

Saving grace by lee smith

[Literature](#), [Novel](#)



Lucid and devoid of any ornate sentimentality, *Saving Grace* is the ninth novel of Lee Smith, followed by what many considers to be her masterpiece, *Oral History*. The Appalachian setting of the novel reflects the author's unceasing obsession with nature, folklore and traditional humane values. Like *Oral History*, *Saving Grace* too deals with the thematic constructs of troubled family relations and wistful remembrances. The first person narrative technique brings out the feel of the novel perfectly.

Florida Grace Shepherd, the protagonist of the story, vividly recounts her younger days in a melancholy tone which reverberates with lack of self-pity. Such a tone reflects Grace's complete alienation not just from established family or social orders, but also from her own internal world. Her subsequent coming of age in an adulterous world is amply recorded in the prose style which is "breathtaking in scope and heart-rending in effect--a redemptive work of art..." (*Saving Grace* 2006).

This essay is going to critically discuss how Grace's life is shaped by her encounter with various men. What makes *Saving Grace* a standout among Lee Smith's other novels is its portrayal of a compelling journey to self-exploration. The title itself serves as an interactive vehicle for bringing out the thematic aspects of the plot. Right from the fictional beginning, the heroine of the story Florida Grace Shepherd feels the need to be saved: "I am and always have been contentious and ornery, full of fear and doubt in a family of believers. Mama used to call me her "worrywart child." (Smith 3) However, the fact that she never liked to be saved by some kind of divine intervention goes to show the matriarchal-patriarchal dichotomy in the Shepherds household. The first Man whom Grace is commanded to put her

<https://assignbuster.com/saving-grace-by-lee-smith/>

trust is Jesus Christ, and she hates doing that. She openly avows her hatred for Jesus. It is her mother in whom she finds solace and healing touch in moments of extreme pain and emotional anguish: "...smoothing my long yellow hair and pressing me against her bosom where I could smell the familiar smell of cotton dried out on the line. (Smith 3) Despite her mother's firm faith in the Holy Lord, much like her father's, Jesus to her is the perpetrator behind broken family relationships. Deep in her mind she knows that her father finds the forgiving nature of God as an alibi to lead a life of a compulsive womanizer on the pretext of fundamentalist preaching of Evangelism. The main line of business for the Reverend Virgil Shepherd is the unassuming womenfolk of the mountain community of Scrabble Creek, North Carolina. Her father's escapades and itinerant schedule have spelled doom for the entire family.

The serpent-healing of Grace's father haunts her at night when she and her sister Billie Jean " fall asleep to the sound of serpents rattling in boxes under their bed. " (Eckard 174) In this context, the all-important theme of spiritual salvation comes into contention. Grace refuses to embrace the ways of salvation by being obedient to the Holy Lord. She scorns the prospect of becoming a " special servant of the Lord" (Smith 30). Her reluctance is extended to such a degree that she cannot even gather up enough courage to rely on the Lord fearing it would lead to misunderstandings within the family and she may be cast out of the known bondage.

Moreover, her restricted and brainwashed childhood is manifested through the religious customs imposed upon the children by their father: " he would not

let us read anything except the Bible, he said that was all we needed to read. We were not even allowed to read the newspaper, as the only news we needed to know was the good news of the Gospel, and anything else would distract us from it. ” (Smith 11) So we have seen the affect of two men on Grace’s upbringing – firstly, her father and secondly and perhaps more ominously, Jesus Christ Himself.

As the story sets in motion, the readers are introduced to a 38-year old Grace making a homecoming to Scrabble Creek. The course of her life appears to be bleak after two failed marriages, childhood seduction by half brother Lamer, her mother’s suicide, and the forsaking of her own children. Here we can get a feel of the plot which is to be unfolded as we go along. It is primarily a plot based on begin-at-end formation with the main character revealing her past life at a time when everything in her present seems to have come to a cul-de-sac.

However, as The Washington Post Book World reviewed, Lee Smith gives an almost impersonalized voice to her heroine as she states the truth with an “ honesty so severe we are brought to our knees...” (Saving Grace 2006). “ I mean to tell the truth...even the terrible things”, and she does unhurriedly and forthrightly (Eckard 174). Her recollection touches down the lives of everyone she happened to come across right throughout her childhood and adolescent days. What she can relate to fondly was the maternal love and care she got.

But nowhere in her narration do we find traces of accusation or bitter repudiation against those men who directly or indirectly exploited her. Her

matter-of-fact presentation renders a dramatic appeal to the narrative, making her a storytelling model. It conforms to the viewpoints held by Sheila Collins who in her essay *Theology in the Politics of Appalachian Women* argues that “ women must resist the silent, feminized roles traditionally expected of them in religious and political spheres...” (Eckard 175).

Indeed, Grace’s account shakes the stereotyped role of womanhood hailing from rough and repressive highland living. All along the novel, the readers can find several sets of juxtaposition in terms of feminine ways of perceiving life. Time and again, Grace embarks on self-evaluation to find meaning behind her existence in a world which is ruthless and full of contradicting elements. Her internal world is perpetually at flux for the simultaneous presence of sin and salvation, silence and voice, power and powerlessness and so on.

All these elements are typically associated with the male connections Grace has during her eventful journey. It won’t be an overstatement to claim that *Saving Grace* is about the tragic life of a woman who, after coming in touch with lumps of dirt, remains unblemished in the end. Her single life may not be seen ideal to follow, but one cannot deny the unyielding spirit of humanity in the face of male dominance that Lee Smith documents through the portrayal of Florida Grace Shepherd.