithic image of woman and [are] now free, for better or worse, to struggle to be themselves" (230-31), and Lee Smith would definitely agree. However, we also find in Smith's works many twentieth-century women who are still plagued by the image of the Southern lady. They are struggling to be themselves, but they are still hampered by social demands that they conform to the ideal of feminine perfection that dictated the lives of their mothers, grandmothers, and great-grandmothers.

CHAPTER III

THE PEDESTAL--A BREEDING GROUND FOR NARCISSISM AND ISOLATION

Throughout her work, Lee Smith explores the tenacious image of the Southern lady in the modern South, and she often portrays the older women as more deeply entrenched in the myths of the Old South and their roles as Southern ladies. Old women such as Miss Iona of Fancy Strut and Miss Elizabeth of Family Linen cling to the image of the Southern lady in an attempt to ward off change. Persistent in their efforts to embody the ideals of the Southern lady, Miss Iona and Miss Elizabeth look back nostalgically upon the Old South as a world of beauty and refinement, and they see themselves as the last true guardians of truth, beauty and elegance in a world that is rapidly becoming cheap, materialistic and gawdy. However, Southern women who wholeheartedly embrace their place on the pedestal are not always old women dreaming of the glories (perhaps imagined) of their youth. Young women can also become caught up in the image so that they worship their own artistic taste, moral purity, delicate health, or whatever other characteristic of the Southern lady might set them apart from the "common" people. Stella, a middle-aged woman in the short story "Cakewalk," and Jennifer, the young heroine of "Artists," use the image of the Southern lady to make themselves feel important and to resist change. Attitude rather than age determines whether a woman will set herself up as a Southern lady. And,

significantly, Smith's works view these women who willingly take on their role as Southern ladies as clearly responsible for their own isolation from society. By clinging to ideals of the past, they willfully set themselves apart from their present communities.

In Fancy Strut, Lee Smith creates the fascinating Miss Iona to represent Southern nostalgia for the "good ole' days" and highminded disgust at the vulgar economic and social changes of the twentieth century. Fancy Strut is set in the small town of Speed, not far from Mobile, Alabama, in the early 1970s, and Miss Iona is the society and ladies' editor of the local weekly newspaper. She writes all the obituaries, reports births in her column "Hello There," and describes weddings, anniversaries, parties and "all the other 'important' events that mark the passing of time in Speed" (FS 4). Miss Iona sees herself as the "custodian of beauty and truth in Speed, the champion of the pure and good" (FS 4); therefore, she takes her job very seriously, conscientiously describing all local social events as she feels they "ought" to take place. The truth for Miss Iona is not the cold, hard facts. On the contrary, the truth is the facts embellished according to her impeccable taste--"Sometimes she draped everyone in mink, regardless of the season. She decorated tables to suit her fancy, and put peau-de-soie slippers on whom she chose" (FS 4).

Thus Miss Iona is known as an eccentric old woman, and her seemingly simple articles can become quite controversial. But Miss Iona has been the ladies' editor of the Messenger since she was a young girl when her father published the paper. Upon the death of her father's successor, a new and progressive young editor, Manly Neighbors, takes charge of the

Messenger, and he keeps Miss Iona on out of a sense of respect for his elders. Miss Iona sets herself up in opposition to the modern ways of the new editor. She is disgusted by his insistence that she interview the local prize-winning majorettes, and when she receives the full-length photo of the girls in their skimpy costumes, Miss Iona is so outraged by the "unbelievably vulgar ten white thighs" (FS 275) that she sadistically decapitates and dismembers the figures of the girls in the pictures with her scissors before crumpling the pieces into a wad and tossing them into the waste can.

In her outrage, Miss Iona follows firmly in the tradition that it is the Southern lady's duty to purify society and civilize the lesser beings around her. From a very young age, Miss Iona sets herself up on the pedestal of Southern womanhood--"At the age of eight, little Iona had ceased to be a child. She had become a small lady. She was a small 'perfect' lady, and she had--perhaps unconsciously--rid herself all the traits which would serve to make such a small lady less than perfect" (FS 156). She cultivated a love for books and poetry and detested blood, violence, loud voices and alcohol. While she worshipped her father, she would never allow her purity to be sullied by his (or anyone else's) touch.

Eventually, Miss Iona came to understand that it was her "mission" on earth, her "call" so to speak, to "translate Art into the world" (FS 158). For Miss Iona, art, truth and beauty become indistinguishable. Rather than becoming discouraged by what she sees as an increasingly vulgar world, Miss Iona is challenged by it: "The sillier and more bourgeois the population grew, the greater became the surge and swell of

inspiration in Miss Iona's breast" (FS 159).

Miss Iona willingly abandons any opportunity to participate in life so that she might maintain her position on the pedestal as an object of emulation. What she fails to realize is that in reality she is merely an object of scorn. She willfully isolates herself from her community because she believes herself to be superior to her neighbors. When opportunities for a true social life come her way, she rejects them. The biology teacher who courts her in her youth is repeatedly rejected, for "Miss Iona doubted very much that she could have forced herself to sortir with a man who daily dissected small green frogs" (FS 158). After her father's death, Miss Iona is alone in the world, for she can find no one else in the town who is on her artistic level. She does not seem to mind the solitude so much as she minds being forced to deal with the common people in order to fulfill her mission of translating Art into the world. She sees this inevitable contact with "real people" as a cross she must bear with "a martyr's grace" (FS 158). And she confronts the inconvenience of associating with the masses by "keep[ing] them abstract" (FS 158). She looks at them as so much clay to be molded and "awakened through Art into a higher form. Most people were nothing. Art was all" (FS 159). Thus Lee Smith writes that Miss Iona "withdrew from the world of man" (FS 158). She lives in in an illusory world of her own creation. By isolating herself in an imaginary world she fails to really live at all.

One of Lee Smith's strongest charges against the Southern lady's image, then, is that it forces Southern women to reside on a pedestal that prevents them from integrating with the community. Life on the pedestal

is lonely and, ironically, shallow. What appears to be a position of privilege is merely a position of isolation that breeds self-absorption and self-aggrandizement. The result is a woman such as Miss Iona--in love with herself and hating the rest of the world. No clearer illustration of the destructive effects of self-imposed isolation is needed than the scene at the end of the novel in which Miss Iona neatly types up the obituaries of Manly Neighbors, the five majorettes, and their mother, seals them into a manilla envelope marked "To Be Opened in Case of Emergency" (FS 277), and giggles insidiously at her sick private joke. Miss Iona's arrogance has turned into a type of madness. She is intoxicated by her own hatred, a hatred that has its source in her isolated state on the pedestal of Southern womanhood. Here, the ideal of the Southern lady becomes a death-dealing force, for it feeds a hate that drives Miss Iona to commit imaginary murder.

Like Miss Iona, Elizabeth Bird Hess of Family Linen isolates herself from her community by clinging to the image of herself as a Southern lady, and she will be driven one step further by the image into committing actual murder. Elizabeth is on her deathbed at the opening of the novel, but the reader learns much of her through the accounts of her children and her own diary. All of Elizabeth's children affirm that whatever else she was, "Miss Elizabeth was a lady" (FL 123). The image that she presents to the world is so vital to her self-concept that she does not allow herself to relax for a minute. Childhood admonitions on the importance of a lady's appearance do not go unheeded, for Elizabeth "never appeared in public without being thoroughly turned out: the blue curls in place, the stockings, heels, and earrings and matching necklace" (FL 159).

The journal that Elizabeth kept as a young woman shows her conformity to the traditional image of the Southern lady and her romantic idealization of the past. She describes her father riding up the hill on horseback, swinging his daughters in his arms, and embracing his adored wife: "For Oh, how Father loved his Ladies! Every roughness of manner every masculine Vice, was left at the foot of the hill" (FL 167). The sporadic capitalization in Elizabeth's writing style indicating her romantic nature is much like Miss Iona's insistence upon a need for the dramatic in her writing. The vision of both women is distorted. Where they should see reality, they instead manufacture fantasy, for they are attempting to live a fantasy, an ideal.

Miss Elizabeth's description of her early childhood is so idealized that any other point of time in her life would necessarily have suffered by comparison. Her father was always "grinning devilishly behind his flamboyant Moustaches" (FL 166) while her mother was "shamefaced and beautifully blushing" (FL 166). And though Elizabeth admits that her father probably possessed some faults--a hasty temper, an inclination to drink intemperately--she subscribes to the Southern tradition that the Southern lady acts as a civilizing influence upon less civilized man. In commenting on her father's carelessness after her mother's death, Elizabeth admits, "Without Mother's calming Influence, I suspect, Father's decisions were often hasty, rash, unwise" (FL 182). In her historical analysis of the image of the Southern lady, Anne Scott points out the irony in the belief that the "paragon of virtue"--the Southern lady--was thought to be in need of the influence and direction of a man, who was "by the nature of his sex more susceptible to vice and immorality" (6). Yet

Elizabeth fails to see this irony. She feels that however superior her mother is, her duty is always to put the needs of her husband first and ultimately to submit to his authority.

In Elizabeth's description, her mother appears as the epitome of grace, beauty, kindness and domestic accomplishment. By willingly embracing the image of the Southern lady, Elizabeth seeks to emulate the romantic vision she had of her mother. After her mother's death, Elizabeth sees herself as one of "Duty's handmaidens" (FL 181)--responsible for taking care of her father and sisters and managing the household as her mother would have done. Elizabeth emphasizes her own self-sacrifice in giving up her schooling to attend to the needs of her family. She describes the frustrations she had to endure in trying to control her sisters--silly Fay and unladylike Nettie. Yet Elizabeth insists that she is pious and sustained by her faith--"my own Faith is ever strong, growing through all Adversity, and ever Strengthening me" (FL 176). Elizabeth seems to be trying to fulfill Thomas Nelson Page's description of the life of the Southern lady--"Her life was one long act of devotion,--devotion to God, devotion to her husband, devotion to her children, devotion to her servants, to the poor, to humanity" (qtd. in Scott 9). But though Elizabeth feels compelled to devote herself to the needs of others, she, like Miss Iona, disdains the "common" people.

Just as Miss Iona's immersion in the image of the Southern lady causes her to feel superior to the community of Speed, Elizabeth's vision of herself as a Southern lady causes her to undervalue the local boys who seek her attentions. She confesses, "I had found none among the town lads to interest me. My Sensibilities were too refined, perhaps, or their

Merits too few" (FL 186). Elizabeth's romantic notions of courtship cause her to choose a decidedly weak young man with whom she ecstatically reads poetry beneath the willows. But when he jilts her for a woman of greater means, she retreats back up to her house on the hill to live alone with her sisters until a true scoundrel, Jewell Rife, charms her into marriage. Clearly, Elizabeth is attempting to pattern her relationships with men after the relationship she imagined existed between her mother and father, in which her mother acted as a "refining" agent upon her father's less than perfect moral character. Thus the image of the Southern lady not only maintains distinctions between the classes, but it implicitly reinforces the boundaries between men and women as well.

Once married, Elizabeth tries even harder to conform to the ideal of the Southern lady by refusing to acknowledge her husband's vices. Elizabeth patterns her behavior after the antebellum women Catherine Clinton describes in The Plantation Mistress. Clinton notes, "Southern custom expected a woman to stay with her husband in spite of maltreatment" (80). Thus Elizabeth, appearing to follow the nineteenth-century Southern lady's code of behavior, blinds herself to the obvious when Jewell makes frequent overnight business trips of an undefined nature, and she even refuses to acknowledge that Jewell is forcing her half-witted sister Fay to have sexual relations with him. When Elizabeth's sister Nettie confronts Elizabeth with her knowledge of what is happening, Elizabeth refuses to believe her. Although Jewell disappears soon afterwards--murdered either by Elizabeth or Fay--Nettie doubts that Elizabeth ever did fully admit to herself "exactly what all went on in those bad years" (FL 214). Elizabeth's self-willed blindness results, in part, from her wish

to maintain an air of respectability. In the eyes of the Southern lady, no private shame compares to the horror of a public shame, for the image of the Southern lady is, in fact, defined by its public nature. The image would not exist without the public or the community because it has evolved to serve the needs of the community.

Elizabeth's steely refusal to come down from her pedestal and admit the imperfections in her life isolates her from her entire community and even her own family. The only time she has anything to do with her sister Nettie is when she needs Nettie to help her hide Fay's pregnancy and prevent a public scandal. Elizabeth's daughter Lacy insists that her mother could never "see beyond the iron pink palace of niceness and illusion, of should and sweet, which she had constructed around all of [them]" (FL 69). The palace may have been pretty and pink, but its walls are nonetheless iron and impenetrable. Lacy continues, "She never knew any of us, really" (FL 69), and when pondering her mother's house, she decides,

The house was symbolic of so many things: of the fact that [Elizabeth] alone, of the three sisters who had grown up there, carried on the traditions which their mother had tried to instill in them; of her own lofty ideas, ideals, and sensibilities; and of, finally, her profound isolation.

(FL 73)

The house of Elizabeth's mother, the house Elizabeth proclaims to be "a home fit for a Lady" (FL 170), turns out to be Elizabeth's self-made prison--"an iron pink palace of niceness and illusion" (FL 69).

Although Stella, of "Cakewalk," is a middle-aged working woman, she, too, is deeply affected by the dictates of the ideal of the nineteenth-century Southern lady. She does her best to keep herself apart from people, for she is like Miss Iona and Miss Elizabeth in her self-absorption and feelings of superiority. Smith admits that Stella is a handsome woman but notes that "her face is proud and stand-offish, sealed up tight with Estee Lauder makeup" (CW 226). The makeup acts as a barrier to the rest of the world, a wall behind which Stella can hide her true feelings. Moreover, the makeup is a mask with which Stella prolongs her rapidly fading youth. Her adamancy about maintaining her mother's social standards has much to do with her attempts to ward off the inevitability of old age.

Stella's pretensions of aristocracy are evident in her embarrassment over her sister Florrie's behavior. Florrie, earthy and casual, is as different from Stella as she can be, and her eccentric behavior upsets Stella, for Stella feels that she and Florrie "were not raised to be town characters . . . they were brought up in considerable refinement thanks entirely to their sweet mother" (CW 227). Stella's mother taught her girls that they had "obligations" to the town as the "creme de la creme" of society, so it is no wonder that Stella considers herself to be "on the top rung of the social crust" and, by implication, on the Southern lady's pedestal (CW 227).

Stella's position in the cosmetic department at Belk's further illustrates her image of herself as an aristocratic Southern lady. In the cosmetics department "everything is elegant" (CW 227). Before the store opens, Stella serves herself tea, being sure to use a china cup and

saucer. Like a regal lady, Stella sips her tea slowly and seats herself on "her high pink tufted stool," greeting the other employees when they come in as a queen might acknowledge her subjects: "she speaks to them pleasantly one by one and pities their makeup and the way they look so thrown together" (CW 228). Truly interacting with these employees would be beneath Stella's dignity. Stella even refuses to wait on any but "the very best people in town" (CW 228). She sells only the most exclusive lines of makeup, for no one but the "creme de la creme" can afford these. And as a salesperson, Stella is "calm, aloof, and refined" (CW 228). She does not try to push for sales; "she doesn't seem to care if anybody buys anything or not" (CW 229). Aggressive behavior would not be fitting to her image as a Southern lady.

Even as a young girl, Stella is concerned about maintaining her image as a "little lady" and her family's social prestige as one of the first families of the community. She worries because her sister Florrie associates with "common" people, complaining that Florrie has "stepped off the upper crust straight into scum" (CW 242). Stella feels that if she can maintain her position on the pedestal, she can resist the threatening changes in society (an increasingly less hierarchical social structure) and in her own personal life (aging). Although Stella is at least a generation younger than Miss Iona and Miss Elizabeth, she has evidently absorbed much of the ideal of the Southern lady. In Lee Smith's works age does not define the strength of the image of the Southern lady in an individual, for even younger women cling to the security of the image as they attempt to ward off changes in their lives.

Jennifer, the young girl in "Artists," learns the Southern lady's

code of behavior through her grandmother's influence, and she is molded quite easily into a perfect little Southern lady. In fact, she even begins to see herself as an actress playing a role or a doll come to life. Jennifer narrates the story, set in Richmond, Virginia during the late 1970s, and her words often indicate that she is willing herself to conform to the romantic nineteenth-century image of the Southern lady. Her admiration for her grandmother's rose garden is not spontaneous, but cultivated: "I attain the roses and halt before them, self-consciously. I am transfixed by beauty, I think" (AR 101). She continues, "I lean forward, conscious of myself leaning forward, to examine a Peace rose more closely" (AR 101). Jennifer even admits that while the roses are lovely and she is fascinated by their names, she actually prefers baby's breath and snapdragon. But since the roses are the "pride of her [grandmother's] heart" (AR 102), Jennifer attempts to cultivate an aesthetic passion for them.

Thus Jennifer yields to the powerful influence of her grandmother as she takes on the characteristics of the Southern lady. The Southern lady was supposed to be physically weak with a delicate constitution, so Jennifer claims "I am 'sensitive,' 'artistic,' and 'delicate,' and everybody knows this is how I am, because my grandmother has laid down the law" (AR 102). As an example of her sensitivity, Jennifer tells how she took to her bed for three days after her aunt read her "The Little Match Girl." Jennifer's striving for the purity and frailty of the Southern lady is further illustrated by her love for the white pique dress she wears in her grandmother's garden that makes her look even thinner than she already is. In her white dress, with her long blond hair pulled

back by a white velvet bow, Jennifer is the very image of frailty, purity, and innocence. Like a truly pure and virtuous Southern lady, she is pious: "I am all soul these days. I have not missed Sunday school in four years . . . " (AR 102). Even when her family is on vacation, Jennifer attends church and insists that the pastor sign an affidavit acknowledging her presence. When her mother curses, Jennifer simply "ignore[s] her vulgarity" (AR 102).

Jennifer is so determined to maintain her unsullied image that when her cousin grabs her and kisses her on the mouth, she runs upstairs and brushes her teeth. She continues, "Then I go to the bedroom, fling myself down on the bed, and wait to have a nervous breakdown. In anguish she considers the violation of her person, I think" (AR 113). Again, Jennifer describes not so much what she feels as what she thinks she ought to feel. In her thoughts, she seems to parrot worn-out phrases from gothic romances. Similarly, the labels she comes up with for Mollie Crews, her grandfather's mistress, are obviously not of her own construction. She thinks that Mollie is a "fallen woman" and a "Jezebel" (AR 117)--labels she has learned in church or from her grandmother but which she clearly does not understand. Jennifer feels compelled to create narratives into which her actions and the actions of those around her will fit. By insisting that the characters involved, including herself, stay "in character" in a very narrow and controlled way, Jennifer is denying herself and her acquaintances true individuality and the right to change. That Jennifer chooses the Southern lady as her role in the narrative shows the powerful influence that nineteenth-century ideal still has in many contemporary Southern towns. All of Jennifer's attitudes and expressions

are clearly manufactured in an attempt to conform to the ideal of the Southern lady--the image which her grandmother seems to represent. She pursues her artistic "talent" because her grandmother encourages her to do so. She paints, writes poetry, and does "not forget to suffer, either, lying on [her] bed for a while each afternoon in order to do so" (AR 115), for Jennifer's grandmother has insisted that "Great art requires great suffering" (AR 114). When Jennifer is taken from her grandmother's presence, she tries hard to hold on to the ideals of the Southern lady image. In Florida, she writes poems about the sea, avoids the children on the beach who want to play with her, goes on long solitary walks to collect seashells, and "think[s] about sin, art, heaven and hell" (AR 118).

But eventually, the grandmother's influence begins to fade. After realizing that her mother has caused her to break her perfect church attendance record, Jennifer smashes a glass table in a flash of anger. She allows herself a burst of passion that a true Southern lady would never allow, and subsequently she feels free to relax more and more of the restrictions she has placed upon her own behavior. She allows herself to wear a bathing suit, acquire a tan, and even have her ears pierced. When Jennifer does see her grandmother again, the old woman is not the regal presence who once dictated Jennifer's behavior. Her grandmother sits in front of the television set all day and claims to be watching "Art." This scene so affects Jennifer that she comes to a sudden realization. Jennifer realizes that just as her grandmother's belief that the car races on television are art is an illusion, the ideals of the Southern lady are nothing but an illusion that keeps Jennifer from truly

living her life. Upon leaving her grandmother, she races off, has her hair cut into a page boy, and heads straight into the arms of her kissing cousin. Clearly, Jennifer is able to shake off the restricting image of the Southern lady and accept the changes that adolescence is bringing into her life.

In examining these willful Southern ladies, one sees a pattern emerge. The women who enthusiastically take on the role of the Southern lady do so in an attempt to hide from reality--either the reality of a changing world or the reality of a less than perfect life. Therefore, Smith's works portray the image of the Southern lady as an illusion that some Southern women use to hide from real life. In addition, Miss Iona, Miss Elizabeth, and Stella cling to the ideal because it makes them feel superior to their neighbors and because they cannot accept the social changes that 1960s, 70s, and 80s are bringing. Miss Iona is appalled by the increasing vulgarity of her community and views herself as the last true bastion of taste and refinement. Miss Elizabeth denies the harsh reality of her family problems by retreating into the fantasy of herself as the Southern lady of the manor. And Stella rejects her own aging and the destratification of her social world by imagining herself as the leader of the "creme de la creme" of society. While Jennifer initially turns to the ideal of the Southern lady as a refuge from adolescent changes, she eventually discovers that the constrictions of this ideal outweigh its benefits. Lee Smith clearly portrays Jennifer's awakening as positive; however, some of her young heroines will not experience such fruitful epiphanies.

CHAPTER IV
SEARCHING FOR THE SELF

Jennifer's sudden awakening to the debilitating effect of the image of the Southern lady at the end of "The Artists" is a rarity in the works of Lee Smith. Crystal of Black Mountain Breakdown and Brooke of Something in the Wind best exemplify Smith's second group of characters, those who do not cling to the image of the Southern lady but rather "try it on," as if to see if this standard image that society expects them to adopt might answer their own questions about who they are and where they are going. Unlike Jennifer, these young women do not come to abrupt realizations. Instead, they undergo a series of inner struggles, at times yielding to the alluring qualities of the Southern lady, at times consciously rebelling. Throughout, they are searching for a sense of personal and social identity. Yet in most cases the women's search for identity is hindered by their tendency to search for a center outside themselves. Rather than searching within, they seek self-fulfillment in men, motherhood, materialism, social prestige, or religion. Thus, the young women who encounter the ideal of the Southern lady and attempt to incorporate it into their lives suffer a debilitating disjunction between their inner and outer selves. While they attempt to conform outwardly to the demands of the ideal, they never feel comfortable within themselves when they take on the role of the Southern lady.

Lee Smith begins Black Mountain Breakdown, set in the western mountains of Virginia in the late 1970s, with a specific goal in mind--to show the disastrous result that occurs when a woman attempts to alter herself in order to meet the expectations of others, especially the men in her life (PC). At twelve years old, Crystal is searching for a personal identity, and she mistakenly tries to conform to the expectations of her mother, or her school friends, or, as she grows up, the men in her life. The sad result is that Crystal can never really discover who she is, and at the end of the novel she is left in a catatonic state of hopeless passivity.

The opening scene of Black Mountain Breakdown presents the twelve-year-old heroine Crystal watching fireflies on a warm summer night. Fascinated, Crystal does not move to capture the insects, but instead, "only her eyes move to follow the flight, erratic at first as if blown by wind although there is no wind in the hot still damp of early June on the river bank, then up into the dark branches, away and gone" (BB 11). The lightning bugs possess a "small pale flickering light, sickly unearthly yellowish green, fairy light" (BB 11), and as the story progresses, the reader will come to identify these fragile, fairy-like, and "erratic" insects with Crystal herself. Crystal's fragility is implied in her name and re-emphasized by her description: "blond and fair, with features so fine they don't look real sometimes; she looks like an old-fashioned painting of a girl" (BB 15). And like the flickering lights of the fireflies, the "color comes and goes in [Crystal's] cheeks" (BB 15). Crystal's name also suggests the mirror-like nature of her personality. Like a crystal looking glass, Crystal reflects the images around her

rather than emanating an inner light or personality of her own.

The role that Crystal most frequently seeks to play has its roots in the nineteenth-century image of the Southern lady. Crystal will have infrequent bursts of protest against the restrictions of this image, but her outbursts of rebellion are ultimately ineffectual because she can never completely resist her passive tendency to let others define her. Her adolescent search for identity is symbolized by her questioning the identity of her image in the mirror--"Who is it there in the mirror? She sees long bright hair and no face, no eyes, no nose, no mouth. . . . Who? she wonders, shaping the word with the mouth she doesn't have. Who?" (BB 41).

Like Jennifer's obsession in "Artists," Crystal's adolescent search for identity causes her to see herself as an object rather than a subject. She imagines herself in narratives that give her a clear-cut role to perform. When she first enters high school, she views it as an Annette Funicello movie or American Bandstand, and initially, it "confuses Crystal to be in this movie" (BB 47). However, Crystal is quick to discover the social requirements that would correspond to the narrative. And these requirements are the same demands put on the Southern lady a century or so earlier.

The purity that is still demanded of young women is symbolized by Crystal's eighth-grade graduation for which they wear "white dresses and wrist corsages" (BB 48). When Crystal reaches high school, her battle with her emerging sexuality is seen in her relations with Roger Lee Combs and Mack Stiltner. As their names suggest, Roger Lee is the "Southern gentleman" while Mack is considered by the town to be "white trash." With

Roger Lee, Crystal feels unable to express her emerging sexual feelings, but with Mack, Crystal explores her passions.

Roger Lee acts the part of the Southern gentleman with Crystal, for he views her as too pure to touch. He even admits to a classmate that although he has had sexual intercourse with many women, he cannot "bring himself to touch [Crystal's] breasts" (BB 92). Crystal responds to Roger Lee's image of her, for when she is with Roger Lee, she feels compelled to hide her sexual desires. In fact, Crystal thinks more about the social approval she will gain by becoming Roger Lee's girlfriend than about her feelings for Roger Lee himself. When Roger Lee embraces Crystal, she is not thinking of a newly awakened passion within herself: she is "thinking about what her mother will say, about showing the ring off to Agnes and everybody else, about wearing it to school on a chain around her neck" (BB 58). Therefore, Crystal accepts Roger Lee's ring and decides that she will love him. As she makes this decision, she imagines herself in "a long lace dress, running through flowered fields" (BB 58). Thus, Crystal attempts to imagine herself as the chaste goddess Roger Lee, her mother, and her friends would like her to be. Crystal tries to fulfill the needs of her community before her own needs just as the nineteenth-century Southern woman attempted to maintain a precarious balance on the pedestal in order to meet her community's need for a representation of their ideal.

By becoming the community's ideal, Crystal gains social rewards--her mother's approval, her friends' admiration. Yet, Crystal never feels completely comfortable with the image her community seems to admire. For example, when she participates in the beauty contests, Crystal admits to herself that she does not feel as if she is really being herself. Smith

writes, "Crystal is perplexed by her made-up face in the mirror. It doesn't seem to go with her hair. Or the hair doesn't fit the face. Anyway, she doesn't look like herself in the mirror" (BB 105). Crystal seems to sense the disjunction between her inner and outer self that results whenever she tries to mold herself into an image that the community holds in esteem.

One of Crystal's most obvious attempts to free herself from the community's constraining image is her determination to continue dating the disreputable Mack Stiltner despite her mother's and her community's disapproval. With Mack, Crystal feels she can do as she pleases and express her sexual desires:

With Mack she feels she can be herself, whatever that means!
she thinks, grinning, stumbling again on the steps. It means
she can wear a purple shawl if she wants to, for one thing.
It means she can fuck him if she wants to, which she does.
Oh yes. (BB 97)

However, even when Crystal thinks she is celebrating her individuality through her determination to date Mack Stiltner, the reader senses that Crystal is still looking outside herself for herself. For Crystal notes that "it's only when she's with boys that she feels pretty, or popular, or fun. In the way they talk to her and act around her, Crystal can see what they think of her, and then that's the way she is" (BB 136). Crystal can act the wild, loose tramp just as easily as she can act the pure, chaste Southern lady. But in both cases she is performing rather than acting on her own impulses.

Similarly, when Crystal experiences a dramatic religious conversion, she is seeking a sense of self outside rather than within. She attends a religious revival, and a "current arcs through her body, making her feel like she felt when she was with Mack--alive, fully alive and fully real, more than real" (BB 123). But what Crystal finds in her conversion is not herself but self-denial. Religion becomes for Crystal another form of escapism in which she is able to avoid the issue of self-definition. She describes the moment of being saved as "being gone and lost in all those flames, of giving herself to Jesus Christ and being nothing at all" (BB 125). Crystal is so desperately trying to define herself in relation to other people, or in this case, in relation to God, that she never achieves true self-definition. As Anne Goodwyn Jones notes, Crystal "feels real" only when she is being filled up with a man or God ("World" 253).

Although Crystal does not always attend faithfully to the behavior demanded of the Southern lady, she resembles the Southern lady in her attempts to define herself through others. Since the Southern lady is an ideal rather than an individual, she by necessity must create herself in response to her community's wishes. Similarly, Crystal, as her name suggests, reflects the views of those around her rather than projecting any inner light of her own. Lee Smith asserts that Crystal's Southern background exacerbates her inability to define herself, which leads to the novel's tragic ending: "The way many women, and I think particularly Southern women, are raised is to make themselves fit the image that other people set out for them, and that was Crystal's great tragedy, that she wasn't able to get her own self-definition" (IN 243-44).

At one point in the novel, Crystal does seem close to achieving a

true sense of self. When she returns to Black Mountain after time spent in a hospital for nervous problems, she accepts a position as a ninth-grade English teacher at the high school. For the first time the reader sees Crystal doing something for herself, something that gives her a sense of accomplishment that could lead to a fully developed sense of self. When she enters the classroom, Crystal sets out immediately to tear down the rules and expectations that have preceded her. She ignores her predecessor's emphasis on reciting grammar rules and stresses the importance of content over penmanship in her students' papers. By the end of the year she is proud of what she has accomplished with her students, and she is looking forward to returning to teaching in the fall.

Yet when Roger shows up with his plan to set Crystal up on a pedestal and allow her to escape the challenge of selfhood she has been seeking throughout her life, Crystal is too weak to resist him. Roger insists that Crystal is not suited to become a spinster schoolteacher; he claims, "A woman like you needs a man. You need your own home, children, a position in the community. You need love. I want to make you happy, Crystal" (BB 199). Crystal's only response is an expressionless, "My God" (BB 199). And after Roger kisses Crystal and she feels the electrical charge that she never felt with Roger before, Crystal is overcome by the powerful appeal of self-denial. She offers herself to Roger and chants as if in a trance, "Where are we going? Where will we live?" (BB 200). Ultimately, Crystal is seduced not so much by Roger as by the appeal of being defined by others. The text implies that despite the gains of the women's movement, modern women, and Southern women in particular, are still raised to live for others rather than themselves. They are raised

to believe that they only have worth in relation to others, and therefore, they can only gain happiness by accepting the definitions--daughter, sister, mother, wife, lover, lady,--that others have created for them.

Towards the end of the novel, the friends and relations who define Crystal seem to rely predominantly upon the nineteenth-century image of the Southern lady. That Roger still views Crystal as his Southern lady is evident by his actions when Crystal unzips her dress for him and leads him towards her bedroom. Although he now has the courage to touch Crystal's breasts, he does not want to make love to her until they are properly married: "Not now, I want us to do this right, Crystal" (BB 200). Moreover, when Crystal complains that if she leaves school now, she will never be able to get another teaching job, Roger responds as a proper patriarch should, "But you'll never have to work. Don't worry, I'll take good care of you" (BB 201).

Crystal responds to Roger passively with statements like, "Whatever you think" (BB 200). Yet she realizes that she is destroying her chances at selfhood by going with Roger: "Some part of her is screaming, or almost screaming, and then it breaks off and is still" (BB 200). She rationalizes her acceptance of Roger's proposal by insisting that Roger has always been her "inevitable" fate (BB 202), and she tells herself, "It's so comforting, really, to have somebody again to tell her what to do" (BB 202). But when she finishes packing her clothes for their trip, Crystal "lies down on her bed and cries and cries as if her heart might break" (BB 202). Despite the fact that Crystal seems unable to take any positive action to extricate herself from Roger's life, she does realize that she is giving up her independence and, in essence, herself, by giving

in to Roger's wishes.

By the end of the novel, Crystal has effectively turned herself into an image of the perfect Southern lady. She becomes so passive that she is almost physically paralyzed--"She just stops moving. She stops talking, stops doing everything" (BB 225). Crystal's mother has to feed Crystal and keep her clean, but Crystal's childhood friend Agnes notes that Crystal "looks better than she ever did" (BB 227). She has finally become the statue on the pedestal--completely passive, totally demure, selfless to the extreme. Ironically, it is in this catatonic state that Crystal becomes most acceptable to her family and friends, for she is no trouble lying there on the bed. Crystal's mother is able to take vacations without worrying about Crystal, and Agnes enjoys sitting by Crystal's bed and reading to her or simply holding her hand. The women of the community send over congealed salads because they have heard that Crystal seems to like them. And Agnes suspects that Crystal is really quite happy to sit passively and watch the season come and go outside her window. And perhaps Crystal is at rest, much as the dead are at rest, for she is no longer troubled with the cares and decisions involved in everyday living. Yet, the word "happy" connotes a joy in living that Crystal simply does not possess. Crystal is not happy, for she is not even truly alive. Her individuality has been sacrificed to the needs of her community. She has become their pure and angelic Crystal again. As long as the community can view Crystal in this way, they feel they can lay claim to these characteristics also. Thus, the image of the Southern lady that the community presses upon Crystal becomes a way for the community to define its highest ideals. Smith appears to imply that Crystal's nearly

catatonic state is the logical result of the myth of the Southern lady upon the life of a Southern woman.

However, in Brooke Kincaid, the young heroine of Something in the Wind, Lee Smith gives her readers a heroine who does not allow the image of the Southern lady to destroy her individuality. Brooke reminds the reader of Crystal Spangler in her confusion over the role she is expected to play in society. Like Crystal, Brooke feels that she is expected to take on the role of the Southern lady, and like Crystal, she does not feel comfortable in the role. However, Brooke's story differs from Crystal's because Brooke is eventually able to reject the social role offered her.

When Brooke makes a list of the characteristic traits of her friends at school, she is describing what she thinks are the surface qualifications of the young Southern lady of her day:

They had straight hair and noses. They did not have acne. They had McMullen blouses, A-skirts, Pappagallos, and brown leather belts with little brass horse emblems on them. They charged at Montaldo's. They had a brother at the University of Virginia or Washington and Lee. . . . (SW 24)

And although Brooke realizes that she also meets all of these requirements, she still feels set apart from this group of girls.

Brooke's brother Charles comes to the conclusion that Brooke feels different because she is different: "The thing that is the matter with you is you are not a lady" (SW 25). Charles's reaction suggests that it is Brooke's duty to the community to conform to the image. But Brooke does not really know what being a lady means, so she decides to imitate

the ladies around her until she becomes one herself. She views the image of the Southern lady as a coat that she can slip on over her real self. Therefore she creates a life plan for herself that consists of imitation: "I would imitate everybody until everything became second nature as the song says and I wouldn't have to bother to imitate any more, I would simply be" (SW 25).

So Brooke separates herself into two selves--the real Brooke and the apparent Brooke:

I split my mind into two equal halves. One half belonged to Brooke Kincaid, the daughter of Mr. and Mrs. T. Royce Kincaid of River Bend, a recent graduate of St. Dominique's School. The other half belonged to me. I was real, and the other half was only apparent. I could monitor myself, and I could be amused or tolerant or strict upon occasion. (SW 31)

Thus, Brooke creates artificial selves to accommodate the demands of those around her, and it is Brooke's mask of the Southern lady that is most in demand. For example, when she is kissing John Howard, Brooke realizes that she must keep her true sexual desires in check because John Howard expects her to be a pure and virginal Southern lady:

John Howard began to kiss me, slowly and very gently. Like I was a virgin. And then I realized that as far as John Howard was concerned, of course I was a virgin. That had been the whole premise of the life plan, after all: you are what you seem. I turned shy and coy and kissed him back, virginal

and chaste. It was what he wanted and expected and he would not have liked anything else. He hadn't liked the way I had kissed him at the German club. (SW 117)

Thus Brooke's life plan denies her the right to be herself. Like Crystal, Brooke is desperately trying to conform to society's demands at a time when she should be just beginning to explore her true self.

Similarly, when Brooke's step-mother Carolyn gives "motherly advice" (SW 35) to Brooke before Brooke sets out to college, she is essentially asking Brooke to deny her own personality and adopt the actions of every other girl on campus who will be trying to catch a man. Carolyn's suggestions--not to go out two nights in a row with the same boy, and not to appear too smart--are demands that Brooke should deny her true desires and her true intellectual potential. In Killers of the Dream, Lillian Smith complains that Southern society encourages "simple-mindedness in females" (123), and Lee Smith appears to agree. According to Carolyn, Brooke does not need brains to acquire a man who will admire and marry her, and the ultimate goal of every Southern lady is to achieve her full potential as a wife and mother.

Brooke is confused because she knows that Carolyn is a "lady," but she still has not clearly defined what being a "lady" means: "Carolyn was not finicky or quiet or even clean, but she was a lady. I couldn't figure it out" (SW 35). Clearly, from the description given of Carolyn, the reader discovers that one aspect of being a lady is a willingness to obscure or deny her true self in order to obtain the approval of others and the admiration of men.

When Brooke analyzes the behavior of her roommate Elizabeth, definitely no Southern lady, and Elizabeth's friends, she comes to the conclusion that these girls are not Southern because they have unique personalities. Brooke notes, "All of them were different. Their looks and their life styles were different from each other. Even if they happened to come from the South, none of them were Southern" (SW 126). In Brooke's eyes, to be Southern means that one must conform to a standard image set by the community--self-expression and creativity are necessarily stifled.

Despite all her efforts to mask herself as a Southern lady, Brooke rebels at times and acts in a most unladylike way. Houston, Brooke's first steady boyfriend in college, initiates sex with Brooke, but he is shocked when she acts nonchalantly about their sexual relations or actually takes the lead and shows her sexual desires. Houston apologizes for having sex with Brooke in a car, and he is baffled when her only concern is that they use a car without an uncomfortable gear stick the next time. And when Brooke lies down in the snow, pulls Houston down on top of her, unzips his pants, and rotates her hips invitingly, Houston angrily pulls Brooke to her feet in disgust. Soon after, Houston breaks up with Brooke, for he cannot accept her unladylike behavior. Just as Roger wishes to maintain his image of Crystal as pure and unsullied, Houston wants to view Brooke as a "good girl," one who does not really like sex but gives in to please her boyfriend.

When Brooke meets Bentley, one reason she is attracted to him is that she feels he does not expect her to conform to any images or perceptions he might have of her. She thinks that she might abandon her

"life plan" and have a true relationship with a unique individual: "I leaned back, took off my shoes, and put my feet upon the coffee table. I didn't have to be a lady. Bentley was Southern, but he wasn't Southern either. He wasn't any more Southern than I was" (SW 146). When Brooke moves into "the pit" with Bentley, she does not feel guilty, but she knows that her actions violate the Southern code--"I never thought for a second that it was wrong, although I knew it wasn't Southern" (SW 175). Brooke feels that with Bentley, she can be her true self: "From the time that we packed all my gear in the Volkswagen and started off for the pit, I felt real. Everything that happened was really happening" (SW 175).

Yet there are signs from the beginning that Bentley is not as free of Southern male expectations as he appears to be. He assumes that Brooke is a virgin when they first make love, and Brooke never chooses to enlighten him that he is not the first. Bentley describes the girl who lives above them as a whore, and when Brooke protests that he admits to having experimented with group sex before they met, Bentley explains, "Girls are different. Guys can do what they want to" (SW 196). Moreover, Bentley's tendency to fit those around him into categories is exposed by his behavior when a girl at a party looks at Brooke as if she were a whore because she lives with Bentley. Bentley verbally reassures Brooke that she is also a "nice girl," but then he treats her as if she were some strange lady of the night he has just picked up. He asks Brooke lewdly if she wants sex: "'You want it, don't you?' he said into my ear, not sounding like himself at all. He sounded like the voice in threatening phone calls in the movies" (SW 225). Thus although Brooke sees Bentley as a free spirit, the reader realizes that Bentley is more hampered by his

Southern expectations than he cares to admit.

But more importantly, Brooke comes to discover that no matter how happy she is with Bentley, she cannot rely on him as a substitute for her abandoned "life plan." Brooke examines the girl whose looks accuse her, and she notes,

I looked at her and remembered when my life plan was based on her life, more or less, and I couldn't believe it. Now I didn't have a life plan any more, or anything to go by. All I had was Bentley and it was growing on me more and more (especially when I was drunk or tired or feeling weird) that Bentley might not be responsible. Not for himself and not for me. But I couldn't imagine having wanted to be like that girl. Now I wanted to be like me but I wasn't yet sure how that was. (SW 224-25)

Brooke has discovered that masking herself as a Southern lady will not make her happy, and she is just beginning to discover that immersing herself in Bentley will also keep her from discovering her true self.

The conclusion of Something in the Wind is much more positive than Black Mountain Breakdown, perhaps because Brooke is so much more consciously self-reflective than Crystal. While Crystal seems to react to those around her without really understanding or analyzing her reactions, Brooke looks for the meanings behind her actions and the actions of others. Brooke witnesses her brother's marriage and realizes that she could marry John Howard and assume her proper place as a modern-day Southern lady, but she knows that she will not do so:

I could have this too, I thought. I could marry John Howard and step into my place like Carter and have all this for the rest of my life. But I didn't think I would. I had come full circle myself, and now there were new directions. (SW 43)

The fact that Brooke is able to recognize the desires of her community actually keeps her from being trapped into playing the role of the Southern lady. Rather than passively accepting the role offered to her by her community, Brooke analyzes situations and discovers her ability to resist definition by others. The reader is left with a sense of hope that after all Brooke's confused struggling with social demands and conflicting images, she has emerged strong enough to begin the journey of discovering her true self.

In Crystal and Brooke, Smith gives us two young women who are plagued by their communities' insistence that they conform to the ideal of the Southern lady. Smith appears to suggest that the Southern community places its women on the pedestal in order to claim for itself those ideal qualities it thrusts upon its "ladies." Since Crystal and Brooke are young and impressionable, they attempt to accommodate their communities' wishes, but they soon discover that they must sacrifice their individual needs when they take on the role of the Southern lady. Crystal, unable to find the strength to fight for her own needs, lapses into complete passivity. But Brooke's strong assertion that she must find her own way, her own path, at the end of the novel suggests that the image of the Southern lady is not all-powerful and that historical changes in the United States such as the civil rights movement and the women's

movement are weakening the once-tight grip the image of the Southern lady had on the minds and actions of Southern women.

CHAPTER V

THE REWARDS OF RESISTING THE IMAGE

Not all of Lee Smith's heroines become caught up in the image of the Southern lady. The women who reject or do not acknowledge the image come from different locations and environments, but they share some important characteristics. First, they reject the aristocratic idea of class upon which the ideal of the Southern lady rests. And because they refuse to set themselves on a pedestal, they are able to participate fully in their communities. Second, as they resist an image that restrains personal expression, they assert their individual identities and insist upon the validity of their individual needs. These Southern women serve as a foil to the Southern ladies, and Lee Smith appears to admire these women and offer them as alternative models of Southern womanhood.

Lee Smith's mountain women appear to be much less influenced by the image of the Southern lady than their city-dwelling sisters. The mountain communities that Smith describes in Oral History and Fair and Tender Ladies lack the aristocratic background of the deep South. The characters do not reflect on the days of slavery or the aristocratic pleasures of life on the plantation. Instead, they remember a constant fight against nature to make the land meet their needs. The mountain people realize that they must band together in order to survive, and the idea of setting women on pedestals would seem ridiculous to them, for their women work as

hard as their men. Lee Smith admits that there is a big division in her mind between the stories that take place in the mountains of Appalachia and those that are set in the deep or middle South, for she sees lack of aristocracy in the mountains (PC). Clearly Smith, like Fox-Genovese, recognizes the important role that class plays in creating the ideal of the Southern lady.

Battered by the awful, yet wondrous, forces of nature, the mountain women who give strength to Smith's Oral History and Fair and Tender Ladies, are too busy just surviving to worry about living life on a pedestal. They seem especially resistant to the image of the Southern lady seeping into their culture as the visitors from the cities and their ideas gradually move in on the mountain folk. The women in these novels who seem most in charge of their lives and their bodies, Granny Younger, Ora Mae, Pricey Jane, Dory, and Sally of Oral History, and Ivy of Fair and Tender Ladies, oppose the restrictions of the ideal of the Southern lady when they are exposed to them. However, their lives are by no means blissfully serene. These strong mountain women wind up beaten by nature, both the land's stubborn refusal to bear fruit and their own bodies' insistence on bearing children. Nevertheless, they live their lives as individuals and participate in their communities as the Southern "ladies" cannot.

The image of the Southern lady does not trouble characters such as Granny Younger and Ora Mae. These women are powerful and influential matriarchs who do not worry about conforming to the images or expectations of other people. Granny Younger, the wise woman, doctor, and midwife of the mountain community, notes that Almarine Cantrell takes her advice and

seeks a wife for himself because "Everybody does what I say" (OH 36). Granny's power comes not from her association with a man but from her own talents and personality. Similarly, Ora Mae chooses to make her own way in the world. Although she is in love with Parrot Blankenship, Ora Mae does not leave with him because she knows that he will end up deserting her later. She has sex with Parrot because she wants it, not because he demands it of her. Ora Mae is aware of her needs as an individual, and she puts them before the needs of the men who come into her life: "He picked me a-purpose to fit his needs, never knowing he fit mine, too. But you do what you have to do, I say. It's not a lot of choices in the world" (OH 207). Ora Mae does not appear to achieve her full potential as a human being, but as she notes, her environment has limited her choices. Nevertheless, she does not fail to use her power of choice when she is offered it.

The beautiful young mountain girls of Oral History, first Pricey Jane and then Dory, come no closer to the ideal of the passive, chaste Southern lady. They do not flirt coyly or attempt to maintain an appearance of purity or innocence. They act upon their sexual desires. Pricey Jane would have gone off with Almarine whether Miss Lucille Aston had forced them to get married or not. And Richard Burlage is surprised and delighted when Dory explicitly asks him to suck her breasts and guides his hands so that he might sexually satisfy her. Above all, these mountain women are seen as natural rather than artificial. They do not cultivate the airs of the Southern lady--they feel no need to rise above their neighbors.

Of course, there is Rose Hibbits, ostracized because she is too

unattractive to win a man. There is no denying that men hold power that is denied to the mountain women. The men can travel, while the women are stationary unless a man takes them away. Dory, for example, could never go off to Richmond in search of Richard Burlage. When he leaves her, she is forced to wait passively for his return, despite the fact that she is carrying his children. Only the women of the future will be able to leave the mountain community.

Dory's daughters, Pearl and Sally, both move away from the mountain community, but their personalities are so different that they respond to the outside world in very different ways. Pearl, inheriting Burlage's aristocratic blood, seems to have been born with an innate desire to better her social position. Sally tells us that Pearl is never satisfied, that she is forever desiring. The coarseness of mountain life repulses Pearl. And her yearnings for romance, poetry and beauty remind the reader of Smith's Southern ladies, such as Miss Iona of Fancy Strut or Miss Elizabeth of Family Linen .

When Sally asks Pearl what it is that she wants, Pearl responds, "I don't want anything to be like this. I want things to be pretty. I want to be in love" (OH 258). Yet, when Pearl leaves the mountain and tries on the image of the Southern lady, she does not find happiness. Sally comments, "Pearl grew more and more high-falutin. She wouldn't associate with the rest of us, except Billy a little bit, and during all that time I lived over the Western Auto store she never once gave me the time of day" (OH 261). According to Lee Smith, the image of the Southern lady demands a class consciousness that Pearl is able to cultivate. Pearl willfully climbs up the pedestal and attempts to isolate herself from her

family. Yet she finds that life on the pedestal is not as fulfilling as she had hoped.

Although Lee Smith does not give much detail of Pearl's life in the huge house with columns that looks like "the Old South Motor Inn in Roanoke" (OH 269), Pearl's appearance and behavior clearly indicate her unhappiness. Pearl marries Earl Bingham, a wealthy upholsterer in Abington, Virginia, who is twenty years Pearl's senior, and who, according to Pearl, adores her. Yet, when Sally sees Pearl just a few years after the marriage, she notes how terrible Pearl looks: "She was wearing a kind of long housedress, or housecoat, which under normal circumstances she would not have been caught dead in. She was skinny as a rail, white blotchy skin, and no makeup" (OH 269-70). Pearl's rebellious behavior in taking one of her young art students as a lover indicates that she has not been satisfied simply playing lady of the manor. Yet, the affair with her student brings her no happiness, and the pitiful Pearl never learns that she has been searching for beauty and truth in the wrong places--outside of herself.

Sally offers a stark and healthy contrast to her sister Pearl. Lee Smith says of Sally, "I like Sally. . . . I think she's very strong and she's meant to be a positive image of a woman as a woman at the end [of Oral History]" (IN 245). Sally is not afraid of living, and she has never wished to be shielded from experiencing life. She describes herself and her current husband Roy as "down to earth" people who "don't want the moon" (OH 234). Sally admits that she has made her mistakes. She runs off to Florida with a disc jockey and spends several unhappy years there having an assortment of meaningless relationships. When she returns home

pregnant, she marries a man who wants to "save" her and tries to lead a respectable life.

But when she meets Roy, she realizes that she has been existing rather than living; she divorces her first husband and is glad finally to be herself again: "I was happy I didn't have to be saved anymore, tired of putting up a front. You can put up a front for years until it becomes a part of you, you don't even know you're doing it. I was glad it was over" (OH 261). Sally can accept her past mistakes, learn from them, and put them behind her. And she allows herself to be herself rather than some image that someone else would like her to be. Most importantly, she never isolates herself from life or those around her. She has never really gotten along with Pearl, but when Pearl tells her about her affair with the high school boy, Sally tells Pearl to pack up her things, and she takes Pearl back home with her. What the text suggests is so appealing in Sally is her strength, her endurance, her compassion, her honesty, and her self-knowledge.

The heroine of Smith's latest novel, Fair and Tender Ladies, is like Sally in her forthright words and actions. The novel traces Ivy Rowe's life from her youth until she is a grandmother. As a child, Ivy dreams of traveling and becoming a writer. Although she does travel, she does not go far, and she ends up right back on her mountain where she feels she belongs. And though Ivy assumes that her dreams of becoming a writer are being fulfilled through her daughter, the novel is composed entirely of Ivy's letters, and we are allowed to see what she could not, that she always was a powerful writer.

Through her letters, Ivy directly and indirectly conveys her

strength as an individual and her zest for living. Although she is temporarily disconcerted by the disapproval of her community when she becomes pregnant out of wedlock, or decides to take the rich, troubled mine owner's son for a lover, or takes a young transient as a lover despite her twenty-year marriage and brood of children, Ivy always accepts responsibility for her actions and voices her individuality through these actions. As Ivy humorously puts it in a letter to her sister, "I decided I had made my bed and I would lie in it, Silvaney, same as before. I thought, I'm getting to be an expert at making beds!" (TL 164). The familiar expression "to make your bed" means in essence "to create your life," and Ivy does just that, for she refuses to be confined by the expectations of society. Ivy lives life fully, and though she has her share of pain, she never appears to regret the decisions she makes.

Lee Smith's admiration for those characters who grasp life with both hands seems to be what Ann Goodwyn Jones is getting at in her analysis of the epigraph from Oral History in which the singer of the folk song insists that if he had known how painful love could be, he would have locked his heart up in a box and "tied it up with a silver line." Yet Jones notes:

Those who do lock up their hearts in Lee Smith's stories paradoxically lose themselves, or make other people miserable, or live, parasitically, in other people's stories. And those who embrace the gross world . . . do indeed suffer. But they have stories of their own to tell. ("World" 250)

Only those men and women who allow themselves to experience real life and

the tumultuous passions of love will achieve a sense of personal identity that can be conveyed in their life stories. Women who hide behind the roles their communities set up for them and retreat from the "gross world" cannot find themselves or form honest relationships with their neighbors. For this reason, Southern women who yield to the demands of their community and accept the role of the Southern lady prevent themselves from truly living and loving. Perhaps Smith's mountain women are so vivid and memorable because they do not allow themselves to be categorized or stereotyped. They are simply too strong as individuals.

The image of the Southern lady is not felt nearly as strongly in Smith's novels about mountain women as in her other work, for these women and their mothers did not live in regions of the South where aristocratic plantation life kept class distinctions and gender roles so rigorously defined. However, the mountain women do still have to confront the demands of their communities, and they are memorable in their absolute refusal to put the needs of the community before their own needs. Some may accuse these strong women of selfishness, but Smith seems to contend that theirs is a self-centeredness long overdue and that only through concentrating on their own needs can Southern women achieve a fulfilling sense of self that will give them the foundation upon which to build honest, enduring relationships within their communities.

Lee Smith's fiction is filled with plucky women who seem to be spiritual descendants of the strong mountain women of Oral History and Fair and Tender Ladies. Because they are brought up in the middle or deep South, these women may be more pressured by their families or communities to adopt the image of the Southern lady, yet they reject it. They defy

the social codes of Southern ladyhood, and by doing so, achieve a self-awareness and contentment that women who are unable to shake the image of the Southern lady cannot attain. Women like Florrie ("Cakewalk"), Billie Jean ("Saint Paul"), and Candy (Family Linen) defy family and friends who wish to mold them into proper Southern ladies, and through their defiance, they assert their individuality. Smith seems to suggest that in order to achieve individual identity, Southern women must often set themselves up in opposition to their communities. Even the commonplace names of these women indicate their lack of aristocratic pretensions. Like the strong mountain women, they are not concerned with social or class distinctions, and their exuberant personalities convey their love of life.

One of Smith's most memorable "earthy" women can be found in her short story "Cakewalk." Stella, the pretentious Southern lady, has a sister Florrie, who irritates Stella by "making those embarrassing cakes and running around town like a mental person" (CW 229). What truly bothers Stella about her sister is that Florrie is so different from Stella. She refuses to conform to the social codes of the Southern lady. She opens her life to those around her, whatever social circle they happen to embrace. And she demands that people accept her for who she is.

Florrie's unladylike behavior has frustrated Stella from their girlhood on. Rather than maintaining a distant manner with the boys who flocked around her as a teenager, Florrie seems to encourage them with her open and flirtatious behavior. Stella complains that Florrie is earning herself a "reputation" (CW 230). And though she has the pick of any boy in town, Florrie chooses to run off with Earl Mingo, "a man with Indian blood in him who had never made a decent living for himself or

anybody else" (CW 237). Yet, Florrie seems happy with her choice of husbands, despite the fact that Earl is a wanderer who is on the road more often than he is at home. At first Stella refuses to speak to Florrie after she runs off with Earl, and when she finally does come over to meet Earl, she is shocked to find Florrie, clad in nothing but a robe at one o'clock in the afternoon, sitting on her bare-chested husband's lap. Florrie's open and honest sexual nature is offensive to Stella's refined sensibilities.

Even when Earl causes a scandal by running off with a friend of his daughter's, Florrie refuses to hide herself in shame. She continues to bake her cakes, which have become a form of creative self-expression, and she sells or gives her cakes to all types of people. Stella complains, "Why, Florrie will make a cake for anybody, any class of person, and that's the plain truth, awful as it is" (CW 229). Florrie, who refuses to acknowledge class distinctions, does not isolate herself on the pedestal as the proper Southern lady should, and she is much happier as a result. Stella notes that people are always stopping in to talk with Florrie and admire her cakes. After her own children have grown up and left home, Florrie invites her son's ex-wife and her grandson to come and live with her. When Stella complains that it is just as if she were living in a boarding house with a bunch of strangers, Florrie laughs and insists that might not be such a bad idea. Stella hates the fact that Florrie has never even attempted to maintain the aloof presence of a true Southern lady.

Yet it is clear to the reader that Florrie's ability to accept her life and herself, with their problems and warts, allows her to achieve a

sense of peace that Stella will never attain. While Stella is trying desperately to maintain an illusion of youth with her makeup and stylish clothes, Florrie is not concerned with the gray in her hair or the wrinkles around her eyes. The beautiful autumn leaf cake that Florrie creates at the end of the story symbolizes her acceptance of both her life and the loss of her youth, while Stella is sheltering her skin from the wind because "the first signs of a woman's age may be found around her eyes, on her hands, and at her throat" (CW 256).

Billy Jean, the narrator of Smith's "Saint Paul," is similar to Florrie in her disregard of convention and her insistence on being accepted for herself. Billy Jean is of a lower social station than her childhood friends, Marlene and Paul, for her father works in the mines that their father owns. Therefore, when Billy Jean runs wild in her youth, dating boys at an early age and allowing them to have sex with her, the community is not really surprised. Billy Jean learns the hard way that even wealthy people can refuse responsibility for their actions when she becomes pregnant with Jimmy Bell Dean, Jr.'s child, and he refuses to marry her or help with the child's support.

Never regretting the birth of her child, Billy Jean is able to accept her mistakes and move into the future with a positive attitude. Over the years, Billy Jean marries happily, goes back to school when her husband dies prematurely, and earns her CPA license. Her acceptance of her life and the passing of her youth remind the reader of Florrie's self-acceptance. When Billy Jean meets again with her childhood friend Marlene, both women are middle-aged, and Billy Jean notes that Marlene looks ten years younger than Billy Jean because she "had spent a lot of

those years . . . holding onto her looks" (SP 199). Yet, in Billy Jean's description of her friend, Marlene appears worn and frazzled: "she was thin as a rail with her hair all frizzed out in one of those fashionable new hairdos they wear now. Marlene looked like a model out of Cosmopolitan magazine, and every piece of jewelry she had on was solid gold. She smoked a lot, though, and picked at things with her nails" (SP 199). Apparently the strain of trying to live up to the physical demands of the Southern lady shows beneath the make-up, jewelry, and fancy hair-do.

In contrast, Billy Jean, like Florrie, disregards the emphasis on appearance that characterizes the image of the Southern lady. Billy Jean does not fight against her gray hair or rounded figure. She accepts her age as she accepts the events in her life: "I have filled out some, you might say. And I've got these streaks of gray in my hair that I won't let Neva at the Clip 'N Curl touch up--'I earned that gray hair!' I tell her, 'and you just let it alone!'" (SP 198). To Billy Jean, signs of age can become symbols of what she has been able to accomplish in her life. She is not tied to the notion that women are only useful as young and graceful objects for men to admire. She rejects the emphasis on appearance that characterizes the image of the Southern lady.

Similarly, Billy Jean refuses to accept that as a Southern woman, she must be passive and demure in romantic situations. When Marlene tells Billy Jean that her brother Paul has always had a crush on her, Billy Jean is baffled but interested. The shy, intellectual Paul had never showed any interest in Billy Jean during their high school years. However, now that Billy Jean knows of Paul's feelings for her, she does not hesitate

to act on this knowledge. She marches right over to Paul's house and offers herself to him:

Now you know me and you know I have never believed in beating around the bush. . . . I know everything! . . . I know how you sent me that money right after I had Betsy, and I know how you have felt about me all my life. So don't try to deny it, Paul Honeycutt, I know! And I'll tell you something else. . . we are not old people right now, and it's never too late to make up for lost time. (SP 202)

But Paul pushes her away, for what he loves about Billy Jean is not her person but rather the image he has created of her in his mind: "No, Billy Jean, you don't understand--It wasn't you, it wasn't ever really you, it was the idea of you, which made possible the necessary. . . . I couldn't possibly . . . I could never actually--" (SP 202). Just as the Southern woman has been asked to become a frozen image on a pedestal, Billy Jean is being asked to remain an image in Paul's mind--a creation of his imagination that is both unreal and static. Paul has a box filled with mementos of Billy Jean, and he wants to keep the lid on that box. Discovering Billy Jean as a real person would unseal that box and disturb the precious image he has of her.

Billy Jean is a bit surprised by Paul's reaction, but she simply acknowledges that he is a fool and then gets on with her own life: "OK. If you're so dumb you'd rather have the idea of me than the real me in the flesh, as they say, then you can keep it. Goodbye!" (SP 202). Billy Jean may allow Paul to indulge his fantasy of her, but she will never

attempt to try to become that fantasy. She enjoys the spontaneity of life too much to abandon it in favor of becoming a prescribed and static image.

Candy, Miss Elizabeth's youngest daughter in Family Linen, is a similarly spontaneous and vibrant personality, and she refuses to conform to the ideal of the Southern lady that her mother worships. She insists that "she's always done exactly what she feels like," and she marvels at the "way most women--well, most people, really--want to be told what to do" (FL 114). Candy notes that she and her mother "never did see eye to eye. They were natural strangers" (FL 123). Candy is not worried about measuring up to the ideal of the Southern lady. Her beauty shop gives her independence, an outlet for her creativity, and an opportunity to socialize with her community. She claims that "she doesn't want a regular man--Candy likes men, but she doesn't want one. . . . She knows that's what most people want. But not her" (FL 119). Yet, Candy is not cold or distant. Candy's sister Myrtle notes that Candy "has good intentions and a big heart" (FL 59). And it is Candy who rushes to Miss Elizabeth's side and spontaneously presses her hand, while her sisters are unable to approach their cold, austere mother.

Yet despite Candy's sympathy for her prickly mother, Lee Smith certainly does not present Candy as the epitome of virtue. She has made her mistakes, and many readers might find her taking her sister Myrtle's husband for a lover reprehensible. Nevertheless, she possesses a kind of freedom that her sisters, constrained by the stereotype of the Southern lady, find difficult to attain. Candy does not feel that she must consider the opinions of her neighbors before she acts, nor does she feel that she must always act within the circumscribed limits of her

community's definition of her. Instead, Candy possesses the freedom to act as she sees fit; she lets her own conscience guide her.

These modern "down to earth" women, Florrie, Billie Jean, and Candy, seem to be the direct descendents of the tough, natural women that Lee Smith writes about in Oral History and Fair and Tender Ladies. Although the communities of these women put more pressure on them to conform to the ideal of the Southern lady than the communities of the mountain women do, they are still able to resist the pressure. Moreover, what the "down to earth" Southern women share with their mountain sisters is an ability to avoid being categorized by their community without losing a active place in that community. They demand to be recognized as individuals, and the community simply learns to accept them for who they are. Their adamant self-assertion earns them the right to be integral members of their communities. And just as importantly, these women are able to embrace their communities without reservation because they have abandoned the out-of-date notions of class that coincide with the image of the Southern lady. These women's ability to live in the present, reject categories of class, express their individuality, act upon their impulses, and accept their own decisions makes them stand out boldly from Smith's Southern women who are controlled by the image of the Southern lady. Lee Smith appears to be offering her readers an alternative and positive notion of Southern womanhood, one that is freed of the class distinctions that isolate the Southern lady from her community and the social conventions that keep the Southern lady from expressing her individuality.

CHAPTER VI

NEW OPTIONS FOR A NEW GENERATION

Lee Smith finds that new options are opening for modern Southern women, and she applauds them. Although the image of the Southern lady still exerts some influence on the women who came of age in the 1960s and 70s, it is rapidly losing its hold over young Southern women of the 1980s and 90s. Anne Firor Scott claims that Southerners were "subjected to more diverse influences in 1930 than had been true in 1830" (229). And Lee Smith acknowledges how much more diverse the influences must be in 1980s and 90s. In Family Linen, Elizabeth Bird Hess' daughters and granddaughters are daily confronted by the changes that Elizabeth refused to acknowledge by clinging desperately to the image of herself as a Southern lady. Elizabeth's son, Arthur Hess, thinks to himself, "Everything's changing. . . . Boy George wears makeup and Mother is dead" (FL 159). Yet Arthur is mistaken in his assumption that the image of the Southern lady has died with his mother. He need only look at his sisters, Myrtle and Sybill, to see that the image still exerts its power over the modern Southern woman. Anne Scott comments that "the image of the Southern lady was slow to die" (221), but Lee Smith would contend that the image is by no means dead, though its power is rapidly waning as the class, race, and gender distinctions upon which the image is based lose their force in the modern South.

The clinging influence of the image is best illustrated by Miss Elizabeth's daughter Sybil. Although Sybill finishes college and teaches English at a technical school in Roanoke, Virginia, she does not seem to derive any value out of her accomplishments as a teacher. Instead, she views herself in a less than positive light because she has never been able to catch a man. Sybill admits that she "had alway expected to marry" (FL 29) and that she was simply finishing school while she waited for Mr. Right. After a while Sybill realizes that she is too set in her own ways to ever adapt to the demands of a "Mr. Right." Yet she is sexually attracted to a neighbor and would like, however much she refuses to admit it, to have an affair with him. Sybill's desire causes quite a dilemma for her, for she is reluctant to give up her ideal of the chaste Southern lady. Therefore, whenever she thinks of calling her neighbor or inviting him to dinner, she is plagued by intensely painful headaches.

Sybill has always had a "distaste for the messier, unrestrained elements of family life" (FL 30), and she is not a favorite with her nieces and nephews, but her family always consults her in matters of etiquette and decorum. Smith writes, "Myrtle and Don say Sybill's been a real big help with the wedding. She always did know how things ought to be, exactly like Miss Elizabeth" (FL 260). Sybill has always admired her mother's ladylike behavior, and she considers herself to have followed her mother's example: "Sybill is proud to be her mother's only responsible child--to be, in some ways, her mother's only child" (FL 38). Sybill's intense admiration for her mother causes her to block out her childhood memory in which she witnesses her mother murdering her father with a hatchet and stuffing him into a well. Her image of her mother as

a restrained Southern lady will not allow her to acknowledge a dark and uncontrollable fury in her mother's nature.

With her unbearable headaches and her repressed memories, Sybill symbolizes the final costs of the ideal of the Southern lady. Like the Southern ladies of old, she cannot bear witness to the atrocities of reality as they exist, so she represses them into imagined nonexistence. In doing so, she attempts to follow in her mother's footsteps. Miss Elizabeth murders her husband, the patriarchal head of the family, to protect her sister, herself, and her reputation, and the reader is unsure just which held the most importance for Elizabeth. In any case, she hides the murder (even from herself), covers over the crime, and slips back behind the mask of the Southern lady.

In Miss Elizabeth, we can see just how horrifying the corruption is that lies behind the mask of the Southern lady. Rather than becoming the pure, moral bastion that the community wishes her to become, Miss Elizabeth becomes a murderer and a liar. She becomes a parody of the ideal of the Southern lady. The reality of Miss Elizabeth's actions remind the reader of the roots from which the ideal of the Southern lady grows. Southerners used the myth of the pure Southern lady to avoid confronting the cruelty and injustice of the plantation system and slavery. By setting Southern women upon the public pedestal as the ideal, the Southern community could continue sinning in private. Smith's portrayal of Miss Elizabeth reveals the reality behind the myth and is her ultimate condemnation of the image of the Southern lady.

Like Elizabeth and Sybill, Elizabeth's daughter Myrtle shares a desire to conform to the image of the Southern lady, and for her

generation, she initially seems to fit into the mold quite naturally. Myrtle has always been the social success--the prom queen in high school. She marries her childhood sweetheart, puts him through medical school, and by the time she is forty, Myrtle has a beautiful house, a stable position in the best of her community's social set, a kind and respectful husband, and two slightly rebellious children. Like her mother before her, Myrtle is concerned about her image in the community and worries more about what her neighbors will think when her pregnant daughter comes home to marry her lover than whether her daughter is going to be happy in this marriage.

Yet at forty, Myrtle is nagged by a dissatisfaction with her life that she cannot seem to pin down. She admits that she "has days when she feels like her whole life is a function of other people's" (FL 48), and she takes a younger man as a lover--an action "she can't explain at all" (FL 49), for she still loves and respects her husband. Although Myrtle is no more willing to object consciously to the demands of image of the Southern lady than her sister Sybill, she is plagued by the feeling that something is not quite right in her life--that the image is somehow failing to fulfill her. Like Crystal Spangler and Brooke Kincaide, Myrtle no longer feels comfortable with the image of the Southern lady, and she is beginning to realize a disjunction between her inner and outer self. Lee Smith uses Myrtle to illustrate the failure of the role of the Southern lady ultimately to satisfy the modern Southern woman's individual needs.

The brief characterizations that Lee Smith gives of Elizabeth's granddaughters show even more clearly this failure. None of these girls seems to be affected in the least by the ideal of the Southern lady.

Pregnant Karen nonchalantly does the can can at the side of the pool on her wedding day. Theresa exclaims, "I'm never going to get married or keep house. I'm going to raise all my own vegetables and have lots and lots of lovers" (FL 158). And fourteen-year-old Kate challenges her mother with the taunt that she could get pregnant.

Of course, all that the reader sees of the latest generation is interpreted through the eyes of their mothers, but, nevertheless, the girls do not appear to feel the need to conform to the "single monolithic image of woman" (Scott 231) that troubled the women of whom Anne Scott wrote. The image of the Southern lady may still exist and restrict, but Scott and Smith agree that in the modern South, there are "multiple options" (Scott 231) and that they are continuing to multiply. The range of choice for women in the South is widening, and although some may regret this fact and look back nostalgically to simpler days, Lee Smith would insist that this widening sphere is not only inevitable, but that it is a change for the better.

Thus, despite the tenacious hold that the ideal of the Southern lady still has upon Southern women, Lee Smith appears to see that hold weakening as time passes. The race, gender and class distinctions upon which the foundations of the image of the Southern lady were built no longer seem to make any sense in an increasingly pluralistic society that has experienced the civil rights movement and the women's movement. For the most part, the characters in Smith's fiction most affected and hampered by the image are old women and confused adolescents. Sometimes, of course, an adolescent, like Crystal Spangler, carries that confusion into adulthood. And some women, like Sybill and Stella, are so heavily

influenced by their mothers that the image maintains its hold over them well into their maturity. Yet, although nearly all of Smith's female characters must confront the image of the Southern lady at some point in their lives, relatively few of them allow that image to dictate and control their lives. And Smith's strongest and most emotionally healthy characters are those who flamboyantly reject the image of the Southern lady.

Despite the fact that the ideal of the Southern lady has traditionally served as a symbol for the South, Smith's portrayal of the image as a clinging but inevitably crumbling myth does not necessarily mean that she views the South as a dying region. Instead, Smith appears to suggest that the revitalization of the South lies once again in its women, but in its real women, not in its manufactured "ladies." Smith's strong Southern women are not crippled by their community's demand that they conform to a single ideal of womanhood. Instead, these women assert their individuality, embrace their ability to make choices, and live with a vitality that is forthright and refreshing. Rather than setting themselves apart from their neighbors and clinging to aristocratic notions of class, they interact with all types of people and willingly participate in their communities. They do not allow themselves to be sacrificed to the needs of the community because they realize that such sacrifices lead to deception, corruption, division, and stagnation rather than the health that the community seeks.

"Notes"

1. One might wonder why Southern women would have accepted such a limited self-definition, for there is no doubt that many did accept and endorse the image of the Southern lady. In The Southern Lady: From Pedestal to Politics (1970), Anne Firor Scott attempts to answer the question of why Southern women tolerated the myth of the Southern lady, which kept them confined and subordinate. She concludes that they were indoctrinated at a very young age by churches, schools, parents, books, and so forth to believe that if they conformed to the image they would be loved and honored. And if they refused to conform to the image, they would be viewed as unladylike, and they would be rejected by society (Scott 20). Moreover, women as well as men resist change. They cling to order and stability. By clinging to the myth of the Southern lady and the patriarchal family and even slavery, they were simply clinging to the only society with which they were familiar. The women may have sensed that any threat to white male dominance would threaten social organization as they knew it (Scott 21).

2. As evidence of the Southern lady's tenacious hold upon the Southern mind, Jones recalls that the 19th Amendment had a much harder time being ratified in the South, suggesting that the Southern white men felt their entire way of life was being threatened if women were to be allowed out of their traditional spheres (Jones, Tomorrow 15). And

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Jones notes that in 1981, the "South [was] nearly solid once again in its refusal to ratify an amendment [the Equal Rights Amendment] that challenges its traditional notions of sex roles" (Tomorrow 17).

Finally, Jones contends that legislators of Louisiana did not rewrite the state's definition of husband as "head and master" of the household until 1979. These incidents suggest to Jones that although the power of the myth of the Southern lady has decreased over the years, the change in attitudes towards the role of women in society has been slower in the South than elsewhere in the country.

Similarly, in The Southern Lady: From Pedestal to Politics, Ann Firor Scott finds that although the image of the Southern lady has lost much of its strength to influence the modern Southern woman, it has not completely disappeared (x). According to Scott Southern society, like the rest of America, was becoming more complex, and women as well as men were exposed to a wider variety of life styles and more diverse influences than Southern women of the previous century (229). The myth of the Southern lady began its decline after the Civil War when the responsibilities of Southern women increased while their men were away at war. According to Scott, when the weakened men returned from the war, the women were accustomed to the new responsibilities and often retained them (106). Moreover, the influence of the image of the Southern lady weakened as opportunities in education and the work force increased for women (Scott 110). Finally, the women's groups that developed in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries led women

["Note to page 14"]

into the public sphere and the right to vote brought women into politics at least nominally (Scott 210).

Yet while the behavior of Southern women was changing--they were working outside the home and entering the public sphere--many women still found it "effective to operate within the ladylike tradition" (Scott 210). Thus the image of the Southern lady was no longer a "complete prescription for a woman's life" but became rather "a style which as often as not was a facade to ward off criticism of unladylike independence or to please men" (Scott 225).

Key to Works by Lee Smith

- AR--"Artists." In Cakewalk. New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1981.
- BB--Black Mountain Breakdown. New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1980.
- BL--"Between the Lines." In Cakewalk.
- CW--"Cakewalk." In Cakewalk.
- FL--Family Linen. New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1985.
- FS--Fancy Strut. New York: Harper & Row, 1973.
- IN--"An Interview with Lee Smith." With Edwin Arnold.
Appalachian Journal 11 (1984): 240-54.
- OH--Oral History. New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1983.
- PC--Phone Conversation with Deborah Wesley August 16, 1988.
- SP--"Saint Paul." In Cakewalk.
- SW--Something in the Wind. New York: Harper & Row, 1971.
- TL--Fair and Tender Ladies. New York: Ballantine, 1988.

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