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Appalachian Myths and Stereotypes in Chris Offutt's "Sawdust" and "Melungeons"

Marcel Arbeit

- 1 Appalachia is a territory rife with myths, an area that even in the twenty-first century is often seen at a distance as being a net of backward pockets of poverty that might look very similar to an outsider but which, on closer inspection, provide a very rich texture of communities that keep up their traditions and oral histories. Appalachian narratives are often true to the numerous stereotypes the rest of the United States created about the region and its inhabitants and which, occasionally, Appalachian people themselves have fed and continue feeding even now, when they do their best to step out from the unfavorable imagery and show that their lives cannot be reduced to a set of clichés.
- 2 Narratives from the poorest parts of Appalachia in eastern Kentucky or West Virginia, especially if related by locals, show that the border between myth and stereotype is very thin, as the two have much in common and partly overlap. At the beginning of each there is a true story that becomes well known and shared; new additions to the story and its distortions make it impossible to tell which part is true and which not; and the story is used as a pattern into which other, more recent stories from the region, no matter whether they lionize or ridicule it, are made to fit.
- 3 The basis for the analysis that follows is the concept of myth introduced by Roland Barthes in his *Mythologies* (1957). Barthes takes myth as “a type of speech” (109, Barthes’s italics), which “is not defined by the object of its message, but by the way in which it utters this message” (109). According to him, “everything can be a myth provided it is conveyed by a discourse” (109), and, what is extremely important, the myth, which is, among other things, always temporary, “hides nothing: its function is to distort, not to make disappear” (121, Barthes’s italics). Barthes’s definition is extremely broad: in fact, as he himself confirms, any story shared by a certain number of people can become a myth, no matter how short-lived and insubstantial. A crucial feature of myth, according to Barthes, is its simplicity: “[Myth] abolishes the complexity of human acts [...], it organizes

a world which is without contradictions because it is without depth, a world wide open and wallowing in the evident, it establishes a blissful clarity: things appear to mean something by themselves" (143).

- 4 The link between myths and stereotypes has lately been explored by historians, psychologists, and sociologists. Larry J. Griffin, exploring some major Southern myths and stereotypes, does not subscribe to such a broad definition of myths as Barthes's, but strictly refutes the school of thinking that defines myths "as erroneous beliefs or delusional understandings" (19).¹ For him, myths are "both analytical devices that help us understand what something is and, implicitly, evaluative and exhortative devices that allow us to judge the 'goodness' or 'badness' of the mythological subject" (19). Stereotypes, "formed through selected emphasis, simplification, and generalization" (19), are, according to Griffin, degenerate myths, "even exaggerated caricatures of the mythic entity that can mislead and misinform, even as they motivate and justify human action" (19).
- 5 In the light of Barthes's definition, however, the three above-mentioned formative features of stereotypes (selected emphasis, simplification, and generalization), together with the distortion that Griffin considers a close companion to degeneration, are properties of every myth. Accordingly, some scholars point out that stereotypes do not - necessarily play a negative role and do not automatically support prejudices, oppression, and discrimination. Jim Sidanius and Felicia Pratto, in their book on social hierarchy and oppression, rank stereotypes, together with attitudes, beliefs, and ideologies, among specific kinds of myths they call "legitimizing myths," that is, the myths that "provide moral and intellectual justification for the social practices that distribute social value within the social system" (49). For them, the emergence of social stereotypes is, as in the case of other legitimizing myths, "the result of basic and entirely normal information processing" (11).
- 6 From this point of view, all stereotypes are myths (of the legitimizing kind), but, logically, not every myth is a stereotype (for example, myths exploring the origin of an ethnic group or a nation). Sometimes even negative stereotypes can have a positive outcome—to raise positive emotions or, at least, to stimulate interest.² This is the case of many Appalachian stereotypes: it is the negative image of this area that made it better known and more popular.
- 7 Both myths that are stereotypes (henceforth "stereotypes") and those that are not (henceforth "myths") are originally transmitted through spontaneous oral narratives. Therefore, the best genre for their translation into a written form is the short story, a genre that also tends to immediacy. The obvious advantage of short stories is that they can be read at one sitting, within a time space close to that needed by a folk narrator delivering a tale in front of an audience. While novels and autobiographies are able to show the intricate network of interconnected myths and stereotypes in their working complexity, short stories can spotlight one myth or stereotype and present it in a naked, immediate shape at a particular point in time of its development.
- 8 Such a presentation of myths and stereotypes corresponds to a large extent to the opinion of Sarah Hardy, who examined the relationship between oral narratives and short stories and emphasized the potential of short stories to relate what she calls the "poetics of immediacy," which stems from the model of oral narratives. In Hardy's opinion, the short story is close to an "oral-epic episode" (352) which is "highly formulaic" and deals with topics and ideas that are "common and reusable" (353). The

oral-epic episodes are able to convey both myths and stereotypes that, through spontaneous proliferation, make their claim to universality.

- 9 This might be one of the reasons why Chris Offutt, a native of the vanishing eastern Kentucky community of Haldeman (in the mid-1990s, it had approximately two hundred inhabitants),³ refuses to be called a spokesman for his region. Spokesmen, whether for a region or a cause, cannot tell stories that transcend their settings and aim at a universal appeal. In a 2002 radio interview, Offutt said:

I'm not a historian or a sociologist or ethnographer or anything like that. [...] I can use eastern Kentucky as a landscape to paint my pictures on because I know it; it's easier for me. I know it extremely well. (Interview with Inskeep)

- 10 Unlike other Appalachian writers, Offutt focuses not only on the features that make his native part of the mountains different from any other region but also on the similarities to other hill cultures and the rest of the rural South. At the time when attempts are being made to isolate Appalachian literature from Southern, he admits that Appalachia shares with other parts of the South "similarities in terms of food, accents, attitudes toward family, attitudes toward the land, attitudes toward old-fashioned traditions" (interview with Harmon A2:4).
- 11 This analysis of two of Offutt's short stories from his two collections, *Kentucky Straight* (1992) and *Out of the Woods* (1997), will point out how Appalachian myths and stereotypes aim much further than the places where they were conceived or, in the case of stereotypes, at which they were targeted.
- 12 The two stories, "Sawdust" and "Melungeons,"⁴ focus on two stereotypes connected with Appalachian people, namely their contempt for formal education, and their violent and vengeful nature. As every stereotype tends to universality, even these two are not unique to Appalachia but to a large extent true for every poor mountain region in the world. Some scholars extend the validity of these stereotypes even beyond mountain areas. For example, J. W. Williamson claims that the derogatory but popular term "hillbilly" currently means "rough, rural, poor but fruitful, blatantly antiurban, and often dangerous, but not necessarily hailing from the Southern Appalachians or even from any mountains" (16).

- 13 In "Sawdust," a short story from his first collection, Offutt explores the stereotypes related to education and its role in Appalachia and links it with the theme of the exodus from the area. The main protagonist is a nameless young Appalachian boy who decides to take a GED test at a local test center in Rocksalt in eastern Kentucky, even though he knows that education is more often ridiculed than valued in the hills where he lives. The center is operated by a non-Appalachian VISTA volunteer⁵ who, according to the boy, had never heard Standard English, "talked fast and didn't always say her words right" (KS 7).
- 14 The boy, whose father, a violent and depressive man, committed suicide, wants to try the test in reading, writing, and mathematics to prove to himself and others that he does not necessarily have to live the same life as his father, whose desire was to become a horse doctor but who had to "quit sixth grade on account of not having nothing to wear" (KS 5). The boy's struggle against the stereotypical but real image of an illiterate mountain resident is even more futile in the light of the fact that, unlike the boy, most young Appalachian people who get some education decide to leave their home region, keeping

the level of illiteracy in Appalachia unchanged.⁶ The education of individuals cannot improve the undesirable situation of the people in a region with no industry, where people grow their own food and live on unemployment benefits. As the narrator says, "This is a place people move away from" (KS 6). An anecdote that even the locals tell about themselves says that "the only things taught in mountain schools after World War II were the three Rs—reading, writing, and Route 23," that is, the highway leading from the mountains to the North (Eller 22).

- 15 The community of Clay Creek, which is not even on the map of Kentucky the boy inherited from his father, is extremely poor. The only meeting places are the local church and the post office, where people regularly come to collect their government checks and pay their money orders. As the narrator says in the very first sentence of the story, no one "on this hillside finished high school" (KS 1). As the only available book is the King James Bible, the boy orders, as his reading material, complimentary copies of various magazines, even though he knows that he does not have enough money to subscribe to any of them.
- 16 When the boy visits the test center for the first time, the clerk thinks that he is looking for the barbershop next door. Later, when the news that someone from the community is striving for a better education is spread, he is perpetually scolded and ridiculed. Instead of encouragement, his mother reproaches him for putting himself forward: "They say you're fixing to get learned up on us. [...] You might read the Bible while you're at it" (KS 8). The boy readily replies that he has read the Bible twice, but it is only the beginning of the problems he has with his relatives and the locals. His older brother Warren, who works in a car factory in Lexington and thinks that GED stands for "Get Even Dumber" (KS 10), approaches him in a similar way: "Hear you're eat up with the smart bug" (KS 9). When the local preacher consoles the boy's mother by promising her "a sweet place in heaven" (KS 10) for having to suffer such a foolhardy son, the boy realizes that it is the first time a member of his family has been stubborn over something he wants to accomplish. When Warren, for whom the emblems of progress are a microwave and a VCR, answers his younger brother's question "What for?" about the purpose of his latest purchase, a battery-operated portable TV set, with "To sit and look at" (KS 14), the boy, referring to his prospective high school degree, echoes: "Same with me, Warren. Same with me" (KS 14).
- 17 The title of the story ironically addresses the opinion that formal education would not be of much use to the poor Appalachian people, who rather need to employ common sense. In one of the mathematical tasks the boy is supposed to calculate how much stove wood you can get from a tree but the authors of the task do not consider the sawdust.⁷
- 18 The skeptical approach to school education is usually complemented with a positive stereotype of the residents of the mountains being equipped with all the skills they need for their life in nature. Offutt presents this stereotype, a favorite with folk narrators, in his autobiography *The Same River Twice* (1993): "We can spot fleas hopping from dog to dog at a hundred yards; we can track a week-old snake trail across bare rock" (19). In "Sawdust," the boy realizes a negative aspect of this stereotype when he almost steps on a snake and they "watch each other for a spell" (KS 7). Common sense advises to "run from a snake without ever knowing if it was poison or just alive" (KS 7) and local people apply the same instincts to education.
- 19 In spite of the obstacles and ridicule, the boy proves at least once that knowledge can be useful for mountain people. He read in a magazine that the government had banned the

killing of alligators, which makes it possible for him to tell his brother that the expensive "alligator-hide boots" he bought in a mall must be fake (KS 9). Still, under the circumstances, obtaining a high school degree is a gratuitous act for the boy, and he knows he should not go further, even though the certificate also means a qualification for a better future. It is obvious that he instinctively understands what Richard B. Drake writes in *A History of Appalachia*: "that schooling lifted [...] mountaineer students from their culture and ran the risk of making such a student unfit to return to the life he came from" (227).

- 20 In this story Offutt does not deny the true core of the stereotype of the contempt of Appalachian people for formal education. In his second autobiographical book, *No Heroes* (2002), he describes himself as the first kid who stepped inside the Rowan County Public Library, opened in 1967, circumventing the limit of four books per person by getting cards not only "for all his siblings" but also "in the name of a family dog" (67). As a student at Morehead State University, the first "full-fledged university" (19) in that part of Kentucky, he was aware that an educated person had a tough life among people who signed legal documents with three x's and according to whom "B.A. stood for 'Big Asshole,' B.S. stood for 'Bull Shit,' and Ph.D. stood for 'Piled High and Deep'" (25).
- 21 The fact that Offutt deliberately composed his autobiographies to resemble long and episodic oral narratives makes visible both the affinities and differences between his fictional and non-fictional renderings of the same aspects of Appalachian life. "Sawdust," being a concise short story focused primarily on the theme of education, creates an impression of universality: a folk narrator could set such a story in any poor region of the world and tell it to listeners anywhere. Compared with it, Offutt's non-fictional descriptions of his own experience with education are only glimpses in the stream of his autobiographical narratives, which considerably limits their universal appeal. They are so firmly rooted in the Appalachia of his youth that they could hardly be transferred elsewhere. In Sarah Hardy's opinion, oral storytelling abounds with "flashbacks, parallels, and digressions" (354), which is why "the spinning out of a theme or idea is never strictly linear," while a short story relates to a "single oral episode, a kind of well-developed theme," even though it stays open (355). The openness lies in the ability of the central theme to spread "energies in several directions at once: it pulls in the direction of its own self-contained narrative line, towards other similar and parallel stories, and towards certain patterns of language or a particular set of symbols" (355).
- 22 In "Sawdust," we can find germs of such parallel stories that lead in other directions and at the same time elucidate the central narrative line. In an interview Offutt said: "Writing a short story is like stepping into the entrance of a cave," while "doing a novel is like going all the way in, into the darkness" (qtd. in Koepfel G2). The first-person narrator of "Sawdust" is standing in the liminal space, alternately looking inside the cave and far away from it. Figuratively speaking, it is in the darkness of the cave that he finds two episodes, both of them only loosely related to the main theme of education, or rather the lack thereof, but serving as gates to the worlds of another Appalachian stereotype, that of violent mountain people. The first episode describes the gradual decline of the narrator's father into violence and insanity, culminating in his suicide, the second one the obvious ease with which, at least hypothetically, a feud could start in the Appalachian hills even near the end of the 20th century. The unfulfilled dream of becoming a veterinarian makes the boy's father a bitter and cruel man who is able to shoot his favorite dog under the porch just because he made a mistake and chased a skunk instead of a coon. Later, when

he joins the church, he believes that his faith will help him heal a puppy with a broken leg. While his wife erroneously considers his helpless crying over his failure to cure the dog to be "a sign that both his oars are back in the water" (KS 5), the boy's father makes another attempt at fixing the puppy's leg but instead he breaks the poor animal's remaining three legs and then hangs himself (KS 6).

- 23 The second episode stems from the first one. The innocent jokes of locals directed at the narrator's desire for education culminate in a rude remark about the incompetence of his father: "I got a sick pup at the house, Doctor. You as good on them as your daddy was?" (KS 13). The boy is immediately aware that he must act up to the mountain code of honor, even though he does not feel like fighting. He is also aware that a marginal skirmish can result in long-time animosity between whole families: "Way it is around here, I had to do more than just fight. Sometimes a man will lay back a year before shooting somebody's dog to get back at its owner, but with everyone watching, I couldn't just leave" (KS 13). The boy kicks out one of the headlights of the teaser's pickup, gets into a fistfight, and finally runs away. On the following day his brother beats the offenders, saying to the narrator: "I'll fight for you, Junior. And for Daddy, too. But I never could figure what either of you ever was up to" (KS 13). The freshly introduced stereotype of the large-scale violence that can spark from a petty problem if family pride is threatened opens up space for other narratives in Offutt's collections.

- 24 In *No Heroes*, Offutt confirms that even people from Appalachian towns are not exempt from the consequences of breaking the code of honor. While in big cities it is considered impolite to stare at strangers, here it is "common because you must try to figure out who the person is related to, if you know the family, and if you are perhaps distant kin. One of the scenarios holds true, because there are no strangers in the hills" (109). If you do not recognize neighbors, they can feel offended: "Lives are ruined by a chance encounter in a grocery parking lot, during which one person didn't notice a neighbor, who felt hurt by the slight" (32).
- 25 The short story "Melungeons," from Offutt's second collection, *Out of the Woods* (1997), brings into prominence the stereotype that played a secondary role in "Sawdust"—that of the violent streak in Appalachian people that occasionally culminates in feuds. The story deals with the stereotype within a broader perspective of the various myths concerning the very origin of the residents of Appalachia from the eastern Kentucky hills.
- 26 In 2006, in his provocative book on the origins of Southern literature, James P. Cantrell claimed that the Appalachian people were mostly of Scots-Irish origin, going back to the Celts.⁸ But some of the inhabitants of Appalachia, called the Melungeons, closer to the ancient Native American population of the region, seem to have a more complex ancestry, which remains undisclosed up to the present day. The uncertain origin of these people, with their wavy hair, olive skin, and blue eyes, who could not be ranked among the white, Indian, or black populations, made them a rewarding subject of myths.
- 27 Richard B. Drake, in his historical book, devotes exactly two sentences to them:
- And a remarkable and puzzling minority called "Melungeons," never precisely enumerated in East Tennessee and neighboring states, has been a mysterious dark-skinned group subject to much prejudice for many years. The Melungeons are just now beginning to put together their own story in a fairly convincing way. (189)

- 28 The tone of the second sentence of the quotation, together with Drake's hesitation as to whether he should put the Melungeons in quotation marks or not, suggests that until recently scholars could not decide how much truth there is in the myth of the strange ethnic group whose members bear Old Testament names and have a skin color similar to that of Native Americans but not exactly like them.
- 29 Offutt was one of the first Appalachian writers to be interested in the identity of the Melungeons but is far from isolated in this effort. In 2007, one decade after *Out of the Woods*, the novelist and short story writer Lisa Alther published a book about her search for her Melungeon ancestors in which she gave, apart from personal memories, an overview of various theories about their origin. In the introduction, she enumerates a few conclusions, some of them contradictory,⁹ from researchers of many fields of study:
- They're said to be descended from Indians who mated with early Spanish explorers, or from the survivors of Sir Walter Raleigh's Lost Colony on Roanoke Island, or from Portuguese sailors shipwrecked on the Carolina coast, or from African slaves who escaped into the mountains. (*Kinfolks* xii)
- 30 With the exception of "Melungeons," the myths concerning the origin of this mysterious ethnic group enter Offutt's stories only marginally. For example, the narrator of "Sawdust" notes that while strangers are white or black, people here are "mostly brown" (KS 6). As he does not know anything about history or ethnography, he is not able to search for the roots of his kin, even though he is very keen on meeting people from outside his ethnically homogeneous environment: "I wouldn't mind talking to somebody of another color but they don't ever come around these parts. Nobody does" (KS 6).
- 31 "Melungeons" is set in Rocksalt, the town where the narrator of "Sawdust" took his exam. The main protagonist of this third-person narrative is the sixty-three-year-old deputy and jailer, Ephraim Goins, who left the hills because of the feud raging there between the Mullinses and the Gipsons; his relatives married both sides and he did not want to see them killed. The feud started sixty years earlier with a minor incident (a falling oak dropped on the land of the neighbors, killing a black bear, and the logging family ate some of the meat) and has cost the lives of twenty-eight people so far. The names of the clans are recognized as Melungeon in most of the ethnographers' lists Alther mentions in her book.¹⁰ The name Goins refers, in her opinion, probably to "Goa, the Portuguese colony in India" (*Kinfolks* 179).
- 32 The presence of Deputy Goins is tolerated in Rocksalt because he is the only local Korean War hero, decorated with a Purple Heart and a Bronze Star. Still, where he lives parents and teachers threaten naughty children that if they do not behave, the Melungeons will get them (OOW 39).¹¹ His life is a story of exclusion and ostracism. In the army, he was assigned to an all-black company because an army dentist noticed the bluish tinge of his gums: "Black soldiers treated him with open scorn. The whites refused to acknowledge him at all" (OOW 39).
- 33 Deputy Goins, an expatriate by choice, romanticizes the hills he left:
- He missed living with the land most in autumn, when the trees seemed suddenly splashed in color, and rutting deer snorted in the hollows. There were walnuts to gather, bees to rob. Turkeys big as dogs jumped from ridgelines to extend their flight. (OOW 46)
- 34 The pastoral idyll connected with the ethnic group that the Shawnee Indians called "white Indians" and claimed "that they'd always lived there" (OOW 39) is, according to Ronald D. Eller, shared mostly by expatriates and people outside the region. In his book

on Appalachia after 1945, he points out that among those who admired the “romantic simplicity and honesty” (134) of the mountain population most were the VISTA volunteers. Such idealization balanced the prevailing stereotypical image of the poor area as “a problem region” (67) inhabited by “yesterday’s people” (102). When Goins occasionally walks in the hills, he feels “awkward and foreign, as if the land was mocking him” (OOW 41). The closer he is to his native hills, the faster the pastoral idyll fades, even though his homesickness increases.

- 35 Goins reads a newspaper article about the Melungeons as a mythical “vanishing race,” and from all the theories of their possible origin he chooses the one that makes them descendants of “one of Israel’s lost tribes” (OOW 47). The preference for Jewish origin partly stems from his isolated life in the Army where the only man who became his friend was “a New Yorker named Abe, whom no one liked because he was Jewish” (OOW 39). But for Goins, this theory, unlike the ones labeling the Melungeons “as shipwrecked Portuguese, Phoenicians [or] Turks” (OOW 47), can also be supported by their names: he is Ephraim, in Genesis “the leader of a lost tribe who never made it to the land of milk and honey” (OOW 49), and he “knowed a Nimrod once. Got a cousin Zephaniah married a Ruth” (OOW 48).
- 36 Even though this theory of the origin of the Melungeons seems to exclude the hypothesis that the Goinses came from Portuguese India, it can be found in Alther’s book as well: the Jews could be the 16th-century “Sephardic refugees in Amsterdam who fled the Spanish Inquisition” (*Kinfolks* 104). Following the research of Beth Hirschman and Donald Panther-Yates, who claim that “the original Melungeons were crypto-Jews and Moors,” she occasionally discovered “stars of David on Appalachian headstones” or “menorahs used as candlesticks on Appalachian dinner tables” (*Kinfolks* 218-19). Hezekiah Gipson, an old man with a Jewish Old Testament name, comes to the Rocksalt prison and insists on being jailed overnight without having committed an offense. Soon it becomes obvious that he suffers from homesickness: “Missed every wedding and funeral my family had” (OOW 41). He is the last surviving member of the old Gipsons, who spent decades in exile, but when he returned he found that one of the old Mullinses, Beulah, is still alive. While the grandchildren of the families “have got a game” of the feud, “play-acting” (OOW 42), which signifies that it will continue its life in a benign, playful, and more creative form, for the last two old survivors it is still a deadly matter. The murder of Hezekiah Gipson by Beulah Mullins in the Rocksalt jail ends, after sixty years, the story of the family feud, but the stereotype of feuding Appalachians lives on. Myths, including stereotypes, always survive the real events, as more details are added later, and more versions, often incompatible, of the narratives appear.
- 37 The story suggests that stereotypes validate personal tragic stories better than non-legitimizing myths such as that of the origin of the Melungeons. Before Hezekiah Gipson is murdered, Goins talks to him about his experience with his Melungeon identity outside the Appalachian hills. Gipson confirms that all his life he had to pass for someone else, depending on who was around: “Italian mostly. Couple times a Puerto Rican till they heard me talk. Sometimes it never mattered” (OOW 41). Still, he is not interested in his origin: “It don’t matter where we upped from. It’s who we are now that matters” (OOW 48). On the other hand, the feud he tried to run from and the stereotype related to it give Gipson his identity back. With buckshot from Beulah’s shotgun in his body, he finally becomes a true part of the hills he always loved but had to leave.

38 In the history of eastern Kentucky (as well as West Virginia and eastern Tennessee) there were many similar feuds, the most prominent being the one between the clans of the Hatfields and the McCoys, whose story was recently retold by Lisa Alther even twice: once in a novel and once in a book of non-fiction. Alther is aware of the existence of many different or downright contradictory versions of all the crucial events related to the feud and what she writes about the Hatfield-McCoy animosity is valid for all the similar episodes from the life of isolated communities in poor hill regions worldwide:

So like other histories, the various versions [...] have been embellished, pruned, and honed, like rocks roiled to smoothness in a creek bed, by generations of tellers, some creating myths, other righting wrongs, most trying to explain or justify the bad behavior of their ancestors or relatives. Chronologies are scrambled. Hearsay appears as evidence, anecdotes as facts. (Alther, *Blood Feud* xvi)

39 When Offutt introduces the character of Beulah Mullins into the story, he also brings in a narrative strategy which is able to change focus from stereotypes into myths, in this case from the stereotype concerning the violent and vengeful nature of Appalachian people into the myth of the ancient violence present in the region from times immemorial. As a stereotype is always a legitimizing myth, the author needs to remove from the story those social practices of its characters that ask for a moral or intellectual evaluation. One of the possible ways is to create a character that is a personification of an event, an era, an area, or a combination of the three.

40 The 84-year-old Beulah Mullins is stripped of all personal characteristics. Not only does she embody the whole history of these hills; she is at the same time an ancient Indian trapper, an animal, the hills themselves, and a female Grim Reaper who must have the last word in the feud. Beulah "had never voted or paid taxes" (OOW 43) and visited Rocksalt only once in her life, decades ago, to buy nails for a hogpen. Still, she has no problem finding the way: she can scent the town and when she gets there, she is stalking it "from the shade" (OOW 45), avoiding a neon sign. Guessing rightly that nobody will provide shelter to a member of one of the old feuding families, she aims directly for the town jail: "Beulah moved downwind of a police car. She couldn't read but knew that an - automobile with writing on its side was like a tied dog. Whoever held the leash controlled it" (OOW 45). Although she never met the deputy, she immediately recognizes his origin: "You look a Goins" (OOW 49).

41 Goins surrenders to everything that she represents almost immediately, as he is aware of her power, which, for him, acquires supernatural qualities:

Goins didn't know her, but he knew her. It was as if the mountain itself had entered the tiny room, filling it with earth and rain, the steady wind along the ridge. She gazed at him, one eye dark, the other yellow-flecked. Between the lines of her face ran many smaller lines like rain gulleys running to creeks. She'd been old when he was young. [...] He could smell the mountain on her. (OOW 49)

42 Goins answers her query about Gipson, tastes her squirrel stew and, lulling himself into the belief that "she wasn't here for trouble" (OOW 50), he gives her privacy with Gipson. When he arrested her after she had shot Gipson dead, it was like taming a wild animal that wants to be tamed.

43 The myths of the Melungeon origin of the eastern Kentucky Appalachian people and the ferocity that is literally present in the air of this area, together with the stereotype of the violent nature of the residents of the mountains, create one of the "changeable groups of themes relating to each other" that, in Sarah Hardy's opinion, account "for the flexibility

of oral narrative” and relate to the genre of the short story “in that it is necessarily episodic, forming shorter thematic clusters rather than a long continuous narrative” (354). Like an oral narrative, a short story is able to present myths and stereotypes simultaneously with naked facts (for example, information about how the feud started and which families were involved, the setting and length of the conflict), or, in Hardy’s words, to “serve a double function of encyclopedic and mythic space for the community” (355). This works neither against the openness of the short story, which provides “important cultural information while remaining sketchy enough to fit into numerous variations” (355), nor against the tendency of myths and stereotypes to become universal.

- 44 From the scholarly discourses about Appalachia, as well as its image in popular culture, it becomes obvious that if Appalachia did not exist, Americans would have to create it as an antipode to the long-cherished concept of progress, as a scarecrow used to frighten away the sacrilegious idea that the American consumer society might be too pragmatic and commodity-oriented to bring something good to culture. Eller, in the introduction to his book, honestly admits:

We know Appalachia exists because we need it to exist in order to define what we are not. It is the “other America” because the very idea of Appalachia convinces us of the righteousness of our own lives. The notion of Appalachia as a separate place, a region set off from mainstream culture and history, has allowed us to distance ourselves from the uncomfortable dilemmas that the story of Appalachia raises about our own lives and about the larger society. (3)

- 45 As Raphael Patai emphasizes in his book *Myth and Modern Man* (1972), a crucial element of every myth is truth, not the factual one, “but rather the truth that dawns upon us as we gain an understanding of the ‘true meaning’ of the myth” (3). To look for a ‘true meaning’ of a myth that keeps adding new, sometimes contradictory elements to its core or, as viewers of TV series would say, pilot story, is next to impossible, and that is why people are inclined to take as truth what is regularly repeated, either literally or in variants; even Patai admits that a myth “requires repetition before it can have a full impact on its audience” (3).

- 46 Offutt is well aware of the mythological ramifications of his stories and does not succumb to the illusion that a true meaning can be derived from them. For him, the repetitive use of myths is primarily a defense against simplification. For him, mythology is strongly connected with oral history:

I was reading mythology. I was reading legends and lore and folk stories and borrowing from them because I grew up hearing that sort of things, and I was trying, in many ways, to create my own stories. But what you’re talking about is really related to that time. I just can’t describe the intensity of my feelings of being a part of an otherworldly experience [...]. (Interview with Trucks 165)

- 47 For the blend of the mythological and the present-day (one does not eliminate the other), the short story is an ideal form, even though extremely difficult.¹² If a myth is presented as a theme for a short story, its journey to the readership becomes as easy as if they were listening to a story told by an accomplished folk narrator. In this way, as Hardy points out, “the theme in a story can resonate beyond the text in which it appears and into the realm of the reader” (357).

48 According to Offutt, this can be accomplished if short story writers can handle the beginnings and endings of their short stories. To write a good beginning, it is necessary to lay aside one's self-consciousness and stop "wondering if your idea is sufficient enough" (interview with Dezen 121). The recipe for a good ending is to overcome the "reluctance to leave [their] imaginary world" (121). Offutt says:

To me, a story has three endings. There's the ending for the protagonist, his or her emotional ending. There's the ending to the events of the story. Then there's the structural ending to the story itself. It's hard to try to fit those in. I think ending with an image is always a strong idea. An image that's related to the protagonist. (Interview with Dezen 121)

49 In "Sawdust" and "Melungeons" the three endings overlap. "Sawdust" ends with a conversation between the main protagonist and the VISTA volunteer in the test center. After the boy, who received a certificate with a gold seal and the governor's signature, refuses to take a job application, the woman, with resignation in her voice, says: "Sometimes I don't know what I'm doing here" (KS 15). The boy's gloomy response—"None of us do. Most people around here are just waiting to die"—transforms into a joke. The woman's reaction to the boy's "but what's funny is, everybody gets up awful early anyhow," is "I like to sleep late" (KS 15). In that moment, the woman's perspective changes: she finally tunes into his wavelength and stops being a stranger, which she proves with her smile. The boy's perspective changes, too: while his father tried to avoid the town, for the boy it is now another part of the mountains, "just a bunch of people living together in the only wide place between the hills" (KS 15). The episode is accompanied with the concluding image of the boy looking for empty bottles to pay the \$15 fee for taking the test, even though the clerk told him that for poor Appalachian young people it is free.

50 Both the anecdote and the powerful image connected with the protagonist return the reader's attention to the stereotype central to the story. The author presents the boy's decision not to benefit from his education as a choice of identity, which helps us see the truth behind the often trivialized stereotype of illiterate mountain people. In addition to that, the boy's unwillingness to take the test as a gift from the government and his insistence on paying for it links it with another stereotype, that of the pride and honor of the residents of Appalachia. At the end of "Melungeons," Deputy Goins writes down the names of both Gipson and Mullins into his book of prisoners, but before doing it, he puts away the Bible where he was looking for the origins of the Melungeon first names. The first names are missing even in the log, because one of them belonged to a man who "was down to a body now" and the other to a natural element that does not need a name. Later, when he opens the door to step out, people duck "for cover until they recognized him" (OOW 53). Goins, like the boy from "Sawdust," is more a part of the town than he thinks himself to be, even though he claims that he had known the townspeople "for thirty years, but never really knew [them]" (OOW 53). On the personal level, the final incident means liberation for Goins: now, when the feud seems to be over, he can return to his native hills. As the narrator says, there "was nothing he needed to take" (OOW 53).

51 It might seem that the evil streak of the mountain people, as well as, figuratively, the area itself, is safely locked up in jail, but you cannot keep in a cage either a myth or a stereotype whose main characteristics are their ability to travel, proliferate, and be shared. To emphasize the difference between the stereotype and the closely related myth, the author juxtaposes the literal and the symbolic, as well as the natural and the -

supernatural, which, again, is a distinctive feature of oral narratives. Although Offutt disagrees with the widely shared opinion that "an ending must reverberate back through the story" and "be something that's inevitable but also unpredictable" (interview with Dezen 121), both "Sawdust" and "Melungeons" meet these demands. Even if Offutt refuses to "worry about all that" (interview with Dezen 121) the closeness of his writings to oral narratives does the job without obvious strain, keeping both the universal and the particular well balanced, as can be expected from a good story with mythical appeal.

- 52 Returning to Offutt's characterization of a short story as a look from the entrance of a cave, the best look at myths and stereotypes comes from the liminal space the cave entrance represents: the author can alternately look outside and inside, connect myths and stereotypes with the lives of individuals, and efficiently link the ancient with the present-day. The universality of the stereotypes and the myths makes the stories - understandable outside the region where they are set and, at the same time, mediates the flair of the times and places to readers who never set foot on Appalachian soil.¹³

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NOTES

1. Thomas A. Bailey, for example, defined myth as "an account or belief that is demonstrably untrue, in whole or a substantial part" (5).
2. Gordon Hodson, in his *Psychology Today* blog article (2012), claims that stereotypes "are not strongly related" to other forms of bias, for example, prejudice or discrimination. In his opinion, it is because stereotypes "can often exist independently from our emotions and behaviors." That is why a negative stereotype can initiate positive emotions and behavioral responses, and vice versa.
3. All biographical data come from two Offutt's autobiographies: *The Same River Twice* (1993) and *No Heroes* (2002).
4. Both stories are henceforth cited parenthetically in the text: "Sawdust," included in *Kentucky Straight*, as *KS* and "Melungeons" from *Out of the Woods* as *OOW*. The stereotype of the violent nature of Appalachian people appears as a subsidiary motif in several other stories from both collections, most prominently in "Smokehouse" from *Kentucky Straight*, which also touches on the theme of feuds. In addition to it, it introduces a vengeful Melungeon character and the main protagonist of the story has a Melungeon wife. The story's main focus is nevertheless on alcoholism and gambling.
5. VISTA (The Volunteers in Service to America) has been operating in Appalachia since the program's establishment in 1965, with the task of participating, like everywhere else, in anti-poverty programs. The GED (General Education Development) test was introduced in the 1940s for soldiers or other people who for various reasons could not complete their high school

education, and gave them an opportunity to obtain a substitute for a secondary school degree. See, for example, Eller 108.

6. The exodus is a historical fact: for example, in the 1950s “more than a million people left the region” (Eller 28). In the 1960s “one in three Appalachian adults remained functionally illiterate, compared with 20 percent of all Americans” (Eller 204).

7. Frédérique Spill kindly brought to my attention Offutt’s reference to the scene in William Faulkner’s *As I Lay Dying*, in which Anse Bundren, the head of a rural Mississippi clan who is carrying out the last wish of his wife to be buried in Jefferson, gets from Snopes by way of exchange a team of mules that, as one of his sons ironically remarks, must have been fed on sawdust (132). An even more obvious influence of *As I Lay Dying* can be found in Offutt’s story “Out of the Woods,” in which the main protagonist is illegally transporting, in the trunk of his car, the dead body of his wife’s brother from Nebraska to eastern Kentucky.

8. Following William Gilmore Simms, even though not completely sharing his identification of this region primarily with Native Americans, Cantrell calls Appalachia the “geographical backbone” of the South. Like David Noel Doyle and David Hackett Fischer, Cantrell claims that “the culturally Celtic immigrants settled primarily in the Piedmont and Appalachian regions of the South and then spread westward” (97).

9. Later, Alther adds several even more interesting and, in the light of recent discoveries, also more probable hypotheses. See *Kinfolks* 45, 95, 104, 137-38, 170.

10. Instead of Gipson, lists occasionally contain the surname Gibson. See, for example, Alther, *Kinfolks* 45.

11. Alther also remembers her babysitter scaring her with the Melungeons: “The Melungeons have got six fingers on each hand. They grab mean little chillun and carry them off to their caves in the cliffs outside of town” (*Kinfolks* 1). Even though the physical anomaly of having six fingers on a hand or a foot was found in a number of the Melungeons, Offutt does not mention it in his short stories.

12. Fred Chappell, another Appalachian writer known for short stories, novels, essays, and poetry, more than once admitted: “Of all the forms I have attempted, the short story is the most difficult” (123).

13. This article was written within the project IGA_FF_2016_058, financed from the budget provided in 2016 by the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports of the Czech Republic to Palacký University in Olomouc to support specific research activities at the university.

ABSTRACTS

Cet article étudie deux nouvelles de Chris Offutt, “Sawdust” et “Melungeons”, qui portent sur deux mythes métamorphosés en stéréotypes et en rapport avec les Appalachiens : leur aversion pour l’éducation et leur nature violente et vengeresse — des traits qui sont à l’origine de diverses querelles. Il analyse la relation entre mythe et stéréotype en s’appuyant sur des recherches récentes en psychologie et sociologie qui définissent comme une catégorie particulière de « mythes légitimisés ». L’analyse a pour toile de fond le mythe des origines des Appalachiens. Les travaux de Sarah Hardy quant aux affinités entre la nouvelle et l’oralité sont ici pris en compte, tout comme les recherches de Lisa Alther sur les racines des Melungeons et les remarques théoriques de Chris Offutt sur le racontage, de manière à mettre en évidence le lien intime qui

unit la nouvelle aux *folk-tales* et donne à ce genre littéraire une capacité particulière pour décrire à la fois les mythes et les stéréotypes.

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