

Transmogrified in the Telling: Granny Younger's Version of Events

In her novel *Oral History*, Lee Smith uses the voices of many different narrators to tell the story of the Cantrell family. One critic, Paula Gallant Eckerd, insists that Smith's use of so many first-person voices indicates an "egalitarian notion that each member of the community . . . has valid perspectives that figure into the construct of memory and experience" (121). The problem with deeming all the perspectives "valid" is that the tellers themselves admit to meddling with the truth of their stories. Because the storytellers often reveal strong biases and intentional transformation of the Cantrell history, the novel seems not egalitarian at all; the many different tales obfuscate the truth to the point that the reader has no hope of discovering what actually happened to the Cantrells. Despite the fact that the stories are unverifiable, they do reveal the needs, desires, and agenda of the storytellers. The most vibrant and expressive of these unreliable storytellers is Granny Younger, a relatively well-respected healer and midwife, who claims that her knowledge has more value than that of anyone else: "I been here a long time. Years. I know what I know. I know moren most folks and that's a fact, you can ask anybody" (Smith 27). By using this disclaimer, she hopes to divert her audience from clues that might reveal her interference with the plot. Although Granny Younger insists that her story is true, she tells a greatly exaggerated and suspicious tale that ultimately reveals her desire for power and her goal of destroying her rival Red Emmy.

In an attempt to gain respect for her authority, Granny Younger tries to elevate herself above other women and thereby gain the power that society reserves for men. She harshly judges women who do not conform to prescribed gender roles and stereotypical female behavior. Her judgment of Red Emmy and other women signifies the fact that she functions as a substitute patriarch in the essentially leaderless community. Patriarchy, according to Allan G. Johnson, exists in a society that is “male-dominated, male-identified, and male-centered” (5). Johnson further says that historically, powerful women in a patriarchal society can only gain and keep that power by “embracing core patriarchal values” (7). Sonya Smith Burchell sees patriarchy as a mystical force which exists outside the people in the community, and without considering how Granny Younger participates in it, she asserts that Red Emmy experiences the “patriarchal power that society tries to impose within her life” (106).

When critics discuss Granny Younger, they tend to note her dominance and claims to authority in her storytelling without questioning these things or her efforts to obtain them. H. H. Campbell envisions Granny Younger as “honest” and “down-to-earth,” with the key to her superiority” as a storyteller being her “knowledge” (146). Katherine Kearns concurs, and accepts Granny Younger’s assertions concerning her knowledge; Kearns describes Granny Younger as someone “who knows human nature as thoroughly as she knows the mountain hollers” (184). Questioning Granny Younger is vital to understanding her role in the story, however, and her participation in male power.

During Richard Burlage’s first foray into the mountains, he comments on the apparent inequality between men and women: “The women were a sad, downtrodden species, from what I could tell. They appeared to be quite subservient to the men, speaking only when spoken to. Some of the girls were remarkably pretty, and yet it was apparent that they age quickly here---the

men appearing, by and large, much less the worse for wear" (Smith 108). Later, upon attending a church service, Burlage notices that the church members segregate themselves by gender, with "one side for the men, and one for the women" (137). Granny Younger recounts only one instance in which she directly challenges a man and believes herself to be the victor. Not long after Almarine, the leader of the Cantrell clan, expels Emmy from his home, several people report seeing and hearing strange things that they attribute to the reputed witch. Granny Younger overhears several people laughing at these stories, and tells them that they "ought not to laugh" because "we ain't seed the end of it yet" (57). Joe Johnson condescendingly says, "Now, Granny," and puts his hand on her shoulder; again, he repeats "Now, Granny," and explains to her that nothing supernatural happened, and that Red Emmy is just "crazy," not a witch (57). She asserts herself by disagreeing with him and walking away. The postman, whom Granny Younger calls "that Stacy boy," calls her "crazy old woman" when her back is turned (57). She doesn't bother to respond, but it is clear what she thinks of him when she growls, "Thinks he is a power with the U. S. Mail" (57). These interactions are significant because they illustrate Granny Younger's discontent with men's condescending and sexist attitudes toward her and her unwavering conviction that she is "a power." Obviously, Granny Younger's limited power as a midwife and healer does not invalidate the men's assumption of the superiority of their gender. Fighting against their attitudes would be a battle she could not win; therefore, she internalizes sexist assumptions about all the other women she meets.

Although individual men control the women within their families, Hoot Owl Holler and its environs constitute a leaderless community. They have no institutional religious leader; the closest thing is a circuit rider who ascends to the mountains every two years to perform belated wedding ceremonies and funerals (85). There is also no mention of a civic leader; Hoot Owl

Holler lies in the middle of a rural, mountainous area that has little communication with centralized federal, state, or local authority. Granny Younger fills the roles of religious leader and community leader, albeit in a way that oppresses the women in the area. She adopts a masculine stance against them, proclaiming strong judgments when they do not conform to female stereotypes. Her judgments of Red Emmy, Nell Cantrell and Pricey Jane confirm Granny Younger's belief that a good woman displays domestic virtues and does not contradict masculine authority.

Granny Younger mainly targets the irascible Red Emmy for criticism, because the so-called "witch" does not conform to an ideal version of womanhood. Granny Younger excoriates Emmy for her lack of femininity more than any other attribute. Emmy lacks the modesty that other women have; she does not "bind up her hair" (49). She does not possess sufficient timidity; when the rain catches Emmy outside, Granny Younger says that "most womenfolks would of run for the house, but you know Red Emmy don't fear no storm" (51). Granny Younger views Emmy as a tremendous threat, or pretends that she sees her that way. Since Granny Younger is the acting patriarch, she bears total responsibility for neutralizing the threat. According to her story, she is the only person who has any hope of combating or containing Emmy. In order to attain this end, she smears Emmy's reputation by recounting her affair with Almarine Cantrell with some supernatural modifications. Granny Younger imagines the tale as more than a story of simple passion; she adopts a hostile stance against Red Emmy, imagining her to be the ravaging villain who takes advantage of the pure, blameless Almarine. The eventual violence becomes Red Emmy's punishment for her perceived bad behavior: violating social norms, practicing witchcraft and refusing to conform to the standards of feminine behavior.

Although Granny Younger desires to construct her identity as completely opposite to Emmy's identity, it is obvious from Granny Younger's story that the two women have more in common with each other than they do with any other people in the community. Granny Younger refuses to acknowledge this kinship and instead persecutes Emmy for things that she herself does, like simultaneously claiming independence from and power over men. Granny Younger renounces the possibility of male company with her statement that she would "not put up with a regular man if you paid me" (34).

The use of witchcraft also connects the two women, but Granny Younger refuses to see her own practice as witchcraft because she infuses it with Christianity. She uses two different healing spells to heal Van Cantrell's leg. First, she "lay . . . a spider web acrost it, hold it on with soot and lard" (30). Then, she chants Ezekiel 16:6: "And when I passed by thee, and saw thee polluted in thine own blood, I said unto thee when thou wast in thy blood, Live: yea, I said unto thee when thou wast in thy blood, Live" (King James Version, Ezekiel 16:6). It is an incantation within an incantation; the Biblical speaker, God, passes by a newborn baby (representing Jerusalem) and decides that it deserves to live (Ezekiel 16:1-6, KJV). Considering the enormous power differential that exists between a superhuman deity and a newborn baby, Granny Younger's usurpation of godlike dominion further reveals her identification with and desire for ultimate power.

Before Red Emmy enters the scene, Nell Cantrell becomes a target of Granny Younger's critical gaze. In this situation, Granny Younger supports a patriarchal power structure through her insistence on strict codes of gendered behavior. She says that Nell acts "like she was too smart for this world, like she couldn't be bothered to smile" (31). Granny Younger resents Nell's confidence and expects her to conform to the feminine ideal: that is, she must smile even

when she doesn't feel like smiling, because that is what women do. Although Granny Younger is aware that Nell's husband, Charles Vance Cantrell, is "mean as snake and hard on women and children," she seems to disparage Nell's "considerable" perkiness after her husband went off to war: "It would have been all right with me if she had not [perked up], now that's the truth. I never give a fig for that Nell" (29). Before her husband enlisted to fight for the Union, Nell "had not done a thing but lay in the bed having a sick headache since the day [her husband] carried her in that wagon up the trace" (29). Given the fact that Charles Vance Cantrell was "hard on women," it's likely that the headache is a euphemism for his wife's physical or mental injuries. Therefore, Granny Younger, who refuses to have a husband herself, passes critical judgment on a woman who doesn't live up to the domestic standard of womanhood. Here, Granny Younger sides (as she always does) with masculine power at the expense of women.

Granny Younger also supports the enforcement of proper feminine behavior by praising women who completely conform to her ideas of womanhood. Granny Younger endlessly praises the virtues of Almarine's wife's behavior. She rejoices in Pricey Jane's domesticity when she notes that the girl cleans the cabin, prepares food, and always seems to have clothes on the line, and, when she's not cooking and cleaning, follows Almarine (63-4). The fact that Pricey Jane doesn't complain during childbirth and loves her baby tremendously also impresses Granny Younger (64). These last two items of praise seem contrived, especially because of what follows afterward. Granny Younger claims to have "heard it told for a fact" that "Red Emmy had that baby of hern all alone where she lived in the Raven Clift, and how she had nursed it at her breast three days and then had flung it straight into the fire" (65).

While Granny Younger's judgments about Nell Cantrell and Pricey Jane don't result in harm to either of them, the fictions she creates about Red Emmy result in Emmy's death. After

Pricey Jane and her son, Eli, become sickened by the “dew pizen” (dew poison) in their cow’s milk, Granny Younger and most of the women attending Pricey Jane’s death bed acknowledge that the illness is fairly common and it could strike anyone (78). One person is unable to see the sense in their conclusion, however. The image of the witch that Granny Younger labored to construct distorts Almarine’s experience of the deaths of his wife and son. His own guilt adds to the impulse to blame Red Emmy; he briefly admits to himself that “he was sure it would not have happened if he’d come on home” instead of playing poker all night (80). If there were no Red Emmy legend, he would have had only himself to blame for the tragedy, and might have accepted the women’s more logical explanation of it. Granny Younger, however, had already set the stage for blaming Emmy when Almarine and the woman were still together. She convinces Almarine that he had become sick and weak because of Red Emmy. She tells him he’s “under a spell” and suggests several violent remedies for his problem; either he should literally throw her out of the house or “cut her” (54). The implication that only extreme violence will expel her impresses on Almarine the supposed danger present in Red Emmy. This is the background that makes him so quick pursue Emmy in his grief. The narrator suggests that Granny Younger is directly involved by stating that “Almarine ran through the night toward Snowman Mountain screaming out like a crazy man, or like a man bewitched” (81). This begs the question: who bewitched Almarine? It wouldn’t have been Red Emmy, because she doesn’t seem to be suicidal. The only other woman in the holler who practices witchcraft is Granny Younger; when she pressured him to end his relationship with Red Emmy, she placed a kind of spell on him by convincing him that the woman he loved, his pregnant live-in girlfriend, was so evil that he needed to sever all ties from her.

Granny Younger's motivations for her participation in the destruction of Red Emmy are complex. Although her desire for power informs her behavior, so too does her affection for Almarine. Granny Younger adopts this affection toward Almarine possibly because she has no family; the dynamics of their relationship resemble that of a mother and child. In a sense, she adopts him, because his birth mother does not pay enough attention to him. Granny Younger complains that "Almarine fell down between the cracks in the family like some children will. In spite of him being so pretty, with all that pale-gold hair, in spite of him being no trouble to a living soul" (28). Because of this bond, she gives him advice about his relationship with Red Emmy and he accepts it without question. Her role as a mother figure in Almarine's life enables her to be the only person in the community who can compel him to do anything; however, she betrays his trust when she encourages him to become violent and later allows him to chase after Red Emmy in order to murder her.

Granny Younger creates a world for herself in which she reigns supreme; she recognizes no male authority, because not only does she have the power of life and death over both men and women, but she is the only thing standing between the community and the threat of Red Emmy. Her ideas about gender are hypocritical; however, she indicts other women for things that she herself does. Her refusal to connect to any women further establishes her distance from their cares and concerns and creates collusion between herself and the ideal of masculine authority. Whatever power she gains from this association is hollow at best; she alienates herself from the women who share the most similarities with her, while aligning herself with women who behave according to constricting rules of feminine behavior. Red Emmy's death, however, is not only a casualty of Granny Younger's campaign for respect and power; the ultimate root of the problem is the fact that Granny Younger, along with many other women in the story, consents to being

controlled by men's ideas. Red Emmy is the only one, according to Granny Younger, who breaks the mold, and her existence as not only an independent woman but an independent thinker violates the basic cultural norms of the community. Granny Younger's success as "a power" comes through her ability to regulate cultural rules by eliminating any and all threats.

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