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DIVERSIFICATION THROUGH DISCOURSE: A BAKHTINIAN VIEW OF HOMER  
HICKAM'S *RED HELMET*

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Bachelor of Arts in English

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DIVERSIFICATION THROUGH DISCOURSE: A BAKHTINIAN VIEW OF HOMER  
HICKAM'S *RED HELMET*

JULIA A. WILSON

ABSTRACT

Homer Hickam's 2007 book, *Red Helmet* tells the story of a New York business woman's (Song) transformation into a West Virginian coal miner. *Red Helmet* is a modern, commercial romance that fits into the category of Appalachian working-class literature. The introduction of this study details the characteristics of regional and Appalachian working-class literature and aligns the characteristics to the plot of *Red Helmet*. A discussion of Bakhtin's theories of heteroglossia, hybridization, language stratification, dialogism, and discourse laid the foundation for the analysis of Song's transformation from an outsider (a non-native of West Virginia) to an accepted and productive member of a West Virginia coal mining community (other). Bakhtin's theory of dialogism within particular words is the focus of Chapter 2. The final chapter explores the different discourses present in the novel. The discourses include: the urban New York discourse, the romantic love discourse, the business discourse, the coal miner discourse, and the religion/God discourse. Each of the discourses affects Song in some way and aid in her transformation to a coal miner. Intense scrutiny is given to the coal miner and religious discourses as these are the areas in which Song's thought patterns shift the most. Application of Bakhtin's theories of discourse and dialogue within a text clarifies these shifts.

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

Hard-working men with hunched backs, dead eyes, and faces blackened by the coal they mine - many Americans tend to view coal miners in this stereotypical way. This stereotype grew throughout the centuries through art, literature, the cinema, and television. Americans do not understand or even consider the great contributions that coal miners make to their society. Homer Hickam in his novel, *Red Helmet*, attempts to change America's view by expounding on the necessity of coal mining to everyday life by telling the story of coal mining through the eyes of several of his characters. His main character, Song Hawkins, is an Asian-American female from New York who falls in love with and marries a West Virginia coalmine superintendent, Caleb Jordan. Their cultural and occupational differences are the central conflict in the novel. To make her marriage work, Song must learn coal mining from the ground up and become an Appalachian. She is an outsider to West Virginia and its coal mining traditions. The process by which she becomes a coal miner brings Song face-to-face with discourse that is foreign to her. She

must deal with these ideas, accept or reject them, and then make them a part of her personality.

This idea of the outsider looking in and the procedure through which one becomes a part of the “other” is the central topic for this discussion. In particular, Song’s assimilation from a New Yorker (outsider) to an Appalachian coal miner (other) will be viewed through a Bakhtinian lens with particular attention paid to the discourses included in the novel and their effect on Song’s language, ideas, and actions. Her transformation is an example of the Bakhtinian concept of language stratification (the idea that language grows and changes through its usage in different contexts).

### 1.1 HOMER HICKAM/*RED HELMET*

*The Kirkus Review of Red Helmet* called the novel a “flat and utterly predictable tale” (Kirkus Reviews 1215). If true, it would seem that the novel is an inappropriate choice for a literary thesis. However, there are several reasons why this novel is appropriate. To understand why this is true, one must first understand why some would consider the novel an invalid choice. Only then, can Homer Hickam and *Red Helmet* be defended and their role in American literature established.

Most critics would reject *Red Helmet* as the subject of a literary study simply on the basis that it is commercial fiction. Commercial fiction is mass-produced and appeals to a mainstream audience. One can find these books on shelves in the local grocery store, large retail booksellers, and online. Not only does *Red Helmet* seek to entertain a large and varied audience, it is also a romance. Hickam uses the classic romantic comedy plot in his story. Readers are not shocked when Caleb and Song reunite and renew their



marriage vow. What makes Hickam's use different is that Song is the "romantic" and plot hero in the story. Cable is not the strong romantic lead that readers expect in contemporary romance. This is significant and will be explored in the discussion of romantic discourse in the novel (section 3.1).

*Red Helmet* is a novel that is plot-driven. There is very little character development aside from Song's character. This truth along with the fact that the novel does not use experimental or non-traditional plot structure identifies it as commercial or genre fiction. Hickam's only nod at a non-traditional structure is his flashback scene in Chapter 2. Even flashbacks have become conventional in contemporary literary fiction. (*The Bluest Eye* by Toni Morrison fluctuates between flashback and the present throughout the book.) Therefore, Hickam is not breaking any new ground here.

Maira Kelly in her article, "What Makes Fiction Literary?" adds this characteristic of literary fiction to the two mentioned above: "[literary fiction] offers a deeper look at human experience . . . and is not predictable" (31). According to the *Kirkus Review*, that is exactly what is wrong with *Red Helmet*. Unfortunately, the critic is correct to a point. Hickam does write to reader's expectations. Readers expect some quirky Appalachian characters; they expect Song to be uncomfortable in Highcoast; they expect that the "natives" will be hesitant to accept Song; and they expect something tragic or fantastic to bring the couple back together. There are few surprises in *Red Helmet*. It still seems to offer little for critique.

However, Hickam's use of discourse in the novel sets it apart from its contemporary counterparts. Each of his stereotypical characters has a discourse that is evident in his dialogue and actions. These discourses come into contact with Song's

discourse, and there is a collision. Song's concepts do not match those of Highcoal's citizens and the miners. She has to adjust her way of thinking and acting to accommodate these ideas. Each of the discourses also has a language or vocabulary associated with it. So, many different "languages" are used within the text. This interplay of different languages within a novel would have interested Mikhail Bakhtin. He was fascinated with the way words/language change based upon the context in which they are used. Therefore, *Red Helmet's* use of heteroglossia (Bakhtinian term meaning many languages) makes it a suitable choice for analyzation.

Homer Hickam has a specific place in American literature. Several of Hickam's works have West Virginia as the setting. He is particularly concerned with the plight of the Appalachian coal miner and coal mining culture. This is not only reflected in *Red Helmet*; it is also a major part of his biographical work, *Rocket Boys* (1998), (which was turned into the major motion picture, *October Sky* [1999]), *Sky of Stone* (2001), and his non-fiction book, *The Coalwood Way* (2000). His most recent novel, *Dinosaur Hunter* (2011), moves away from the Appalachian Mountains and coal mining to the American southwest and archaeology. With *Dinosaur Hunter*, Hickam continues to write mainstream fiction. Because Hickam and his work have not been widely studied critically, they are ripe for evaluation.

Knowing this, it is easier to discern *Red Helmet's* place in American literature. The evidence presented shows that this novel falls into the commercial fiction category, but there are also clear factors that identify it as a piece of regional fiction. Identifying literature by the region of origin became popular in the late eighteenth century. American literature of the 1700 and early 1800's was nationalistic. These works reflected the

concerns, problems, and everyday life of Americans. At that time, America was still a small and emerging nation. Because only a small region was producing and publishing literature, nationalism equaled regionalism. As the nation grew and the country was divided by war and expansion, the idea of regionalism changed. Regions of the country and their works became more distinct. In particular, “distinctions between the literature of New England, of New York, and of the South became sharp and unmistakable” (McDowell 109). While this was true, writing outside of New York was still limited. Even as late as the early nineteenth hundreds, Americans believed that Manhattan writers and publications spoke for the whole country.

At the roots of Regionalism was the local color movement. This was particularly true for the Southern and Appalachian regions. The local color movement differs from regionalism in that those writers tended to be “superficial and commonly sentimental . . . They concentrated on the odd, the curious, and the picturesque” (McDowell 110). They would find the most outrageous characteristics/characters of a region and use those to tell a story. On the other hand, these writers would also find examples of quaint behaviors, mannerisms, or language to relate to the public. These two diverse views of a region had several effects. It romanticized the regions for the readers and brought visitors and attention to the areas. When using the more negative and outrageous views of a region, local color writers fed the idea that these regions (particularly the rural Southern and Appalachian regions) needed redemption, spiritually and culturally. These “backward” folks had to be educated in the ways of the city because there was nothing redemptive about their culture. The effects brought about by the local color writers play an important role in the outsider versus other conflict (see section 1.3) in *Red Helmet*. Contrary to local

color writing, regionalism strives for a more realistic portrayal of the people, cities, and conflicts that are the subjects for their works.

According to McDowell, there are four characteristics of regional literature. *Red Helmet* exhibits one of the characteristics. The other three are more applicable to the whole genre of Appalachian fiction, of which *Red Helmet* is a part.

The first characteristic of regional literature is that it is “profoundly connected with both the past and the present” (McDowell 111). In *Red Helmet*, there is a pervasive sense of the past. His father’s death is the catalyst that sends Cable to school to study mine safety. Caleb keeps Bum on as an employee (even though he is unreliable and dangerous) because they played football in high school. Many of the miners have been coal mining for years, and this is reflected both in their respect for the mine and their acquired nicknames. Almost every character in the novel has some past connection with the mine and a deep tie to the community. However, the people of Highcoal are not stuck in the past. Caleb has made significant changes to the mine that has increased safety. The success of the mine is always a concern for Cable. He understands that the town is depending on him to make the mine productive and safe. Thus, the present coal shortages that are detrimental for the mine play a big role in the novel’s conflict. The need for new miners is also always a problem for Cable, so the rookie miner class is central to the prosperity of the mine, as well as the plot of the novel.

The second and third characteristics are most applicable to Appalachian literature. The second characteristic of Regionalism is that “it established its own organs and its outlets to the public” (McDowell 112). A similar idea is expressed in the third characteristic of Regionalism. “[It] develops a program and a platform, becomes a

conscious movement, and even attacks its critics” (McDowell 112). Because of the civil war and the controversies surrounding it, as well as its ramifications, regionalism flourished in the south. For the first half of the twentieth century, the Southern region included Kentucky, Tennessee, and West Virginia; the 1950’s saw an emergence of Appalachia as a “region” for art. Once established, the region began to publish works; and a movement dedicated to study Appalachia (its works, culture, and history) began.

According to the *Encyclopedia of Appalachia*, many nineteenth and early twentieth century Appalachian authors (like other regionalists) had their works published outside of the region, especially in New York. It is not until the late eighteenth hundreds (1892) that the first literary periodical published in Appalachia is established - *Sewanee Review* (University of the South, Sewanee, TN). Another Appalachian-centered literary publication would not come into existence for another thirty-three years. In 1925, The University of Virginia in Charlottesville created The *Virginian Quarterly Review*. It is not until the 1950’s that these publications were prominent nationally. They did not specifically focus on Appalachian literature; rather they were produced in the Appalachian region.

The Appalachian studies movement of the 1960’s and 70’s brought more periodicals dedicated to the understanding of Appalachia’s people and culture. Periodicals that have contributed much to the movement include: *Appalachian Journal* (1972, Appalachian State University, North Carolina), *Appalachian Heritage* (1973, Alice Lloyd College), *Now and Then: The Appalachian Magazine* (1984, Eastern Tennessee State University, Tennessee), *Iron Mountain Review* (1983, Emory and Henry College, Virginia), *Shenandoah: The Washington and Lee University Review* (1950,

Virginia), *Hollins Critic* (1963, Virginia), *Cold Mountain Review* (1994, North Carolina), and *New Millennium Writings* (1990, Tennessee) (McDowell 1067-1068). Thomas Nelson Publishers (a Christian publishing company in Tennessee) produced *Red Helmet*.

The fourth and final characteristic of Regionalism is that it “rarely comes to full expression in literature alone” (McDowell 112). Recently, there has been an explosion of interest by America in the art, history, and social sciences of the Appalachian region. The Appalachian studies movement is responsible for this interest. Scholars are now examining the architecture, folklore, food, music, religion, and visual arts that are particular to the Appalachian region (Abrams Table of Contents).

McDowell’s discussion of Regionalism also helps define Hickam’s role as an Appalachian author. According to McDowell, there are three types of regionalists - pseudo regionalists, propagandists of Regionalism - its prophets and its defenders, and the spontaneous regional artists (115). Of the three, Hickam aligns most closely with the spontaneous regional artist. McDowell characterizes this type of artist as possibly having an awareness of their regionalism or as not being aware at all. For the spontaneous regional artist, their regionalism is “innate and natural rather than calculated or predesigned” (116). For Hickam, his ability to write about the coalfields of West Virginia is innate. He was born and raised in a West Virginia coal community. His father was a coal miner, and Hickam visited the coalmines. He is writing about his experiences. McDowell furthers his definition of this type of author as being “all authors who not only paint regional manners but achieve, at least momentarily, universal appeal” (116). Hickam does this in *Red Helmet* through his use of the romantic comedy plot. In the “painting of regional manners”, Hickam falls short. He uses very little vernacular in the

plot. The speech patterns of his characters also do not match Appalachian speech. There is a generic quality to his characters. While Hickam does portray some things that are central to Appalachian culture like food, music, religion, and community, he neglects or glosses over others that are so important to the literature of the Appalachian region. The things he does not discuss include hunting, sustenance living, distrust of mining corporations, and the distinct tie that Appalachians have to the land and their desire to preserve it. Highcoal (with the exception of Squirrel Harper and the town's physical appearance and location) could be a small town anywhere in the United States. Perhaps, this was a conscious choice of Hickam – to make the town more generic so that it would appeal to a wider audience and allow him to concentrate on the importance of coal mining. It does accomplish this, but it also diminishes what could have been a more unique experience for the reader. By delving deeper in his character's thoughts and using more realistic speech for his characters (like Still in *River of Earth*), Hickam could have taken this novel into the literary fiction category.

Appalachian literature can be broken down even further into several sub-categories - by state of origination or by state of the setting; classification of writing - non-fiction, fiction, and poetry; type of work - novel, novella, short story, poem, magazine/journal article, etc.; and by genre - romance, western, science-fiction, fantasy, mystery, and literary fiction. Confirmation of *Red Helmet* as a commercial romance with an Appalachian setting was made earlier. Beside this classification, *Red Helmet* falls into the category of working-class literature. Working-class literature focuses on the everyday problems and lives of the proletariat. *Red Helmet's* focus on coal mining - what it means and takes to be a miner - clearly puts it into this category.

In his introduction to *Our Working Lives: Short Stories of People and Work*, Larry Smith discusses ten general characteristics of working-class literature and art. Seven of the characteristics are applicable to *Red Helmet*, but the real focus should be in how Hickam's novel lines up with his characteristics of Appalachian working-class literature.

According to Smith, Appalachian working-class literature, first, reveals a "deep appreciation of folk habits and customs, family rituals. Music, alcohol, and food are a major part of the life ritual" (ii). Music plays a large role in *Red Helmet*. There is the use of the name, Song, for the main character. Then, there is the song performed before Cable's proposal to Song. Finally, music plays an important role in Song's acceptance into Highcoal society when she joins the church choir and begins to bond with the churchwomen. Alcohol's part in the story is brief and only related to Squirrel Harper. His moonshine drinking reinforces the hillbilly stereotype. Food also plays an interesting part in the story, first in Song's dislike of traditional, carbohydrate-laden food that Rhonda prepares for Song's first dinner in Highcoal. Later, Song is ravenous for the very food she previously rejected. The suppers at the boardinghouse were not just a time of nourishment for the miners; they were also a time of bonding, venting, and relaxing.

The second characteristic of Appalachian working-class literature is that "family extends back historically and in a neighborly way to community" (ii). There is a distinct feeling of "family" between the miners and the community. Most of Highcoal's citizens had a connection to someone who has worked in the mine. This binds the community together. When the mine prospers, so does the community.



The third characteristic of Appalachian working class literature most closely matches Caleb's story. In Appalachian working-class literature, "themes of sense of place abound; most are not about 'escaping' the working-class culture but of going out for education yet returning home to help" (ii). Cable always knew that he would mine coal and that he would return to Highcoal. He wanted to make the mine the safest that it could be, so he went away to get a college degree in mine engineering. He took that knowledge and applied it to the mine that killed his father, in hopes that current miners and future generations of miners would live whole and healthy lives.

The idea of outsider versus other that has been briefly touched upon above is inherent in Smith's fourth characteristic - "Ethnocentrism is present in families, towns, counties. Distrust comes first till one is revealed as 'one of us,' then welcome is extended" (ii). This conflict is clearly present in *Red Helmet*, specifically in the reluctance of the townspeople to accept Song. At first, they are standoffish and distrusting. It is not until she enters the mine for the first time that the women truly reach out to her. Joining the choir also strengthens Song's bonds with the women of the community.

Continuing with the characteristics of Appalachian working-class literature is the idea that "Often religion is strong, emotionally and physically intense . . . fundamental yet often given individual or family interpretation" (ii). Song's character changes the most in this respect. She transforms from an Agnostic to a praying coal miner. Chapter 3 will thoroughly examine the process by which Song reaches this point and also the irony present in her conversion.

A final characteristic from Smith's list could be a succinct description of Highcoal, its dependence on the mine and on each other. Appalachian working-class writing "is marked by an intimate sense of community - though respecting uniqueness of character, it most often portrays an interdependence of relationships including home, family, town, work and the landscape and natural world" (ii).

Within Appalachian working-class literature, *Red Helmet* falls into an even narrower category - coal-mining literature. The first creative writing about Appalachian coal mining appeared in the late nineteenth century. Within this early fiction, certain themes emerge. These themes continue to be used in today's coal-mining literature. They include the praise of a miner's and his family's courage and durability, fear of a group of organized miners, distrust of unions, and a pity for the conditions that miners and their families endured. (Abrams 1054). These early works also contained stereotypical and one-dimensional characters that also persist today. *Red Helmet's* plot is comparable to the early works, *A Mountain Europa* (1892) by John Fox Jr. and *My "Buddie" and I* by Marcellus E. Thornton. Both of these novels have romance at their core with a coalmine setting. Also similar to *Red Helmet*, Thornton's *Buddie* makes use of "technical descriptions of various kinds of mining" (Abrams 1054). Hickam's novel also shares a bond with William W. Whalen's books, *The Lily of the Coalfields* (1910) (one of the first books to look at women and mining) and *Strike* (which deals with foreign workers in the coalmines). It is Hickam's use of a "foreign", middle-class, female protagonist who becomes a coal miner that sets him apart from these other authors. A discussion of coal mining literature would not be complete without a mention of James Still's *River of Earth* (1940) and *On Troublesome Creek* (1941). These novels are unique because they

“explore the impact of digging coal for a living on individuals, families, and communities in more sophisticated ways than anything published previously” (Abrams 1054). Hickam explores these ideas in *Red Helmet* particularly in the financial and social importance of the mine to Highcoal society. However, he does not deal with the environmental impact, dishonesty of mining corporations, and loss of family land that tends to be the focus of more recent authors like Silas House and Denise Giardina. In fact, his portrayal of coal corporations is somewhat neutral. Unlike many writers of the region, Hickam does not paint the corporations as ruthless companies determined to make profits without a thought for the safety or feelings of miners and townspeople. Even his criticism of mine rescue procedures is subtle. Hickam’s view is balanced.

Homer Hickam’s *Red Helmet* is a suitable novel for scholarly study for several reasons. First, there are very few critical studies of Homer Hickam’s works. Second, he offers a unique and very informative look at coal mining through the eyes of a minority female. In addition, *Red Helmet* is representative of both Appalachian and working-class literature. The study of Appalachian literature as a viable enterprise is still a very young field when compared to the literature of earlier periods. In fact, two students’ dissertations on Appalachian literature help to set the Appalachian studies movement in motion. The more diverse selections that are critically studied the more that Appalachian studies benefits and moves forward.

## 1.2 BAKHTIN

### 1.2.1 HETEROGLOSSIA/HYBRIDIZATION

Mikhail Bakhtin, an early eighteenth century theorist, was interested in language and its usage in the novel. How authors utilized the language of everyday life in the novel intrigued Bakhtin. According to him, a novel is “a diversity of social speech types (sometimes even diversity of languages) and a diversity of individual voices, artistically organized” (262). In light of this definition, an early quote from *Song* illustrates why this novel is suitable for a Bakhtinian interpretation. “Am I going to have to learn a new language with you?” (Hickam 7). Song poses this question to her new husband. Caleb has just used the coal miner’s vernacular “swan” instead of swear. In a miner’s mind, it is bad luck to “swear” in a mine, so they use the word “swan”. This statement serves at least two purposes in the text. It introduces the idea of different languages present in the text (Bakhtin’s idea of heteroglossia), and it subtly shows the differences between Song and Caleb. The truth is Song will have to make the coal mining language her own if her marriage is to work.

Bakhtin offers a very thorough explanation of language usage in the novel. In "Discourse in the Novel", Bakhtin argues that heteroglossia is present in most prose texts. Heteroglossia is the many “languages” one uses to communicate with others. An example from everyday life would be the way a person speaks at work and how he may speak another way when he is with his family. That is just two examples. In the course of a day, a person may speak four or five languages, maybe more. Each language characterizes a personality that a person has - father, daughter, worker, etc. The author does the same thing in the novel through his different characters. Each character can speak several languages (heteroglossia) that represent his background, his work, his beliefs, or his education. Through his exposure to other characters and experiences within the novel, the

reader's languages and discourses evolve to include new ideas and words. The reader and various characters in the book begin to speak a hybrid version of their own language - bits of his old language and the new words he has learned strung together to communicate a concept that was previously foreign to him. *Red Helmet* contains the languages or discourses of New York, Appalachia, education, business, religion, and coal mining. Each of the discourses affects Song in some way and aids in her transformation from outsider to other (see Section 1.3).

The fact that *Red Helmet* does include so many discourses would have been interesting to Bakhtin particularly in each user's grasp and handling of his language. For Bakhtin, each of the characters would understand and use language in a different way. When analyzing the dialogue/thoughts of the characters, as well as the prose that surrounds it, it is not enough to know what the word means. Rather a critic must investigate "its [the word's] varied history, as conflicting social groups, classes, individuals and discourses [seek] to appropriate it and imbue it with their own meanings" (Eagleton 102). Historically, people of all regions have taken language and words and made them fit their lives to express their ideas. It is no different for the Appalachian mining community. They makes the words mean what they want them to mean. For example, the use of "swan" for "swear" or "gob" for the leftover muck that permeates coal mines. Throughout the novel and this discussion, readers will see how this phenomenon plays out repeatedly.

The result of Song's exposure to a variety of discourses is that she is a character who can use the languages of these many different discourses. The discourses she understood at the beginning of the book (New York and business discourse) are still very

much a part of who she is, but they have either changed or receded in importance for Song's way of thinking. Song has added coal mining and a God-centered religious discourse to her repertoire. They and their vocabulary have become a part of who she is.

The acquisition of these discourses is similar to the process that natives of a country must undergo when faced with colonization by another country. The colonizers come in with their own language, ideas, and form of government. If the colonizers are to be successful, they must learn to communicate with the natives and convince them that the foreign way of life and government is best. Granted, sometimes force may be used. Nevertheless, it may be unnecessary for others. Regardless, the natives face adaptation to these ideas - to either accept or rebel against the colonizers. If both parties come to an agreement, there will be an effect on the actions and language of the natives. In the end, the natives will speak a language that is a hybrid (a mixture) of their own language and that of the colonizers. This, in no way, invalidates one language or the other; rather it enhances both languages as it makes communication between the groups possible and creates a new identity for the native. There are many examples of hybridization here in America. One such example is the language of the Creoles in Louisiana. They speak a mixture of French (colonizers) and English (native) that is unique to their area. There is also the Gullah language of the low country in South Carolina. It is a hybrid of English and the African languages of the slaves that inhabit the islands. Even Appalachian vernacular continues to harbor accents and words (like haint for haunt, the collapsing of two syllable words into one syllable - wire to "war") of the Scotch and Irish that settled there.

Intrinsically, dialogue carries with it the idea of two-way communication. If that is the case, Song's interactions with the people of Highcoal should have brought about changes in their languages and discourses. As a rule, this does not happen. Highcoal's citizens remain who they are and maintain their languages. Song, on the other hand, makes significant changes in the way she acts and talks. Song carries the burden of "becoming" to belong. This is another area where Hickam falls short in creating a realistic story. Aside from their grudging admiration and acceptance, Highcoalers should have been impacted a bit more than what is pictured here. Song does produce change in some characters, but it is limited and unrealistic, particularly in light of the extensiveness of her transformation and her heroic actions at the end of the story.

### 1.2.2 LANGUAGE STRATIFICATION

Bakhtin in his essay, "Discourse in the Novel", explores language usage in a novel. Bakhtin argues that traditional forms of literary analysis do not work for interpreting a novel because language utilization in a novel is different. To Bakhtin, language is a living, breathing thing that is constantly changing. It cannot exist in a vacuum. Bakhtin insisted that:

There was no language which was not caught up in definite social relationships, and that these relationships were in turn part of a broader political, ideological and economic systems. Words [are] 'multi-accentual' rather than frozen in meaning (Eagleton 102).

Time changes language - not only in how words are used but also in their meaning. This is stratification of language. By definition, to stratify something is to form or place something in strata or layers or to arrange a thing in a hierarchical order, especially according to graded status levels. No dictionary includes a definition as it applies to

language. Therefore, one must take the geologic and sociologic definitions and apply them to language and words. Whenever words are used in a new context, a collision of sorts occurs. Old ideas, nuances, and remnants of meaning clash with the ideas of the new context. This “conflict” adds a new layer of meaning to the word. The word grows both for the user/writer and for the receiver/reader. The term “stratify” for this discussion refers to this definition or concept.

### 1.2.3 DIALOGISM

A key to understanding the idea of stratification is Bakhtin’s idea of dialogue, not only dialogue in the traditional sense but also in the sense of words "conversing" with the words around it. Bakhtin does not stop here; he takes it to an even more elemental level and puts forth the idea that there is dialogue inherent in a word itself. One word (like the name/word "Song" used in *Red Helmet*) can have various meanings or social ideas attached to it. When the reader brings these ideas into a reading, it can change the interpretation. Language/words for Bakhtin come to be less about concrete/specific meaning and more about performance - what meaning does the word take on in its current context. Terry Eagleton in his work, *Literary Theory: An Introduction*, explains it this way:

The sign [is] to be seen less as a fixed unit (like a signal) than as an active component of speech, modified and transformed in meaning by the variable social tones, valuations and connotations it condensed within itself in specific social conditions (101).

On a larger level, Bakhtin argues that the novel is a dialogue. Dialogue within the text, serves to move the plot and give deeper insight into the speaker. The prose of the story acts as a conversation between the author and the reader. There are times when the



author speaks directly to the audience in an “authorial” language that stands out stylistically from the text. The author may choose to do this because he wants to establish ownership or he may want to emphasize a particular point that he cannot express through his character’s dialogue or actions.

When considering the dialogue of an author with his reader, one must also take into consideration the author's relationship with language. “The author’s words [are] always the words of one particular human subject [the author] for another [the character and the reader] and this practical context would shape and shift their meaning (Eagleton 102). When the author uses the discourse of his characters, he seamlessly incorporates them into the novel, thus making the novel “a unique artistic system, which orchestrates the intentional theme of the author” (Bakhtin 299). The author is not afraid of a word’s previous use; he welcomes the ideas associated with those uses into his work. The nuances of the word’s past uses can differ greatly from its current use in a novel. The juxtaposition of the two ideas (old and new) can add depth to a story and even new meaning to its words. It produces yet another layer than an author can use. These collisions of ideas are often the beginning of transformation for a word. It takes on a new meaning; it grows; it stratifies. As language is a living, breathing, changing thing; so is the relationship of an author to language. Bakhtin details it in this way:

the author exaggerates, now strongly, now weakly, one or another aspect of the 'common language' [language of the common person/ non-literary language] sometimes abruptly exposing its inadequacy to its object and sometimes, on the contrary, becoming one with it, maintaining an almost imperceptible distance, sometimes even directly forcing it to reverberate with his own 'truth' (302).

Hickam’s choices of names for his characters and locations and some of the conversations between his characters are evidence of this concept.

#### 1.2.4 THE PROCESS OF COMING TO KNOW ANOTHER'S WORDS/ACTIONS

Another thing Bakhtin notes is always present in the novel is the "activity of coming to know another's word, a coming to knowledge whose process is represented in the novel" (353). In *Red Helmet*, Song takes the language and actions of mining and makes them her own. They become an integral part of who she is. Song not only has to come to understand the "language" of Appalachian vernacular, she must also learn the jargon of coal mining to be the "hero" of the text. Readers must also participate in a similar process. They have to become familiar with the words of another (author and character), the use of which may be very different from their experiences. The reader must process these words and add them to their own vocabulary. The word may stratify for the reader, or it may not. Like Song, the reader may take the knowledge (understanding of various words, processes, customs, or idiosyncrasies that are particular to the Appalachian region) and incorporate it into his everyday life or speech. Alternatively, the knowledge can become a part of the reader's "experience" database, perhaps never to be accessed again.

Inherent in the idea of coming to understand a process, there is struggle or conflict. Most people do not learn a new concept easily. It involves introduction, work, practice, and mistakes. Song certainly experiences this with coal mining. Novels portraying a process like coal mining must necessarily wrestle to represent all the thoughts, words, and languages needed to tell the story. In fact, Bakhtin believed that the novel offers the best platform for a look at everyday life and its trials. Because of the author's use of heteroglossia in the novel, he can deal with problems and struggles of life

in detail. He is able by word choice and choice of speaker to lay open a subject in a new and different light. Through the portrayal of a certain character's thoughts or opinions about a topic or situation, readers gain a certain perspective about the topic or situation. The character's viewpoint may be very different from those of the author. This is the beauty of the novel as a format. An author can put distance between himself and the things said or happening in a story. Everyday life, like language (specifically novelistic language) is not static. Lives change minute by minute, as does language. Because the novel makes use of the different languages used by people in their daily lives, it presents a more realistic picture of life than could ever be achieved in poetry or other genres (with the exception of non-fiction). The novel opens the way for authors to deal with the tragedies and triumphs that people experience daily. The author can present his true feelings about a topic through one character and then can put forth the opposite view through the voice of another character. Even a third, fourth, or fifth viewpoint can be shown using a variety of characters and their dialogues. Because of this flexibility, a novel can deal with current issues that still haunt the minds of the reader. Bakhtin explains it in this way:

it [the novel] deals with discourse that is still warm from the struggle and hostility, as yet unresolved and still fraught with hostile intentions and accents; prose art finds discourse in this state and subjects it to the dynamic unity of its own style" (331).

*Red Helmet* portrays what life is like in a small, coal mining community. The reader gets not only a perspective on a miner's life but also a minister, shopkeeper, constable, Appalachian child, and boardinghouse owner. Each of these characters brings his own

“language”/discourse to the text, and he influences Song’s character and perceptions, facilitating her change to other.

#### 1.2.5 THE HERO OF THE NOVEL

According to Bakhtin, an adequate portrayal of the transformation of a hero (in the case of *Red Helmet* – Song) in a novel must necessarily include a "generous and full representation of the social worlds, voices, languages of the era [discourses], among which the hero's becoming - the result of his testing and his choices - is accomplished" (Bakhtin 411). Subject matter and length of an author’s chosen written product have to somewhat limit representation. No novel or other written piece can fully represent all the social worlds, voices, or languages of a particular time or place. Yes, a reader/hero should be exposed to the essential ideas that are going to be an influence on the character; but not every possible idea, thought, or reaction of a particular time or place can be written down. In *Red Helmet*, the reader meets and interacts with the citizens of Highcoal – not all of them are coal miners, but coal mining ties all the characters together. By including characters other than coal miners, Hickam represents the various worlds and languages of a small Appalachian, coal-mining town in West Virginia. Song’s relationships with the people of Highcoal help to bring about her acceptance into their society. The coalmine will test Song physically, mentally, and emotionally. Some of the choices she will make will prove uncomfortable for her. Ultimately, Song will transform into the coal miner that the town needs and the understanding wife that Caleb needs.

Even Song as the heroine in the novel had to have a starting point, a point from which she could grow. This, of course, is her attitude and actions towards Highcoal and

its people. Bakhtin's description of the "hero" within the novel describes the New York, business-minded Song perfectly. It is his idea that the "hero" of a novel "lives and acts in an ideological world of his own" (336). The hero has his own ideas about how things are or should be, and these ideas shape his actions and discussions. Song's original thoughts about West Virginia guide her actions and attitude toward the people she meets. It is only through her experiences and discussions with them that her perceptions change, and she becomes one with them and their language and discourse. She is the outsider – both for the reader and the people of Highcoal.

#### 1.2.6 DISCOURSE

Finally, an explanation of Bakhtin's concept of discourse and its use in the novel is needed. The term "discourse" involves both an individual words and a method of using words that presumes a type of authority. For Bakhtin, the language of a novel was a threat to the more closed systems of literary/poetic language. The ability of the novel to make use of a multitude of "languages" in a single story blasts through the confines of "literary" language. One should not put language and words into the box of a narrow definition. Words must be allowed to change and grow as their usage does. Bakhtin, also at times, used discourse as "way to refer to the subdivisions determined by social and ideological language (I.e., the discourse of American plumbers vs. that of American academics) (Holquist 427). This definition will guide the examination of *Red Helmet*.

#### 1.2.7 BAKHTIN'S SHORTCOMINGS

One area of language upon which Bakhtin does not touch is non-verbal communication (including body language, facial expressions, and a character's actions). There are times when a person's mannerisms and actions speak more loudly than his speech. A protestor performing a "sit-in" does not necessarily have to chant his disapproval; it is inherent in his actions. A child with crossed arms and a jutted out lip does not have to scream, "I am mad!" He is "performing" a universally accepted action/body stance for anger. It is very difficult to communicate without body language having some impact. This is also true for the action of a story. In *Red Helmet*, Song did not extol the virtues of Yoga for pain relief to the miners. She just continued to do her stretches, even in the face of ridicule. The miners saw the effect of her yoga work when Song moved more easily and had less pain. Through her actions, Song was able to help the miners. The miners adopted the stretches and found the same relief. Therefore, non-verbal communication can also mirror stratification/evolution. The fact that Bakhtin did not include non-verbal communication in his studies does not lessen its efficacy. A study of this kind would probably fall more into the area of psychology. Nevertheless, application of Bakhtin's ideas to non-verbal communication is a viable option.

This brief examination of Bakhtin's "Discourse in the Novel", in no way captures all of the complexities of his theories; rather it explains and focuses on those concepts that will be used in the analysis of *Red Helmet* - heteroglossia, dialogism, discourse, and language stratification.

### 1.3 OUTSIDER VERSUS OTHER

As much of this discussion will be focused on Song's transformation from "outsider" to "other" and the part that language and discourse play in this change, it would be beneficial to define these terms as they are being used here.

First, an "outsider" is a person who does not have the characteristics of or does not meet the qualifications for inclusion into an opposing group. Song has never visited West Virginia or a coal-mining town. Readers can assume that she has had limited exposure to people from rural Appalachian areas as she is enchanted by Caleb's chivalrous and backward ways. Further evidence of this comes in Song's statement that the only exposure she has had to West Virginia and coal miners is what she has read and seen in the movies. In a similar vein, the people of Highcoal do not understand Song and certainly do not want to accept her into their community. Song has a lot of money, wears fancy clothes, and does not understand coal mining or its effects upon a town. Then, there is Song's nationality. There are only a few other minorities portrayed in the novel – Gilberto, a Mexican, rookie miner; Maria, Gilberto's girlfriend; and Omar and his wife, the Lebanese, general store owners. Even without these factors, Song is an outsider simply because she is not from West Virginia. As a rule, small-town Appalachians are distrustful of "non-natives". They tend to be slow to include or welcome outsiders into the community. This distrust stems from the way missionaries, writers, and visitors portray the region upon leaving.

Missionaries, in an effort to raise funds for their work, would always depict the poorest and neediest to potential donors. These pictures would often include people living without modern conveniences like running water and electricity or shack-like houses. Children would often be barefoot or wearing worn, torn, or patched clothing. Simple

meals and sustenance living would also be paraded out. Missionaries never showed the wealthier, educated, or even middle-class Appalachians. These images would not bring money into their coffers.

Using the same materials, local color writers took these images to a new level. They are, perhaps, the ones most responsible for the residual distrust of outsiders. This hesitance to accept outsiders continues in many rural areas of Appalachia. Local color writers created the hillbilly stereotype that emphasized the poverty, lack of education, and naiveté of some of the people from the most rural and backwoods areas. This caricature certainly did not endear the writers to the natives. It continues to make some from the region angry. Appalachians need to take the good with the bad, and the hillbilly stereotype is mixture of both. The word “hillbilly” first appeared in the United States in 1900 in a *New York Journal* article. This article set up some of the standards that have become the American view of an Appalachian - white, poorly dressed, uneducated, drunk, and gun happy (Abrams 216). The hillbilly stereotype is further strengthened in later years by Paul Webb’s *Mountain Boy* cartoon (1934), Al Capp’s *L’il Abner* (1934), and Billy De Beck’s *Barney Google* (1919) and *Snuffy Smith* (1934) (Abrams 216). Recently, hillbillies have been “glorified” in the television shows, *The Beverly Hillbillies* (1962) and *The Dukes of Hazzard* (1975). For most in the Appalachian region, the hillbilly remains a negative stereotype. Still, others have adopted it as a symbol of regional pride. Not everything about the stereotype is negative. According to Abrams,

The hillbilly is imbued with distinct powers. He can flatter, frighten, and humiliate. As a rugged frontiersman, he flatters the American self-image. As a savage, embodied in the mountain men of the movie, *Deliverance*, he frightens and humiliates. The hillbilly both attracts and repels, representing both the complexity of Appalachia and the ambivalence about the region in the public mind (218).



Hickam uses the hillbilly stereotype for the character, Squirrel Harper; while the other characters (aside from the coal miners) would fit into the category of a romanticized mountaineer.

The opposite of an outsider for this discussion is “other”. “Other” is the Appalachian coal miner. The ways in which Highcoal’s citizens view Song and the average American’s picture of West Virginia and coal miners are comparable. The predominant stereotype of West Virginians is that of the hillbilly or rube. At the same time, there is also a stereotype of the Appalachian coal miner. Because most people, including the readers of this novel, do not understand the skills that are necessary to do the job of a coal miner, the public often views miners as manual laborers, unskilled workers, brutes, or pack animals. The portrayal of the coal miner in literature tends to fall into one of two very different categories -

class conscious militants who are interested in pursuing solidarity through unions and socialist politics . . . [or] independent, complacent mountaineers with little interest in the betterment of anyone but themselves (Abrams 208).

Hickam’s coal miners do not fit into either of these categories, with the exception of Bum who is definitely only looking out for himself. The coal miners in *Red Helmet* are standoffish at first but eventually come to accept Song and her rookie co-workers. There is also no real anger or distrust of the unions mentioned in this book. The miners are not happy with the fines levied by “Einstein” and Cable for safety infractions, but they know just how important safety is. The men not only respect Cable, but they have a good relationship. They are friendly towards each other. The miners do not shy away from Cable or consider him “uppity”. This is how many Appalachian authors (House, Still, and

Giardina) portray mine supervisors and coal companies. It may not be a startling difference from other Appalachian coal-mining literature, but it is refreshing and helps to differentiate Hickam.

For Song, her wealth, her ethnicity, her education, her occupation and her fastidiousness are all at odds with the typical vision of a miner. In addition, Song's sex also sets her apart. Part of this is coalmine superstition and the other is the perception of gender roles in the mountains. Generally, "the gender roles are narrow and [Appalachian] people have limited views about what does or does not constitute work" (O'Brien 46). A patriarchal view of women and their roles in the community prevails in rural Appalachian society. Men are the breadwinners - responsible for the money and well-being of their families. They are the ones suited for the hard physical labor like mining, timbering, and construction. They hunt and put meat on the table. The woman is a caretaker. She is to be home - cooking, cleaning, having babies, and tending the garden. "Man's work" should not include women. The Highcoal miners certainly felt this way. However, Hickam's story breaks with the patriarchal view of "women's work" by including Song and Dr. Gloria Kaminsky in traditionally male roles. This is a more valid portrayal of modern rural Appalachia, but some residual chauvinism remains. Chauvinism is also partly responsible for the superstition that women in the mine are bad luck. The miners in the novel make several jokes about this in an attempt to ease their discomfort and fear. They are quick to remind Song that she is a detriment to them. There are no other female coal miners seen in the story. The only other mention of a female miner is when Song is able to purchase steel-toed boots meant for another female miner who was killed in a

coalmine. Song must put aside her femininity in the mine and toughen up both physically and mentally to become an “acceptable” coal miner.

Because the focus of this argument is the change of Song’s character from an outsider to other, the questions of who represents the “norm” in the novel and/or to whom is Hickam writing the novel arise. Because of his previous books, *Rocket Boys* and *The Coalwood Way*, and the acknowledgments and transcript of his Sago Miners Memorial remarks that are included in *Red Helmet*, readers are aware that Hickam is from West Virginia and is supportive of coal mining. Hickam is writing to those who live outside of the Appalachian region. He champions the Appalachian people and the work of West Virginia coal miners. Support for this concept is in the New York section, in which Hickam satirically deals with the views of New Yorkers about West Virginians and Song’s negative reactions to their ideas (which she used to share). Another strong support for Hickam’s audience being those outside of Appalachia comes at the end of the novel in a speech given by Young Henry in which he outlines the importance of coal and coal miners:

‘Ma’am, here’s the way I see it. You want to tell the story of coal miners? They don’t need nobody to do it, nobody on television or the newspapers anyway. Their story is told every time you turn on your light switch, or watch television, or wash your dishes or yourself. Their story is told in every building that uses steel to hold itself up, and every time you ride in a car, a truck, a train, or an airplane. Tell the story of coal miners? Heck, Ma’am. It’s told everywhere, if you’d just listen to it.’ (307)

If the book was written for those outside of Appalachia, then the job of the Appalachian coal miner and all that it entails are those of an “other”. With this interpretation, Song is still an outsider because the intricacies of her occupation as an acquisitions manager are

incomprehensible for most readers. West Virginia coal miners would have very little to no knowledge of business acquisitions. The reader, while embodying the “norm”, has to view West Virginia and coal mining with their set ideas coloring their views as well as partaking in the events and conversations through Song’s eyes. This works well with Bakhtinian theory. The reader’s discourses (experiences and prejudices), which at times mirror those of Song, collide with the “languages” of the religious, Appalachian, and coal miners Song encounters in Highcoal. These collisions of languages break down words and impart new meaning for the readers and Song. According to Bakhtin, this illustrates the stratification of language. To understand how this is true in *Red Helmet*, an analysis of the “collisions” of languages (discourse) must be done.

## CHAPTER II

### HICKAM'S DIALOGIC WORD CHOICES

Bakhtin's concept that words are dialogic is evident in Hickam's use of particular names within the novel. There is struggle inherent in them. They carry the residue of past contexts. The way they have been used before colors their current use and meaning.

#### 2.1 Song

The use of the word Song as the main character's name is one example of how the dialogic nature of words is used by Hickam. The choice of names throughout the novel is very deliberate and provides a clue on how to understand the character and his/her experiences. Song gets her name from her dead mother's family (the Asian side). Song is complex and (at times) out of reach for the reader. However, Song's name grounds her for the reader. A song is usually a group of words that tells a story and is set to music. The notes must flow together to form harmony and melody. It should be pleasing to the ear. Often a song will also evoke a particular feeling or emotion. Songs have been around since the beginning of time either in the form of poetry or oral storytelling. Most people -

male, female, young, or old - enjoy one kind of a song or another. Songs also cross cultural barriers. Most cultures have some type of music at their core (most importantly for this discussion – the Appalachian working class).

All of these characteristics of a song are evident in the character, Song. Her story provides the action and backbone for the narrative. The changes in Song's character reflect how a song's melody moves from one note to another to create harmony. Her thoughts and ideas transform; Song needs these changes to make her a more dynamic character and to create harmony between her and the community, her and Caleb, and her and the miners. The idea of songs transcending barriers is also prominent in Song's Highcoal experience. Song has multiple obstacles that stand between her and acceptance in the Highcoal community. Just as music has a series of high and low notes, sharps and flats, Song's experiences in Highcoal produce a variety of emotions that readers experience right along with her. Song's story evokes a plethora of emotions including happiness, grief, frustration, fear, anger, exhaustion, elation, and finally contentment. Undoubtedly, readers need to have the notions that come with the word "song" at the fore of his mind as he reads the novel.

Furthermore, it is important to note one other thing music in *Red Helmet*. Caleb has Jim Brickman sing *Destiny* to Song before he proposed:

What if I never knew,  
What if I never found you,  
I'd never have this feeling in my heart.  
How did this come to be?  
I don't know how you found me.

But from the moment I saw you,  
Deep inside my heart I knew,  
Baby, you're my destiny.  
You and I were meant to be.

With all my heart and soul,  
I give my love to have and hold.  
And as far as I can see,  
You were always meant to be my destiny (4).

This, too, is also a deliberate choice of the author. The song talks about love and destiny. Caleb wants Song to know that he believes she is his destiny. Regardless of their backgrounds and differences, they are meant to be together. The song assures readers that Cable and Song's marriage will be successful. Readers should view Song's upcoming trials in this light and not lose hope. The relationship will work, but Song has to change.

## 2.2 Caleb/Cable

A second word that establishes a dialog between the Hickam and the reader is Caleb's name. Hickam expects the reader to bring prior knowledge - in this case, biblical - to the story. Caleb was one of the twelve men sent by Moses to spy out the Promised Land. He and Joshua were the only two that came back with the belief that the children of Israel could defeat the giants of Canaan and take over the land. Of course, the majority of the Israelites sides with the other spies. As a result, God forced the children of Israel to wander in the wilderness for forty years before He allowed them to enter the Promised Land. For his belief, Caleb could choose any piece of land in Canaan to become his own. He chose a mountain. Although he was old, Caleb defeated the inhabitants of that mountain and made it his home.

Identical to this Caleb, Caleb Jordan has conquered the mountain. He has brought safety and security to the mine when others told him his ideas were improbable. Though faced with the loss of his father in the Highcoal mine, Caleb still chose to work there.

Caleb is completely immersed in and responsible for/to Highcoal and its citizens. He recognizes that the survival of the town depends on the mine and his supervision of it. This mirrors the surety and strength that the biblical Caleb exhibited when he returned from the spy mission.

An interesting twist comes in Hickam's play on Caleb's name. Caleb's nickname is Cable (an anagram of his name). His nickname also illustrates dialogism within a word. It is common for the miners in the novel to give nicknames to others. Sometimes, the nickname is based on an experience or characteristic that sets the character apart. Hickam never gives the story behind Caleb's nickname. The reader can infer that it came about as a possible spelling error or mispronunciation. This is common in the Appalachian region. "Cable" is used primarily throughout the text; his real name is mentioned rarely. From this point on, Caleb will be referred to by his nickname, Cable. The predominant use of the nickname, Cable, is another deliberate decision by Hickam. By definition, a cable is "a very strong rope made of strands of metal wire". A cable joins two things, offers support, or conducts electricity. This is exactly how Cable functions in Highcoal society and as Song's husband. As the mine supervisor, he keeps the community going. He describes his situation thusly: "My job is also my town. That's why I can't leave it. It's a responsibility I took on. I can't walk away" (Hickam 8). The prominent place that Cable holds in the community also requires him to bring the miners together as a team and to serve as a mediator between the mine and government watchdogs. As Song's husband, he links her to coal mining and Appalachian culture. Song's love for him is the cord that will bind her to mining and Highcoal and will keep her there.



### 2.3 WIRE

Another interesting thing is Hickam's choice of Wire for the name of Cable's father. Perhaps, this is how Cable got his nickname. Regardless, a wire is also a material that is used to bind things together (just like a cable) and as a conduit for electricity. Wire's death in the mine influenced Cable to go to college to study mining and mine safety. His death is one of the reasons Cable has such a strong focus on safety.

### 2.4 HIGHCOAL

Lastly, even the name of the town, Highcoal, is a deliberate choice. If a miner is in "high coal", he is mining the finest coal and there is an abundance of it. Cable describes it this way: "the seam [of coal] is thick enough that a man can stand up or nearly so. In other words, a miner's happy when he's in high coal" (Hickam 18). Readers should know that although the outward appearance of Highcoal is not very appealing, there are treasures, particularly in its people and its way of life. Song will be successful here if she can endure the backbreaking and life/attitude changing events she will experience.

CHAPTER III  
DISCOURSES IN THE NOVEL AND THEIR PART IN SONG'S  
TRANSFORMATION

Just as a word can have layers of meaning, a novel's plot incorporates layers of language or discourse. In *Red Helmet*, Hickam includes the discourses of an urban New Yorker, Appalachia, music, religion/Bible, romance, coal mining, and business. The dialogue and actions of the characters with whom Song interacts or in Song herself are the vehicles for the diverse discourses. The discourses presented by Highcoal citizens change Song's character and help in her assimilation into their society. There will be a brief discussion of the urban New Yorker discourse as this is the starting point for Song's character. This discourse illustrates the prejudices and ideas that Song must rise above to be a productive citizen of Highcoal. The romantic love discourse will be touched upon, as it is an essential plot point. Within the romantic love discourse, readers catch a glimpse of the business discourse that shapes Song's thoughts towards work and success. It guides her actions as well. As it is her business sense (discourse) that provides the means to

answer one of the conflicts in the novel, it would be beneficial to look at Song's business discourse. The religious and coal mining discourses receive the most scrutiny, as they are responsible for the most significant changes in Song's character. Bakhtin's theories of language and dialogue will be applied to these conversations and encounters. In particular, attention will be given to those situations in which the different languages (heteroglossia) of the novel collide. By doing so, new insight into how the reader's language evolves and stratifies along with Song's character will be attained.

### 3.1 THE URBAN NEW YORK DISCOURSE

The first discourse to be analyzed is that of the urban New Yorker. It is a good starting point because it illustrates the mindset and prejudices with which Song entered Highcoal. There are three users of this discourse in the novel - Song, Michael (Song's ex-boyfriend), and Kitty Franks (a New York author who has just written an Appalachian novel). The discourse (not surprisingly) makes much use of the hillbilly stereotype and the idea that Appalachia is a backwoods, uneducated, and poor area. Song is invited to a cocktail party simply so that she can tell of her "dreadful experiences in the deepest Appalachia" and her marriage to "a backwoods, moonshine-swilling mountaineer" (215). In a way, Song is thrust into a role similar to the early Appalachian missionaries and local color writers. The well-heeled revelers, like potential donors of long ago, wanted tales of poverty, violence, and savagery. They wish to be entertained. Song, however, does not stoop to their level. Although she had many opportunities to contradict the thoughts of those around her, she keeps her counsel. Unlike the missionaries, Song realizes that her original ideas about West Virginia were limited. While she still battles with a negative

view of West Virginia, her conversations with Kitty Franks and Michael bring her beliefs into a sharper focus.

In this chapter, Hickam satirically depicts a commercial fiction writer, Kitty Franks. Franks is the modern equivalent of a local color writer; only she takes it to the extreme. Like those who have come before her, the plot of her novel relies on stereotypes of hillbilly children, poverty, religious zealotry, ignorance, and murder. While the Appalachian backwoods is the setting for her story, she did not attempt to visit the area for research. Hickam's portrayal of the outrageous Franks is both satiric and ironic. Frank's story uses the worst of the negative perceptions of Appalachians - the hillbilly children rise up in a fit of religious zealotry to murder their parents. Here, Hickam is using hyperbole to show how ridiculous Frank's plot is. Hickam's use of the Frank's plot is ironic because Hickam is a commercial fiction writer who uses some of the same stereotypes.

In fact, Hickam is guilty of using a reverse prejudice in his story. He is taking Appalachian prejudices about urban dwellers, and he exaggerates or emphasizes some of the most negative in Song and her fellow New Yorkers. Examples of Song's outrageous behaviors that fit into the stereotype include her mortification over a ruined blouse, her disbelief that Omar's store did not carry high-end cosmetics, her rejection of Rhonda's food, and her wearing of a designer dress to church. Over and over again, Hickam portrays the New York attitude negatively. For readers, Hickam makes Song and her reactions to Highcoal just as distasteful as Frank's outrageous characterization of Appalachians. This is not the only negative stereotype that Hickam uses. He blatantly uses the hillbilly stereotype for Squirrel Harper (a moonshine-swilling, gun-toting coal

miner who is quite protective of his land and willing to kill for it). Hickam also utilizes a new and unfortunate West Virginia stereotype – the meth head. Because of the ruggedness and seclusion of the West Virginia mountain terrain, it is an area where meth production is on the rise. Hickam is obviously conscious of this new and disturbing trend as he chose to include two meth addicts – Justin and Bum – in his story. Justin is getting his act together and is part of the red helmet class. Bum, on the other hand, is the villain of the story. His addiction has led him to steal coal and attempt to kill Song and Cable during the mine explosion. Hickam’s use of this particular stereotype does add realism to the plot. Perhaps, there is some redemption for Hickam when he has justice prevail in the end. Bum is trapped by Song and sent to prison. From these stereotypical presentations, readers can see that Hickam is a bit of an Appalachian Kitty Franks.

The New York discourse continues when Song talks with her old flame Michael. He wants to know “what happened to you [Song] in that awful hog wallow of a place” (215). Like those around him, Michael cannot imagine having a pleasant time in West Virginia. Song could have told him of the negative things about her visit, but she chose to relate the facts. It is interesting that Hickam does not give a transcript of what Song told Michael. However, she must have presented a somewhat wider view of Highcoal than that what Michael already had. This is borne out in Michael’s response to Song’s stories -

“If I may say so, it sounds like the makings of an excellent memoir. It has everything - pathos, humor, hillbilly rustics, and you, a bright city fish dunked into dark coal country water” (115).

Prejudices towards Appalachia and its people continue to spew forth from Michael’s mouth. He calls Cable a “bumpkin” (116) and compares Song to trailer trash. Song is

now face-to-face with her prejudices and must deal with them. They will change even more once she returns to Highcoal.

### 3.2 THE ROMANTIC LOVE DISCOURSE

The second major discourse present in *Red Helmet* is romantic love. It is first presented in Cable and Song's romance and marriage. The whole idea of a quick romance and marriage is completely out of character for Song. Even in this setting where romance and love is the predominant discourse, Song's business language and ideas intrude:

‘We’ve done the most romantic thing. Cable, we got married at sunset on one of the most beautiful beaches in the world, and we did it on the spur of the moment. But, now we’re having a business meeting to decide our proper course’ (7).

The business language is contrary to the subject and setting for this conversation. The mixture of diverse discourses with that of romantic love is seen throughout the novel. Mixing of discourses is inevitable because the characters' experiences shape their discourses and their worldviews. The character's language becomes a mixture (hybrid) of different discourses present in his life. This passage begs the reader to make sense of it. This business-minded woman deals with the romantic language she encounters in the only way she knows how – she brings business into the mix. For Song, business represents logic and order. She has to impart some order to the seemingly crazy situation. Cable could have adjusted his actions and language to meet the needs of his new bride. However, he did not, or maybe he could not. The very thought of a “business meeting” during their honeymoon was incomprehensible to him. In this instance, Cable's language did not stratify. It remained static. (This could be a summary of Cable's character throughout the novel as well.) Song's language did change. She eventually forgot her

worries and fell under the spell of romance. This exchange sets up the dichotomy between husband and wife that is the key to the novel.

The pattern of mixing business and romantic love continues. After a few weeks in the mine, Song's romantic discourse shifts significantly when she contemplates her relationship with Cable. Her metaphors become mining metaphors. When Cable finally admits to regretting their marriage, Song feels as if he has driven a "roof bolt through her heart" (214). This is definitely a different reaction than what she would have previously had. Her earlier concerns were about Cable signing the annulment papers. Here, the readers can see that her heart has also changed. Her love for Cable is growing again. Hickam's use of the mining metaphor is a nice way of reminding readers that love is at the center of the story and that mining is going to make Song and Cable's relationship work, even if Cable is denser than the coal in his mine. Hickam continues the mining metaphors as Song's heart "cracks" when Cable unceremoniously drives away from her. Once again, the language of love and business collide. However, this time Song chooses to use the language of a coal miner to express her emotions.

Song's speech at the black cap ceremony most clearly demonstrates the extent to which her romantic discourse has grown to include coal-mining terminology. "Cable used to tell me not to make easy things hard . . . I know he was right because there was a very easy thing I kept making hard, and that was loving him" (328). She goes on to relate her love in mining terms. She has taken mining jargon and made it her own:

'I was like the continuous mine operator who keeps digging into the roof rather than into the rich, good coal. I was like the shuttle car operator who runs over his own cable or swipes a rib when he is turning. In love, I was just a red cap, uncertain what to do next, afraid to ask, certain I was going to mess up if I tried. Oh, for an instructor in love as good as the one I had in coal mining!' (328).

This speech and the conversations of her honeymoon and her use of the mining metaphors discussed above are similar. Here, again, the language of romance and love confronts Song. Once more, she chooses to use the language of business – in this case, mining – to make sense of her relationship. It is only through her encounters with a continuous mine operator, roof, shuttle car, cable, rib, and red cap that she is able to use them to correctly detail the mistakes she made in her relationship with Cable. This marks not only growth in her language but also in her character.

The romantic love discourse is the area in which Hickam distinguishes himself from other romantic authors. Cable is not a strong romantic lead. He is insipid and passive. The only time readers really glimpse any passion from him is during the honeymoon. Although Cable is anxious for Song to visit and live in Highcoal, he does nothing to make it a comfortable place for her – he does not even have a hot water heater in his house! On their first night together in Highcoal, Cable leaves Song alone to deal with a mine problem. Cable pays very little attention to Song during her visit. He also cannot fathom why Song might be jealous of his past relationship with Governor Godfrey. Cable is just dense. Song is so despondent by the end of the visit, she requests an annulment. Again, Cable does not put up a fight. He just drags his feet. Just like Song has to do all the changing for Highcoal, she has to do all the pursuing in the romance department too. Even during the mine explosion (the expected tragic twist), Song has to save the day, putting her life at risk to save Cable.

Hickam's use of Song as the romantic hero shows just how strong females are and how much they are willing to do for their marriages and family. This is exactly how Appalachian women function in society. They are the glue that keeps their families,



churches, and communities going. So, underneath Hickam's overt portrayal of Song's transformation is a subtle layer that deepens the meaning of her change.

In defense of Cable, he functions, realistically, as an Appalachian man. Traditionally, they are very stoic and not prone to outward shows of affection. Cable (in true Appalachian male fashion) could not function as a typical romantic hero if Hickam was going to keep his character consistent.

### 3.3 THE BUSINESS DISCOURSE

As has been evidenced in the romantic love discourse discussion, Song is very business-minded. She is brilliant when it comes to analyzing a business and making it productive. She was educated at one of the best universities in the country and had contributed several articles to well-known business publications. Her occupation and the knowledge that is required for it shape her actions, attitudes, and conversations.

In describing her work, Song states:

'I crawl up inside a company for my father, see what makes it tick, then mentally take it apart. After I understand everything about it, I either recommend moving on or buying it. If we buy the company, we maximize its profits by making it better. Sometimes, that means we fire everybody and start over' (7-8).

This ability to get to the heart of a business would have been beneficial during her first visit to Highcoal. Because Highcoal is so dependent on the coalmine for its survival, understanding how it functions would have given Song a better appreciation for the town itself. She could have learned about the coal shipment shortage and the reasons behind it. Instead, she chose to think only of herself and Cable's neglect. A little introspection might also have revealed to Song just how much Cable was like her - driven to succeed.

Cable never saw his preoccupation with work as neglect. Rather, he was doing his job because it allowed him to provide for Song and the town. The man as the breadwinner and provider is the way it works in Appalachia.

Song does not realize her mistake until she returns to New York. While home, she continues to thrive in her father's business, but her marriage falters. She wants nothing more than for Cable to sign the annulment papers. It is only when her father accuses her of being "off-key" (another nod by Hickam to the musical interpretation of Song's name and her character) that Song admits to her failure:

'I just feel unhappy with myself about what happened in Highcoal. I didn't handle it very well . . . I understand business. But there I was, in a company town, and I not only didn't understand it, I made no attempt to figure it out' (127).

Song can redeem herself when her father purchases the parent company of Cable's mine. However, Song wants no part of it. She is done with Highcoal, the mine, and its people. In spite of these feelings, Song returns to Highcoal for Squirrel Harper's funeral. Afterwards, Song decides to help the mine with its production problem, even if it means firing Cable. To do so, Song joins the red cap class to learning mining from the ground up.

Because of her exposure to mining, Song's discourse shifts from that of a white-collar businessperson to a blue (black)-collar coal miner. While she completely embraces the coal mining occupation, her business acumen solves the production problem. Through analysis of data (gotten by underhanded means) and a little bit of spying, Song learns that the high-grade coal is being stolen by Bum and his partner. Her discovery is significant because it will allow the mine to be profitable again and will secure Cable's job. After Song reveals her findings, there is no more white-collar discourse. Any business that

Song discusses is the hard, manual labor of coal mining. This represents a significant shift in her way of thinking.

The business discourse offers one area in which there is a reciprocal change. Cable and his supervisors would no longer be able to look at mining data in the same way. Cable took Song's ideas and adopted them.

### 3.4 THE COAL MINER DISCOURSE

A fourth discourse included in the novel is that of the Appalachian coal miner. Song's language and discourse change and grow to include the terminology, actions, and attitudes of this occupation, thus changing her physically, mentally, and emotionally.

Song's exposure to mining takes place early in the novel with her romance and subsequent marriage to Cable. Right away, there is a clash of ideas and languages. During their honeymoon, Song gets her first taste of Appalachian vernacular when Cable uses the word "swan" instead of "swear". An explanation of this particular language usage appeared earlier, but it should be examined in the light of language stratification. Song's previous knowledge of the word "swan" was probably that of the white waterfowl. It would not have entered into her understanding to use the word as a replacement for "swear". Cable exposes Song to a new definition, she contemplates the new meaning, and then makes it part of her vocabulary as will be evidenced in her later conversations.

Song's second encounter with mining discourse occurs during her initial trip to Highcoal. While giving her a hug, Bossman (the coalmine supervisor) ruins Song's two-hundred dollar blouse. Needless to say, her reaction is not a good one:

‘What was that awful stuff that came out of that man’s mouth? It looked like liquid poop!’  
‘Tobacco juice, honey. Lots of miners chew it. Keeps the dust out of their lungs, so they say. You’ll get used to it’  
‘I can’t imagine getting used to something that gross. And what’s this stuff on my blouse?’ . . .  
‘Looks like gob,’ he concluded.  
‘I don’t think I want to know what gob is.’  
‘Stuff that comes out of a coal mine,’ he answered. ‘Coal dust, rock dust, grease, you know.’  
‘No, I don’t know. But I do know my blouse is ruined.’ (25)

This corroborates how much Song lacks understanding of her husband and his occupation. She is completely ignorant about coal mining. It is amusing when she says that she cannot imagine getting used to something that gross. While she is talking about the tobacco chewing, a reader can see that she is also not fond of gob. Her dislike of gob is ironic because, by the end of the novel, Song will be covered in gob and loving it. For Bakhtin, this would exhibit how Song’s language grows/stratifies to accommodate this idea. She has not only been exposed to the word “gob” (as well as the physical thing that is gob), she has experienced the word, made the word her own, and submerged herself literally into the word.

Section three of the novel is where coal mining will take on a different meaning for Song. It will not only be her husband’s job; it will occupy her thoughts, actions, and language.

During her first red cap (rookie) mining class, the teacher, Square Block, introduces terminology that will become a fact of life for Song. Terms like gob, long wall, continuous miner, and shuttle car are just some of the things Song will encounter when she enters the mine.

Every day during the class, Song is inundated with new terminology – ribs, roof, roof bolt, timbers, cribs, loaders, drilling machines, rock dust, methane, and face. She also learns the dangers of mining:

‘rock dust silicosis, coal dust pneumoconiosis – black lung – sprung backs, busted knees, amputations, broken legs, broken arms, broken heads, and crushed fingers, toes, and nearly every other part of anatomy’ (163).

With all of these “positives” going for it, readers begin to realize just how much Song must love Cable and just how strong she is. The most important term that Song would learn is SCSR (Self-contained self rescuer), a breathing apparatus that would save her life during the mine explosion. From this lesson, one can see that coal mining discourse must necessarily include the perils of the job as well as a certain attitude towards the uncertainly and brevity of life. Perhaps, this is what leads the coal miners to their belief and dependence upon God. The miners do not dwell on the dangers and possibilities; rather, they do their jobs with a resignation of sorts. This is the job that God has provided for them. They will do it the best they can and place their fates in God’s hands. Coal mining puts food on the table, a roof over their heads, and clothes on their backs. This deep dependence on God is examined further in section 3.5.

After her first day in the mine, Song has a conversation with Cable that illustrates how she is changing and how her language is evolving:

‘Good job, Cable’ she said. ‘You’ve done a first class job ventilating your mine’.  
Startled, he managed a stuttered thank you. Then he took her in.  
‘You almost look like a coal miner,’ he said.  
‘Why, thank you, sir’ she answered, inordinately pleased (175).

Before the red cap class, Song's knowledge of ventilating a mine would have been non-existent. The only ventilating she would have known would have been the air conditioning vents in her home, office, or car. Now, not only does she understand mine ventilation, she has been exposed to it, and she has now incorporated it into her everyday language. Then, there is the fact that Song is pleased about looking like a coal miner. This is evidence of her change of heart. Gob covers Song from head to toe. At the beginning of the book, she was horrified when she encountered a little gob. Now, she is proud and happy to be enveloped in it. Her physical appearance is representative of the journey the word "gob" has taken in her vocabulary – introduction, exposure, contemplation, and assimilation.

### 3.5 THE RELIGION/GOD DISCOURSE

A fifth discourse included in *Red Helmet* is religion and the Bible. Song changes the most in this area. At the beginning of the novel, she proclaims to Cable that she is an Agnostic, and that only thing she might believe in is yoga. By the end of the novel, not only does she believe in God, she also places her life in His hands.

Song's introduction to Highcoal religion occurs when she sees Preacher changing the message on the church sign. It reads, "The First Step to Heaven Is Knowing You Are Lost" (27). Although readers are just beginning to glimpse how much Song is out of her element in West Virginia, these words draw reader's attention to it. Perhaps, it is also a bit tongue-in-cheek, as West Virginia's motto is "Almost Heaven". Nothing can be further from the truth for Song. She feels that "her first step to hell . . . was landing on that postage stamp glued to the top of a mountain you West Virginians call an airport"

(27). Song will have to figure out what being an outsider entails. She will have to change if her marriage and life in Highcoal is going to work. By changing and assimilating, Song will reach her Heaven (happiness). In the message on the sign, there is once again a mixing of languages and discourses - religious, advertising, and even a bit of the literary in the metaphor.

Song's second exposure to mountain religious discourse takes place during her first conversation with Rhonda. Rhonda asks Song to join the church choir. By doing so, Song would not only become acquainted with the people of Highcoal, she would also be involved in the community in a different capacity than as Cable's wife and an outsider. She would also please Cable. In response to Rhonda's invitation, Song immediately asserts that she does not go to church; that she is an Agnostic. Rhonda is perplexed:

'A what-nostic?' Rhonda laughed. 'Oh, I get it. Honey, there ain't no such thing around here. Don't matter what particular religion you are or even if you ain't got no religion at all, best to get close to God in these old hills. It's His country, make no mistake, but that don't mean there's an end to trouble. Some folks think the Lord likes to throw fuel on the fire just to see how we'll do. Anyway, give it some thought. You want to meet people, it's the only way. Gotta go' (36).

In Rhonda's statement above, one gets religious ideas presented in a mountain person's language. There are three examples of heteroglossia just in this statement. First, there is the religious – whatnostic, religion, and God. Second, there is a bit of mountain vernacular – ain't no (use of a double negative), old hills, and gotta. Finally, there is a hint of mining language with fuel and fire. This is significant because Rhonda is describing the Lord's part in troubles. Her use of fuel and fire is ironic because fuel is what the mine provides and the fire is what will test Song's physical, mental, and mining abilities, as well as renew her relationship with Cable.

The discussion is also noteworthy because it introduces a new word to Rhonda. She has never heard the word “Agnostic” before now. However, Rhonda quickly figures out its relationship to religion from the context in which it is used. From what Rhonda could tell about Song, Agnostic could not be a positive religious thing. Rhonda takes this new concept, mentally compares it to what she knows, and dismisses it. She does not belittle the idea. She reframes it according to her understanding and the realities of Highcoal. This is not a word that Rhonda will use every day; however, she has illuminated it in a new way for Song. Song will no longer be able to use this word without some residual memory of this encounter. The word not only has a new meaning for Song, Rhonda’s language has had to grow to accommodate the idea. Bakhtin would describe the encounter in this way:

The word [Agnostic] breaking through to its own meaning and its own expression across an environment full of alien words and variously evaluating accents, harmonizing with some of the elements in the environment [prior knowledge], dissonance [collision] with others, is able in this dialogized process, to shape its own stylistic profile and tone (277).

It should come as no surprise that the person who has the most influence on this area of Song’s life is the Preacher. Through his character, readers and Song realize that there is more to the Highcoal citizen and coal miners. They must not be taken at face value or viewed through the lens of pre-conceived notions. Preacher provides the reader with the image of a balanced and happy individual. He a multi-faceted character; therefore, he speaks many languages - mountaineer, family, religion, business, coal mining, and education - and is knowledgeable of the discourses contained within these. While Preacher represents the religious in the novel, he also exhibits an "everyman" quality. He is a coal miner, but he is also educated and the epitome of common sense. If



Song is to survive and thrive in this community, she must become like the preacher - having common sense, an appreciation and acceptance of God, and a little coal mining experience. Her discourse must also grow to exhibit these characteristics.

Like those who have come before him, Preacher comes to Song with advice for her relationship with Cable and an insight into the problems at the mine. The lack of high-grade coal needed to fill Indian orders could lead to the firing of Cable. As this conversation happens before Song's return to New York and her epiphany, Song is ecstatic about the possibility of Cable's job loss, but Preacher is horrified and points out the potential outcomes of just such an action:

'But, my dear, Cable must stay here! The people of Highcoal depend on him. If Cable was to be sent packing, Atlas would bring in another manager who would push production and forget mine safety entirely. Men might die, families would be broken, and the town would suffer in so many ways beyond counting. I prayed and the answer was for me to come and speak to you.' (93).

Preacher's reply not only continues to define Cable's character and importance to the community, it also reveals the extent of Preacher's mining knowledge, as well as his spiritual dependence on God. This proclamation, like the Preacher, is a complex mix of the languages he uses. His true calling as the pastor of the town comes through in his concern for the town and its families. Finally, there is the fact that he prayed – he sought guidance from God on how to handle Cable and Song's relationship problems and the mining deficiency. This is completely outside of Song's understanding. She cannot fathom talking to, listening to, or following the lead the "Big Guy Upstairs". The whole concept of prayer is one that Song will have to take into her language base and deal with it.

An interesting collision of discourses presents itself during Song's first choir practice. Loneliness and a desire to belong drive Song to the church. Doing so shows just how desperate Song is to belong and how she is changing. For her to willingly darken the doors of a church, Song has had to deal with her beliefs about church, God, and the women of Highcoal (who have not been very receptive or "Godly" in their actions towards Song). While at practice, the women ask Song to lead a song that she knew to warm up the choir. The song she chose – *In the Jungle* – offers much in the way of a Bakhtinian analysis. First, one must mention the singing of a profane/worldly song in a house of worship. A collision of languages usually brings forth new meaning for the speakers/receivers of the language. This is also true for this occasion. It is a bonding moment for the women because there is a common knowledge of the song. The song transcends barriers that have been in place and put the women on common ground using common languages – music and laughter. The singing of this song in church is almost a metaphor for Song and the church. Song (an Agnostic by her own claim [worldly]) has come to the church (Godly) seeking friendship and acceptance. The words of the song offer a metaphor for Song's time in Highcoal and her marriage to Cable. There is also a hint of foreshadowing. "In the jungle, the mighty jungle, the lion sleeps tonight." For Song, Highcoal and her relationship with Cable has been a jungle – a tangle of mixed emotions, dangers lurking around the corner, and the need for guidance. This song helps readers make the connection. There is also the idea of a sleeping lion, which could be foreshadowing of a danger that is to come. On the other hand, it could also represent a mighty protector who is waiting in the wings. Both interpretations work with the end of the novel – there is danger coming, and there are several saviors (God, Cable, and the

mine rescue team) who will come to Song's rescue. While this is not a particularly religious experience, it does lead to a softening of Song's thoughts towards church, God, and church people. Thus, Song's vocabulary expands to include new religious words and ideas.

Throughout the text, there have been instances of reciprocal language stratification (both Song and those she converse with have language shifts and growths). "Religion" is an area where this occurs. While Song identifies herself as an Agnostic, she has also claimed the title of "Yogist". While in the mine, she performs Yogic stretches to relieve some of the muscle spasms she has from crouching. Of course, the other miners watch her in amazement and a bit of disgust ("women miners"). As the exercise eases Song's discomfort and allows her to move more easily in the mine, the miners become more receptive to the practice of Yoga. By the end of the novel, seasoned miners are practicing Yoga. Once exposed to Yoga and its movements, the miners incorporate it into their everyday lives. Their language/discourse has grown to include Yoga and its practice. This is an example of non-verbal communication being the catalyst for change.

Before discussing Song's prayers in the mine, an examination of an earlier conversation with the Preacher would be fruitful. Song asked him why God does not answer all prayers. To which Preacher answered:

What we don't see are the ripples that happen every time anything happens. They're like the stones dropped in a pond. Even bad things that happen have a purpose. We don't know what their purpose is, but it's for something. . . It takes faith to believe that in the end goodness triumphs through adversity. Everything good, Song, takes faith (92).

For Song to even ask the question shows that she has grown and that her religious discourse has changed enough to include the concepts of prayer and answers from God. To ask the question, she also has to acknowledge (at least in her head) that there is a higher power that can change the outcomes of people's lives. Then, the actual response by the Preacher is ironic. An avalanche of rock has caused Song's current situation, and she is trapped with a criminal intent on killing her. If anything good is to come of this, it is going to take faith to get her to do the inadvisable – cross the fire to get the shot box. She has no choice. She has to have faith.

Religion and its discourse become very important to Song especially when during the mine explosion. She rejoices with “Hallelujah” (261) when Cable finally realizes that Bum is actually not a friend or decent employee. Song has never used this word to show joy. Hallelujah is a word used to praise to God and to show jubilee. Song's use of the word shows that her language has grown to include the religious in something as simple as displaying her happiness.

Even with this minor breakthrough, Song is still struggling with the idea of a God. She “the Yogist is curious whether we're going to get out of this alive” (262). Yet one page later, when more of the mine roof collapses and covers Cable and danger surrounds her, Song cries out “God, help me!”(262). “It was decidedly not a Yogist's prayer” (262). She has given herself over to the idea of an omnipotent and omnipresent help. She has seen His hand at work in the mine. As chaos and peril encompass her, Song instinctively does what any good coal miner would do – she prays. Song must literally cross a fire to reach the equipment that will save her, Cable, and Bum. “Lord, I am not a Yogist, I swan.

I am just a coal miner. I think, I hope, that makes me one of yours. Let me get through this and I promise . . .” (308).

Thus, her next prayer – “All right . . . Lord, here’s my prayer and I’ve got a reason for it You might like. I need to get across this fire and then I need to get back. Why? Because the man You gave me to love is back there and it’s the only way to save him. Is that good enough?” (308)

There are several layers of discourse present in this prayer. Obviously, there is the religious as it is a prayer. Song does not think about praying, she just does it instinctively. Second, there is the mining discourse. Song’s use of the vernacular “swan” proves that the language of the coalmine and Appalachia has become a part of her everyday discourse. Finally, there is the language of romantic love - Song has concluded that she does love Cable.

Another significant point in the development of Song’s religious discourse is her use of the name, Lord. Up to this point, Song’s prayers have been very casual and do not make use of the formal title, Lord. A lord is someone who is in control, who has power. Song has come to recognize that she is His subject and that she must rely on Him for survival. She also realizes that God is the One who orchestrated her relationship. When compared to the doubt she expressed about a dependence on God in her earlier conversation with Preacher, this shows significant growth on Song’s part. Now, she not only understands it; she has also turned to God and prayer without hesitation. God and His language/discourse have become a part of who she is.

Also in this prayer, Song denounces her “Yogism”. No supernatural help will come from that. She hopes to be one of the Lord’s “subjects”. Because of her relationship to Him, she asks for His help.

Song never directly states what her promise is, but it lies inherently in the second prayer – her reason for the prayer – Cable. She promises to love the man God gave her. That means making her marriage work.

Also indicative of Song’s spiritual change is the capitalization of the pronoun “You”. It takes into consideration a respect and recognition of God as God. Up to this point, any time that Song prayed, the pronouns had lowercase letters.

Song’s new faith is rewarded when she is able to cross the fire and return with only minor singeing. Song admits to Cable that it is prayer that enabled her to do the impossible. Song counters Cable’s disbelief with this statement:

‘I know, but I’m a stupid red cap, so I did it (crossed the fire) anyway. That required another prayer. I’m getting this praying thing down to a science. I’m telling you. Funny thing too. So far it works! Preacher may be on to something. (311)

It is humorous that she says she has it down to a science. Generally, science and faith do not mix. Provable facts are the basis for science. Faith relies on the unseen and hope. This is another collision of discourses – in this case – faith and academics. Song has literally been through the fire and back. She was able to do the unfathomable. Her admission of faith had to affect Cable in some way.

The discussion of the God/religious discourse would not be complete without a look at the irony present within the discourse. Hickam’s irony has several levels here. First, Song is an education individual who is introduced to God by the uneducated. This

is opposite of the early Appalachian missionary movement. In the late 1800's, there was a movement by the Presbyterian churches to send missionaries to the Appalachian region. These missionaries were educated men and women from northern states. It was the church's goal to bring Christianity as well as "mainstream" culture to the "savages". By doing so, the Presbyterians thought that they could make Appalachians believe, act, and worship like they did. In true Appalachian fashion, West Virginia took the teachings that the churches and missionaries offered but chose to interpret them in their own ways. In contrast to the Presbyterians, worship in West Virginia and other rural Appalachian towns is lively and loud. Also, many of the ministers do not have a formal education. Rather, they look to the Holy Spirit and God for their education. Then, there are Appalachians who choose to interpret scriptures very literally by taking up snakes, drinking strychnine, and handling fire. Of course, these primitive ways of worship have helped to create/reinforce the stereotypes of the region. Thankfully, these believers and their practices are in the minority for the area.

On a minor note, irony can also be seen in Song's ethnicity. For centuries, churches have sent missionaries to foreign continents (including Asia) to reach the heathen. In *Red Helmet*, the "heathen" (Song) comes to the savages (miners and Highcoalers) to learn about God.

### 3.6 CONCLUSION

In conclusion, it has been clearly evidenced how Song's transformation is an apt metaphor for Bakhtin's concept of language stratification. As Song experienced the coalmine and interacted with the citizens of Highcoal, she became one of them, taking on

their characteristics and language. This mirrors the process of language stratification. Every time a word is used in conjunction with other words (perhaps in new and inventive ways), the words themselves change and their meaning evolves to include new definitions and new meaning. Song's character did just that. Her experiences with the different discourses presented by the people of Highcoal shaped her into something different – a faith-filled coal miner. Song's character shifted from that of an outsider (both to Highcoal and to readers) to an other (an Appalachian coal miner).

Along with the idea of stratification, Bakhtin offers the idea of conscious dialogic choice by the author. The author converses with his readers through his specific word choices, character actions, and character dialogue. This is certainly the case for Homer Hickam and *Red Helmet*. Some of his choices are almost simple and elemental, but they bring a complexity to the text. His use of the names, Song, Cable, and Wire, exhibit this concept at work in the book. Many of Hickam's dialogic choices are also apparent in the monologues and dialogues of the main characters. The actions and words of Hickam's characters clearly deliver his message to the reader, and that message is that the Appalachian coal miner is a valuable asset to American society and that the miner deserves the respect of the American people.

While the novel gives a very informative view of coal mining in West Virginia, it does little to dispel some of the stereotypes that are present in Appalachia. In fact, Hickam uses three negative stereotypes in telling the story. Song and her fellow New Yorkers are portrayed through the Appalachian prejudices against "city folk". Squirrel Harper is a very identifiable hillbilly; Bum and Justin are meth addicts. Hickam also gives very little to no insight into his characters' thought processes. By not allowing



readers inside his characters' heads, Hickam limits reader's abilities to understand and empathize with his characters. Cable, as the leading male, does not lead at all. Song seems to be the only character capable of true change. Hickam takes what could have been a definitive story that changed attitudes and instead writes to the expectations of modern romance readers.

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