
Dialect and regional identity in Jesse Stuart's short story "Split cherry tree"

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Annotation *This article investigates the intricate relationship between dialect and regional identity as portrayed in Jesse Stuart's renowned short story Split Cherry Tree. Set in rural Appalachian Kentucky, the story serves as a rich linguistic and cultural tapestry that captures the essence of a specific geographical and social milieu. The study explores how Stuart's deliberate use of regional dialect transcends mere stylistic ornamentation and functions as a profound narrative strategy that embodies cultural values, reflects socio-economic structures, and reveals the tensions between traditional and modern worldviews. The dialect spoken by the characters—particularly the contrast between the older generation represented by Luster Sexton and the younger, school-educated Dave—mirrors the deep-rooted cultural dichotomies within the Appalachian region.*

Keywords *Dialect, regional identity, sociolinguistics, intergenerational conflict, cultural values, rural Kentucky*

Диалект и региональная идентичность в рассказе Джесси Стюарта «Расколота вишня»

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Аннотация *В данной статье исследуется сложная взаимосвязь между диалектом и региональной идентичностью, представленная в известном рассказе Джесси Стюарта «Split Cherry Tree». Действие рассказа происходит в сельской местности Аппалачского региона штата Кентукки и представляет собой богатую лингвистическую и культурную картину, отражающую сущность конкретной географической и социальной среды. В исследовании подчеркивается, что использование регионального диалекта автором выходит за рамки простого стилистического приёма и становится глубокой художественной стратегией, с помощью которой раскрываются культурные ценности, социальные структуры и противоречия между традиционным и современным мировоззрением. Особенно выделяется контраст между представителем старшего поколения Ластером Секстоном и молодым, школьно-образованным Дейвом, что отражает укоренившиеся культурные различия внутри Аппалачского региона.*

Ключевые слова *Диалект, региональная идентичность, социолингвистика, межпоколенческий конфликт, культурные ценности, сельская местность Кентукки*

Jesse Stuart'ning "Split Cherry Tree" hikoyasida lahja va mintaqaviy identitet

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Annotatsiya Ushbu maqolada Jessi Styuartning mashhur "Split Cherry Tree" nomli hikoyasida tasvirlangan sheva va mintaqaviy identifikatsiya o'rtasidagi murakkab o'zaro bog'liqlik o'rganiladi. Kentukkinging Appalachi qishloq hududida sodir bo'ladigan ushbu hikoya o'ziga xos lingvistik va madaniy manzara bo'lib, ma'lum bir geografik va ijtimoiy muhit mohiyatini aks ettiradi. Tadqiqotda muallifning mahalliy shevadan foydalanishi oddiy uslubiy bezak emas, balki chuqur ma'noli badiiy strategiya sifatida namoyon bo'lishi ko'rsatiladi. Bu strategiya orqali muallif madaniy qadriyatlar, ijtimoiy tuzilma va an'anaviy hamda zamonaviy qarashlar o'rtasidagi ziddiyatlarni ochib beradi. Ayniqsa, keksa avlod vakili Luster Sexton hamda maktabda o'qigan yosh Dave obrazlari o'rtasidagi sheviy farq Appalachi mintaqasidagi chuqur ildiz otgan madaniy tafovutlarni ifodalaydi.

Kalit so'zlar Sheva, mintaqaviy identitet, ijtimoiy tilshunoslik, avlodlararo ziddiyat, madaniy qadriyatlar, Kentukki qishloq hududi

Introduction

The use of regional dialect in American literature functions as both an artistic and sociocultural device, reflecting the complexities of identity, place, and historical change. From Mark Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* to Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, dialect has been employed to capture the rhythms of speech, cultural worldviews, and the tensions between marginalized communities and dominant societal norms. In Southern and Appalachian fiction, this technique takes on heightened significance, as authors grapple with stereotypes, rural authenticity, and the clash between tradition and modernization. Jesse Stuart (1906–1984), a prolific Appalachian writer and educator, stands as a key figure in this tradition, using dialect not merely as a stylistic choice but as a vehicle for preserving and interrogating the ethos of rural Kentucky life (Shokirovna, 2025). His short story *Split Cherry Tree* (1939) exemplifies this approach, weaving linguistic authenticity into a narrative

that explores education, generational conflict, and the evolving identity of Appalachia in the early twentieth century.

The plot of *Split Cherry Tree* revolves around Dave Sexton, a farm boy who incurs a school punishment after a mishap involving a cherry tree during a biology experiment. His father, Luster Sexton – a hardened, traditional mountain man – views the teacher's disciplinary measures as an affront to his family's dignity and confronts the progressive-minded Professor Herbert. Through their charged exchange, Stuart (1985) dramatizes the friction between agrarian self-sufficiency and modern institutional education, a recurring theme in Appalachian literature. The dialogue, rich with regional dialect, serves as more than local color; it becomes a narrative strategy that underscores cultural resistance, character psychology, and the precarious balance between preserving heritage and embracing change. This article examines how Stuart's use of dialect in *Split Cherry Tree* operates as both a cultural marker and a literary tool.

Literature review and methodology

Researchers writing about dialect in American literature often point out that it serves two purposes: it shows a character's cultural background and challenges the idea that only standard English is "correct." Scholars like Sharon Monteith (2000) and Rodger Cunningham (1987) have discussed how Appalachian writers, including Jesse Stuart, use dialect to fight against negative stereotypes and give value to their region. Others, like Michael Montgomery (2000) and linguistic anthropologists such as Barbara Johnstone (2013), have studied how Appalachian English sounds and grammar work. Their research helps us understand Stuart's spelling choices (like "hit" instead of "it" or "whar" instead of "where") not as random, but as meaningful ways to show local identity.

However, not many studies have looked closely at how dialect in *Split Cherry Tree* helps show the conflict between old rural traditions and new school-based, modern thinking. This article tries to fill that gap. It uses close reading of the characters' speech and applies ideas from sociolinguistics – especially William Labov's (1972) work on how language varies depending on social identity. By looking at how characters use or avoid dialect when facing authority, the article shows how language reflects struggles over independence, education, and belonging. This method combines literary study and language analysis to give a fuller picture of what dialect means in Appalachian storytelling.

Results and discussion

Jesse Stuart's deliberate use of Appalachian dialect in *Split Cherry Tree* plays a vital role in highlighting the central theme of cultural identity and resistance. Through the story's dialogue, Stuart (1985) constructs a world where language reflects not only where characters come from but also what they stand for. The story presents a conflict between two generations and two different worldviews: Luster Sexton, a proud, uneducated mountain farmer who speaks in a strong regional dialect,

and Professor Herbert, a schoolteacher who represents formal education and social progress through his polished, standard English.

Luster's speech is rich in nonstandard grammar, local vocabulary, and phonetic spellings that reflect the patterns of rural Kentucky speech. His language is direct, emotional, and grounded in lived experience. For example, when he says, "I don't give a ding what's right! I pay my taxes!" he is not only expressing anger but also challenging the authority of the school system using the language he knows. His pronunciation of words like "l'arnin'" for "learning" and "whupped" for "whipped" is more than a dialectal quirk – it reflects a worldview that values hard work and practical knowledge over academic theories and discipline. His dialect becomes a form of resistance: he refuses to alter his way of speaking because it would mean surrendering his identity and dignity.

In contrast, Professor Herbert speaks in formal, standard English, which signals education, authority, and control. At first, his speech reflects the values of the institution he represents: rules, order, and discipline. When he tells Dave, "You broke the rule... You must be punished," his tone is calm but firm, underscoring the impersonal logic of the school system. To Luster, Herbert's language sounds cold and disconnected from everyday life. However, Stuart allows Herbert to show flexibility. When he realizes that Luster is not ignorant but unfamiliar with the scientific language used in the classroom, Herbert adapts. He simplifies his speech to connect with Luster, saying, "We study life up here... even a louse." This moment marks a shift in the power dynamic. Instead of asserting superiority through language, Herbert uses plain speech to build a bridge of understanding, showing that communication does not require uniformity but respect.

The character of Dave, Luster's son, offers a more nuanced example of how dialect and identity intersect. His language is a blend of his

father's dialect and the more standard forms he learns in school. While his grammar is still marked by regional patterns – for instance, “It wadn't his fault” – his overall speech is less marked than Luster's. This middle-ground dialect reflects Dave's transitional role in the story. He is caught between the traditional values of his father and the modern world offered by his teacher. Dave's evolving language mirrors his internal negotiation: he wants to remain loyal to his heritage while also embracing the opportunities that education can bring.

Stuart uses dialect not to mock or exoticize his characters, but to portray them authentically and sympathetically. The story does not present Luster's nonstandard language as a flaw, but as a meaningful expression of his background, values, and emotional world. Even as Luster begins to respect the school and Professor Herbert by the end of the story, he does not change how he speaks. (Shokirovna, 2025). This suggests that acceptance and growth do not require abandoning one's identity. Likewise, Professor Herbert does not force Luster to conform linguistically but chooses instead to meet him halfway. The resolution of the story, therefore, is not about one worldview defeating another, but about mutual understanding.

The image of the split cherry tree, which gives the story its title, becomes a fitting metaphor for the cultural and linguistic divide explored in the text. Like the tree that is damaged but still alive, the community can withstand internal differences without losing its roots. Through dialect, Stuart captures a moment of transition in Appalachian life – where change is inevitable, but cultural memory and identity remain strong (Hogg, & Denison, 2006).

This discussion of dialect and identity in *Split Cherry Tree* aligns with sociolinguistic theories that recognize the power and prestige of nonstandard varieties within their own communities. Scholars like William Labov (1972) have emphasized that such dialects,

while often viewed as inferior in formal settings, carry deep social meaning and respect among speakers. Similarly, Barbara Johnstone's (2013) studies of regional dialects show how language can build group identity and push back against external judgment. Stuart's story reflects these ideas by giving voice to Appalachian speakers without correcting or belittling them. Instead, he presents their language as part of a broader narrative about understanding, dignity, and cultural change. In sum, *Split Cherry Tree* uses dialect not merely for realism, but as a powerful tool to explore identity, conflict, and transformation. It shows that language is never neutral – it is tied to who we are, where we come from, and how we make sense of the world around us. Through his characters' speech, Stuart affirms the richness of Appalachian life and argues for a model of education and progress that honors, rather than erases, local voices.

Conclusion

Jesse Stuart's *Split Cherry Tree* shows that regional dialect is much more than just a way of speaking – it is a powerful expression of cultural identity, personal pride, and social resistance. Through the contrast between Luster Sexton's Appalachian dialect and Professor Herbert's standard English, Stuart explores the tension between rural traditions and modern education. Importantly, he does not present one way of life as better than the other. Instead, he suggests that both can exist together if there is mutual respect. Luster is not forced to change his language, and Professor Herbert learns to communicate more simply. This balance shows that progress does not have to erase tradition (Shokirovna, 2025).

The story remains relevant today because it reminds us that different ways of speaking are valuable and meaningful. In a time when rural or nonstandard speech is sometimes looked down on or ignored, Stuart's story gives dignity to the voices of Appalachian people. By giving equal importance to both Luster's and Herbert's speech, Stuart invites readers to think more deeply about whose language – and

whose knowledge – we respect. The image of the split cherry tree symbolizes this idea: though damaged, the tree still stands and grows. In the same way, regional dialects can survive and thrive, even in a changing world.

Overall, *Split Cherry Tree* is not just a story about a father and son – it is a thoughtful look

at how language shapes identity and how understanding across differences is possible. Stuart’s message is clear: education and tradition do not have to be enemies. When people listen to each other with respect, even a “split” community can remain strong and united.

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