DOI: 10.2478/aa-2023-0008

The Hillbilly Stereotype in Horror Comics

Jozef Pecina

Jozef Pecina is an assistant professor at the Department of British and American Studies at the Faculty of Arts of Comenius University in Bratislava. He received his PhD in British and American Literature at the Faculty of Arts of Palacký University in Olomouc. He teaches American history and American literature. His main fields of interest are antebellum history, popular fiction and comic books. He is the author of *The Representation of War in Nineteenth-Century American Novels* (2015) and has published numerous articles on James Fenimore Cooper, antebellum sensational novels, crime and horror comic books, and eye-gouging.

Abstract:
From William Byrd's 18th-century "lubbers" of the North Carolina backcountry through the deviant gun-toting hicks with missing teeth from John Boorman's survival thriller Deliverance *(1972) to Darlene Snell from Netflix's recent crime drama series* Ozark *(2016), the stereotype of the "hillbilly" has been one of the most pervasive images in American popular culture. This image has been usually associated with mountaineers inhabiting either the Appalachians or the Ozarks, and it has portrayed them as dirty, lazy, ignorant, often mean, violent and dangerous. Since the beginning of the 20th century, it has been popularized by film, music, and, starting with the Depression Era, also by comic strips such as Al Capp's* Li'l Abner*, which shaped all subsequent depictions of these mountain folk. This article considers the depiction of hillbillies in comics with a focus on horror comics published by EC in the early 1950s.*

Of all the cultural regions of the United States, only the Old West and Old South seem comparable in their representations in popular media to "hillbillyland" – the mountainous region originally settled by Irish and Scottish immigrants in the 18th century. The stereotype of the hillbilly has been one of the most pervasive images in American popular culture. Just as viewers and readers recognize a gunslinger or a Southern belle, they know a hillbilly when they see one and immediately create a symbolic context in which the image appears (Newcomb, 1979, p. 155). The stereotypical hillbilly has been portrayed as a lazy, mean, violent and feuding moonshiner, and this article examines if and how these features were exploited in the horror comic books published by EC – a company notoriously famous for ignoring genre conventions and crossing the boundaries of good taste. More specifically, the article attempts to find out

whether the hillbilly stereotype as it is known from present-day horror films and television shows was present in comic books during the early 1950s.

In his enlightening cultural history of the hillbilly as an American icon, Anthony Harkins claims that the popularity and pervasiveness of the portrait of the hillbilly stems from the dualistic nature of this cultural phenomenon – on the one hand, it personifies characteristics such as pioneer spirit, strong family networks and a rugged individualism. On the other hand, the pioneer spirit can reflect backwardness, strong family ties might represent inbreeding and feuding and rugged individualism might stand for stubbornness and an inability to adapt to changes (2004, pp. 6–7). Therefore, he concludes, it "served the dual and seemingly contradictory purposes of allowing the 'mainstream,' or generally nonrural, middle-class white, American audience to imagine a romanticized past, while simultaneously enabling that same audience to recommit itself to modernity by caricaturing the negative aspects of premodern, uncivilized society" (2004, p. 7).

According to *The Companion to Southern Literature*, the prototype of the hillbilly was created by William Byrd, an 18th-century Virginia planter who surveyed a disputed boundary line between Virginia and North Carolina (Carr, 2002, p. 332). In his *Histories of the Dividing Line*, Byrd offered an exaggerated and caricatured portrayal of the backwoods people:

> Surely there is no place in the World where the Inhabitants live with less Labour than in N Carolina. It approaches nearer to the Description of Lubberland than any other. . . . The Men, for their Parts, just like the Indians, impose all the Work upon the poor Women. They make their Wives rise out of their Beds early in the Morning, at the same time that they lye and Snore, till the Sun has run one third of his course, and disperst all the unwholesome Damps. Then, after Stretching and Yawning for half an Hour, they light their Pipes, and, under the Protection of a cloud of Smoak, venture out into the Open Air; tho', if it happens to be never so little cold, they quickly return Shivering into the Chimney corner. . . . Thus they loiter away their Lives, like Solomon's Sluggard. (Byrd, 1929, p. 92)

Later in the 19th century, the hillbilly stereotype was solidified by a number of writers, among them southwestern humourists such as Augustus Longstreet and William Gilmore Simms. In *Sut Lovingood* (1867), another Southern writer, George Washington Harris, created the first poor white character from the Appalachian Mountains. The character of Sut embodied the standard tropes that would come to characterize the hillbillies in the 20th century: "lazy, slovenly, degenerate people who endure wrenching but always comic poverty, embody an uncivilized state of raw physicality and sexuality, and possess an almost superhuman fecundity" (Harkins, 2004, p. 19).

The word "hillbilly" first appeared in print in 1900, when the political correspondent Julian Hawthorne in *New York Journal* defined Hill Billie as "a free and untrammelled white citizen of Alabama, who lives in the hills, has no means to speak of, dresses as he can, talks as he pleases, drinks whiskey when he gets it, and fires off his revolver as the fancy takes him" (Otto, 1985, p. 327). The term soon began to be applied to the mountainfolk of the Appalachians and the Ozarks. The evidence of the popularity of the word and stereotypes associated with it can be found in Cleveland Moffett's obscure invasion novel called *Conquest of America* (1916), which depicts a fictional German invasion of the United States and the heroic efforts of American patriots to stop it. At one point, an American counterattack takes place, "which was the work of an unorganised and irresponsible band of ten or twelve thousand mountaineers gathered from the wilds of Virginia, North Carolina, and Kentucky and Tennessee. They were moon-shiners, feudists, hilly-billies, small farmers and basket-makers, men of lean and saturnine appearance, some of them horse thieves, pirates of the forest who cared little for the laws of God or man and fought as naturally as they breathed" (1916).

By this time, the hillbillies were enjoying a boom in a totally new medium. Between 1910 and 1916, there were at least 300 films about feuding and moonshining (Williamson, 1995, p. 38). The first film to explicitly feature mountain folk, *The Moonshiner*, appeared in 1904. These nickelodeon films were full of fast-paced plots, horse chases, feuding families and an incredible amount of violence, and, together with "hillbilly music", the films would popularize the hillbilly image throughout the entire nation. Indeed, by the early 1930s, this had been well established in American popular culture.

It was only a question of time when the hillbillies would appear in newspaper cartoons as another popular medium. As Thomas Inge points out, until the 1930s American comics had been urban oriented in terms of their settings and characters, and only occasionally would "the rural South enter the comics as coincidental or background material, despite an obsession with things Southern in all other areas of American popular culture in the early part of the twentieth century" (2001, p. 5). Costello and Whitted add that since the medium of comics originated in the cities of the northeastern United States, Southern locales "generally reserved for folktales and local color peculiarities, are often subject to limiting assumptions about the region's aesthetic complexity, storytelling potential, and modern relevance, making the South a provincial enclave on the comics landscape" (2012, p. 7). In 1934, however, three cartoons appeared almost simultaneously that featured hillbilly characters – Paul Webb's *The Mountain Boys*, Billy DeBeck's *Snuffy Smith*, and Al Capp's *Lil' Abner*. Harkins notes that from a cynical perspective, they offered the pleasure of laughing at the misfortune of others and the

confirmation of the belief that the poor deserved their poverty because of their laziness and ignorance (2004, p. 104). Of the three, *Lil' Abner* was the most successful and influential. Inge estimates that over the course of 45 years of the cartoon's run, it reached 60 million readers in 900 American newspapers and had an enormous impact on how the world viewed the South and the hillbillies (1996, p. 155). In his portrayal of the Abner family from the fictional mountain village of Dogpatch, Capp would rely on a comic dialect (or eye dialect) which would become a standard way of portraying speech patterns of Southern and hillbilly characters in cartoons and comic books.

Horror comics enjoyed a short-lived boom in the first half of the 1950s mainly thanks to EC. This company had been founded by Max Gaines, a former salesman who played an instrumental role in the development of the medium. He helped put *Famous Funnies* on the newsstands, even laying claim to inventing the comic book as a format. He also advised DC to print Superman, and he published comic books that introduced such important superheroes as the Flash, the Green Lantern, and Wonder Woman. This is despite the fact that he never liked superheroes and believed that comic books should primarily be used for educational purposes. EC originally stood for Educational Comics and the titles the company produced (*Picture Stories from American History* or *Picture Stories from the Bible*) were intended for children and their teachers. After his untimely death, the company (and its debt) was inherited by his 25-year-old son Bill (Goulart, 2001, p. 19). After several years of stagnation, the younger Gaines hired a number of talented artists and launched a "New Trend" line of titles. Besides war, crime and science-fiction titles, the line included three horror magazines – *Tales from the Crypt, The Haunt of Fear*, and *The Vault of Horror*. As Wright points out, in the subsequent years, EC "produced remarkably innovative and distinctive comic books that challenged the creative standards of the industry, attacked the façade of America's Cold War consensus, and considerably raised the stakes for control of youth culture" (2003, p. 135). David Hajdu notes that the timing for starting the horror titles was apt. Just a few months earlier, the USSR had tested its own atomic bomb; for Americans, the Cold War was no longer just a political abstraction but a threat of gruesome devastation. Ghouls and zombies with tissue peeling of their bones could not have been far removed from young American's mental pictures of their own fate in a nuclear holocaust (2009).

Gaines's innovative approach to horror writing and the company's publishing philosophy can be seen in the ad for contributions published in *Writer's Digest*: "You should know this about our horror books. We have no ghosts, devils, goblins or the like. We tolerate vampires and werewolves, if they follow tradition and behave the way respectable vampires

and werewolves should. We love walking corpse stories. We'll accept an occasional zombie or mummy…Virtue doesn't have to triumph over evil" (Bernewitz and Geissman, 2000, p. 192). As Richard J. Hand observes, such an approach deliberately shifted away from "the ghosts, goblins and devils of the nineteenth-century tradition of horror and the supernatural" (2016, p. 215).

The "New Trend" comic books significantly changed the comic book landscape in the United States. Firstly, thanks to the talents of artists such as Johnny Craig, Wally Wood, Jack Kamen or Jack Davis they featured extremely innovative and high-quality artwork. Secondly, their stories were tightly plotted and often included gallows humour, puns, inside jokes and surprise endings which became the company's trademark. Furthermore, the scripts of individual stories were customized according to artists' styles. And finally, a number of stories published by the company, known among its fans as "preachies", addressed some the most pressing issues faced by American society in the 1950s and challenged "readers' assumptions about racial, ethnic, and religious prejudice, Cold War paranoia, and other anxieties over social difference and American heterogeneity" (Whitted, 2019, p. 5). As Wright claims, Bill Gaines considered himself an extreme liberal and the comic books he published satirized and subverted American values and institutions at the time when, at the height of McCarthyism, no other pop-culture outlet would dare to do so (2003, p. 136). But this innovative approach would eventually contribute to the downfall of the company and the end of the co-called Golden Age of Comics. EC horror comics books broke almost every imaginable taboo of the industry, and it was just a question of time before the company's writers would step over the line. During the mid-1950s, comic books were suffering from massive criticism from religious groups and parents' organizations who blamed comics from causing juvenile delinquency. The mid-1950s United States was a country full of fears that provided an excellent atmosphere for hunting scapegoats. In 1954, televised Senate Subcommittee on Juvenile Delinquency hearings were held and Gaines was one of the main witnesses. Though the hearings did not lead to any specific legislation, the major publishers agreed to establish the Comics Magazine Association of America, a self-regulatory organization (Weiss, 2011, p. 74). Subsequently, a set of guidelines known as the Comics Code was issued that, among many other things, prohibited the use of words "horror" and "terror" in the titles. It also prohibited the depiction of vampires, ghouls, cannibalism, torture and other material that formed the staple of horror stories in comic books. (Code, 2000, p. 95). The Code thus effectively eliminated horror as a comic book genre and in 1955, EC cancelled the entire "New Trend" line of comics.

What distinguished the authors of EC's horror stories from scores of writers and illustrators in the field was not just the innovative artwork but also their cynicism, readiness to defy convention, and willingness to shock. They made a specialty of intimate and domestic terror where the real monsters were scheming, abusive and murderous wives. Marriage and family life were sources of unbearable suffering (Hajdu, 2009), and this is true for a bizarre hillbilly story titled "Drink to Me Only with Thine Eyes…" (*The Haunt of Fear* No. 24). Jake Watson is a violent husband who constantly sucks moonshine from his earthenware jug. When drunk, he either beats his wife or abuses her sexually. But, as the narrator points out, "To those passing by, it was nothing out of the ordinary. The cries…the thuds of hard fists on soft flesh…were a time-honored custom among the mountain folk…" Betty, however, has a lover, who is coincidentally a moonshiner who supplies Jake with his favourite liquor. They come out with a plan on how to get rid of Jake – the lover pushes him into the moonshine still, lets him drown, and then pours lye into the still for the body to decompose. What they do not expect is that over the night, a strange liquid starts dripping from the vat: "slimy and viscous. It did not soak into the earth as an ordinary liquid would. It lay there...shimmering…quivering…and then, toward dawn, it moved…" Jake, in the form of a slimy substance, then kills both Betty and her lover.

Horror stories in *Tales from the Crypt*, *The Vault of Horror* and *The Haunt of Fear* included all kinds of classic characters and settings well known from 1930s horror films. There were werewolves, zombies, ghouls, vampires, cemeteries, mortuaries and haunted mansions. But were there any hillbilly monsters comparable to the deviants with missing teeth from the film *Deliverance*? The tale closest to the evil hillbilly stereotype is "Country Clubbing!" (*The Haunt of Fear* No. 23) with artwork by Jack Davis, who had a strange and cartoonish rural style that was not really like comic-book art (Hajdu, 2009). Davis had the ability to bring the right combination of terror and comedy and could draw the most gruesome scenes and make them somehow tolerable. Set in Okefenokee Swamp, it follows the story of an escaped convict who, in search of food, clubs an old woman to death. He is then surprised by a hideous creature – the dead woman's husband. In panic, the convict runs across the swamp, followed by the club-waving creature. He runs into quicksand and is attacked by a possum, an alligator and a cottonmouth snake before being bitten by mosquitoes. He finally gives up, waiting for the hillbilly to kill him. The creature approaches and hands the convict his club, saying, "Uh..here's your club mistuh! Ya fergot an' left it way back at muh house." The last panel depicts the convict as a crazy raving maniac holding the club. As Hajdu points out, in many of the stories, EC's authors sought to "engender sympathy for misfits, underdogs, and exiles of every breed –

human, animal, fish, alien, living, dead, undead, and combinations thereof" (Hajdu). What makes "Country Clubbing!" unique among EC's stories is a relative lack of text since they were often overwritten. The writing always had priority over the artwork.

A similar monster resembling the degenerate inbred hillbillies from *Deliverance*, "a creature in human form yet of such indescribable revulsion and loathsomeness that even the flies avoid him," occurs in another swamp story called "Swamped" (*The Haunt of Fear* No. 27). The story reflects the innovative approach to storytelling which made the company so famous – it is a first-person narrative told from the perspective of a dilapidated shack standing in the middle of the Okefenokee Swamp. The creature lives in the shack and every night it ventures out of the swamp to satisfy its craving for human meat since, as the shack tells the readers, the creature is a ghoul. Therefore, in "Swamped" a more traditional horror character has an outward appearance of a stereotypical hillbilly.

A hillbilly monster can also be found in another swamp yarn – "A Thing in the 'Glades" (*Tales from the Crypt* No. 31). A series of gruesome murders takes place in the Everglades and the authorities suspect that an old hermit named Ezzard living in the middle of the swamp is hiding something in his hut. During their first visit to the hut, Ezzard – a stereotypical, long-haired, and eye dialect-speaking hillbilly – greets them with his shotgun: "Don know nuthin' 'bout no murders! I mind m'own business! You mind yourn! Now…git!" But when another man is found torn to shreds, a teary-eyed Ezzard admits that the murderer is his own son, who had been born with a deformed body and had grown into a hideous hairy creature with an underdeveloped mind and legs. This monster continues its killing spree by murdering its own father as well as several members of the sheriff's party. Bullets seem to do no harm to the creature, so the sheriff then leads it into a pool of quicksand where the monster drowns.

Sometimes, evil hillbillies do not need to look evil at all. "Death of Some Salesmen!" (*The Haunt of Fear* No. 15) is also a classic horror tale featuring artwork by Davis. It tells the story of Stuart Thatcher, a travelling salesman whose car breaks down on a mountain road during a rainstorm. He finds shelter in an old and weather-beaten house that is inhabited by a nice elderly corn-cob pipe smoking couple. Thatcher is surprised to see all kinds of modern appliances in their household. He is told that the couple had bought a fridge from a salesman but that they had been cheated and the fridge did not work. Ever since, they "vowed that if any other salesman tried to sell us anything…we'd make sure it worked first!" Thatcher is then shown a freezer with "a frost-covered blue skin body" of a salesman stored inside. Then, "a brown-crusted well-roasted corpse" of another follows in an electric oven. Then there is a body hanging "head down…swinging back and forth! A pendulum…HUMAN pendulum!" in a

grandfather clock. On top of that, there is a charred face in a television set and a human vacuum bag. The old man then brings the product Thatcher has been selling, and the last panel shows the sweating face of the salesman and the couple holding "Mother Jackson's little housewife helper…the handy-dandy meat slicer!" There were few places in 1950s popular culture where sadism, unpunished murder and the triumph of evil were so welcome.

One of the most original hillbilly yarns appeared in *Shock SuspenStories*, a title which brought together horror, crime and science-fiction comics in every issue. "Cadillac Fever!" is the only EC story written completely in eye dialect (including captions). It is the tale of Pa, a poor hillbilly man who desperately craves to drive a Cadillac. It is narrated by Ruthie, his daughter. He thinks about nothing else and saves every dollar he earns, hiding it from Ma. But she always "sniffs it out like an ol' hound dog trackin' a possum", spending it on bonnets and dresses. Ruthie seems to be the only person to understand Pa's desire. Finally, Ma is found dead with a hole in her body and Pa is the main suspect. He is charged with murder and sentenced to the electric chair thanks to Ruthie's testimony. As Ruthie arrives at the funeral, she observes a big black car: "An then I heard it…the hum of the ingine…coming down the road…coming from the state prison…Bringin Pa. And then I saw it…And I was glad! Pa was finally getting' his ride in a Cadillac…A Cadillac hearse!" It turns out that it was Ruthie who had shot Ma dead and then framed Pa so he could finally get his desired ride. Such O. Henry endings with ironic twists were a trademark feature of EC's authors. Just as in many of EC's horror tales, the exact topographical location is not mentioned. Harkins notes that the image of the hillbilly has occupied a mythical rather than a particular geographical locale. Although it has been associated with the Appalachians and the Ozarks, the creators of such images, including comic-book artists, hardly took into account their cultural, topographical or social diversity and instead combined the two regions into one single fantastical place (2004, p. 5). On top of that, more hillbilly stories in EC's horror titles take place in swamplands rather than in the mountains. This is true to Harkins's assertion that "hillbillyland" has been often perceived as an area anywhere on the rough edges of the landscape and the economy (2004, p. 5).

To conclude, despite the ongoing popularity of hillbilly newspaper cartoons like *Lil' Abner* and *Snuffy Smith*, mountainfolk do not figure prominently in horror tales published by EC Comics. Out of roughly 360 horror stories which appeared between April 1950 and March 1955 in *Tales from the Crypt*, *The Haunt of Fear*, *The Vault of Horror*, and *Shock SuspenStories*, only eight of them featured a mountain or swampland setting and hillbilly characters. With their bearded faces or missing teeth, these characters visually fit the hillbilly stereotype. Most of them are evil in their nature, being murderers or, in one case, a non-human

monster. In one story ("Warts so Horrible?"), a hillbilly character plays only a minor role. Taking into consideration the innovative approach to the horror genre by EC artists, the low number of hillbilly characters is quite surprising. Cemeteries, mortuaries, ghouls, zombies and werewolves probably had a larger appeal for adolescent audiences. Another reason is that the evil hillbilly stereotype as it is known today had not yet been fully developed and had to wait another 20 years to fully surface and reach one of its most extreme forms in James Dickey's novel *Deliverance* (1970) and John Boorman's film adaptation, which launched a plethora of hillbilly horror films such as *Texas Chainsaw Massacre*, *The Hills Have Eyes*, *Wrong Turn*, and the infamous X-Files episode titled "Home."

Works cited:

Primary sources:

"Cadillac Fever!" In: *Shock SuspenStories* 18, Dec/Jan 1954-5.
"Country Clubbing!" In: *The Haunt of Fear* 23, Jan/Feb 1954.
"Death of Some Salesmen!" In: The *Haunt of Fear* 15, Sept/Oct 1952.
"Drink to Me Only with Thine Eyes…" In: *The Haunt of Fear* 24, March/April 1954.
"Swamped" In: *The Haunt of Fear* 27, Sept/Oct 1954.
"The Thing in the 'Glades!" In: *Tales from the Crypt* 31, August/Sept 1952.

Secondary sources:

Bernewitz, F., and Geissman, G. 2000. *Tales of Terror! The EC Companion.* Seattle: Fantagraphic Books.
Byrd, W. 1929. *William Byrd's Histories of the Dividing Line Betwixt Virginia and North Carolina*. Raleigh: The North Carolina Historical Commission.
Carr, D. 2002. "Hillbilly." In: Flora, J. M. et al (eds.). *The Companion to Southern Literature: Themes, Genres, Places, People, Movements, and Motifs*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, pp. 332–333.
"Code of the Comics Magazine Association of America, Inc." In: Bernewitz, F., and Geissman, G. (eds.) *Tales of Terror! The EC Companion.* Seattle: Fantagraphic Books, p. 95.
Costello, B., and Whitted, Q. J. 2012. "Introduction." In: Costello, B., and Q. J. Whitted (eds.). *Comics and the U.S. South*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, pp. 6–14.
Goulart, R. 2001. *Great American Comic Books.* Lincolnwood: Publications International.
Hajdu, D. 2009. *The Ten-Cent Plague: The Great Comic-Book Scare and How It Changed America*. London: Picador. Kindle.
Harkins, A. 2004. *Hillbilly: A Cultural History of an American Icon*. New York: Oxford University Press.
Hand, R. J. "Disruptive Corpses. Tales of the Living Dead in Horror Comics of the 1950s and Beyond." In: Fischer-Hornung, D., and M. Mueller, M, *Vampires and Zombies: Transcultural Migrations and Transnational Interpretations*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, pp. 213–228.
Inge, T. 1996. "Sut, Scarlet, and Their Comic Cousins: The South in the Comic Strip" In *Studies in Popular Culture*, October 1996, Vol. 19, No. 2, pp. 153–166.
Inge, T. 2001. "Al Capp's South: Appalachian Humor in Li'l Abner." In *Studies in American Humor*, New Series 3, No. 8, Special Issue: Humor in Popular Culture, pp. 4–20.
Moffett, C. 1916. *The Conquest of America. A Romance of Disaster and Victory: U.S.A., 1921*

A. D. New York: George H. Doran Company. Kindle.
Newcomb, H. 1979. "Appalachia on Television: Region as Symbol in American Popular Culture." In *Appalachian Journal*, Autumn-Winter 1979–80, Vol. 7, No. 1/2, pp. 155–164.
Otto, J. S. 1985. "Reconsidering the Southern 'Hillbilly': Appalachia and the Ozarks." In *Appalachian Journal*, Summer 1985, Vol. 12, No. 4, pp. 324–331.
Williamson, J. W. 1995. *Hillbillyland: What the Movies did to the Mountains and What the Mountains did to the Movies*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press.
Weiss, M. 2011. "Will Eisner's Contract with Comics." In *American & British Studies Annual*, 2011, Vol 4, pp. 74–83.
Whitted, Q. 2019. *EC Comics: Race, Shock and Social Protest.* New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press.
Wright, B. 2003. *Comic Book Nation: The Transformation of Youth Culture in America*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.

Jozef Pecina
Filozofická fakulta Univerzity Komenského
Gondova 2
814 99 Bratislava
jozef.pecina@uniba.sk