

SUSANNAH

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Act I. New Hope Valley, Tennessee, time "the present," on a Monday night in mid-July. A square dance is under way in the churchyard. Susannah Polk, a beautiful young local girl, is enthusiastic about the dancing, but the elders' wives are more concerned about the new minister they are getting: will he be able to save enough sinners? One woman, Mrs. McLean, singles out Susannah as an example of what she means, adding that this is only to be expected from an orphan who was raised by her drunken brother. They are surprised when the minister, Olin Blitch, who is not expected until tomorrow, appears in their midst, declaring he brings the Lord's word to their valley. Noticing Susannah, Blitch asks who she is, to which Mrs. McLean replies that both Susannah and her brother, Sam, are evil. Saying he will pray for both of them that night, Blitch asks Susannah to dance.

Later that evening, in front of the Polks' run-down farmhouse, Susannah reminisces about the dance with Little Bat McLean, a somewhat retarded youth whose parents, Elder and Mrs. McLean, don't like him to hang around the Polks; infatuated with Susannah, he does anyway. Admiring the clear sky, Susannah dreams of the day when she will see what is beyond the mountains. Her brother, a misunderstood dreamer, arrives to ask affectionately whether she had a good time. Before retiring, she asks him to sing the song their father used to sing. Looking in the woods the next morning for a baptismal creek, the four elders of the church — Hayes, Ott, Gleaton, McLean — catch sight of Susannah bathing nude. Outraged, they propose to tell Blitch.

That evening, at a church supper in the same location as the square dance, the four elders' wives — of whom Mrs. McLean is the most venomous, Mrs. Gleaton the most tolerant, and the other two somewhere in between — discuss Susannah's scandalous behavior and wait for the minister to arrive. Suspecting something is wrong but not realizing what, Susannah arrives and offers her contribution to the supper — freshly picked and cooked peas. When told she is not welcome, the girl retreats in confusion.

At her house, looking for Sam, Susannah instead sees Little Bat, who explains why she has been ostracized. Susannah, who has always bathed there, cannot understand what she did wrong, but the boy goes on to say that she is being called a loose woman, that his mother made him say he too had been seduced by her. Incensed by his lie, she sends him away, telling him never to come back. When Sam returns home, he has heard the gossip and laments the streak in human nature that lets such a thing happen, adding there is nothing they can do but weather the storm.

Act II. The following Friday morning, Sam informs his sister what the community wants: a public confession. She replies she has nothing to confess, though she is beginning to wonder whether maybe the devil is tempting her somehow, without her knowledge. The creek is now being used for baptisms, and Blitch has asked her to come to a prayer meeting that evening; Sam thinks she should go to show that she is not afraid, but she feels unable to face public contempt. Sam says he has to empty his traps on the other side of the mountain but will be back the next day.

That evening, inside the church, Blitch takes up the collection while the congregation sings a hymn. Starting his sermon, Blitch stresses the need for personal salvation and calls on those who have not yet been baptized to come forward. Several candidates appear. Then Blitch singles out Susannah, as the others stare at her accusingly. Against her will, as if hypnotized, she comes down the aisle to receive the benediction, then runs out of the church crying, "No!"

An hour later, back at her house, Susannah recalls a folklike song that reflects her loneliness and sorrow. The preacher surprises her, coming to pay a call: having failed to convert her at the meeting, he is determined to do so now. She defends herself vigorously, saying that the community has put her through hell all week. Feeling a conflict between his human understanding and his rigid religious convictions, Blitch finds himself drawn to her and puts his arm around her. Her energy to resist is spent, and she allows him to lead her inside the house.

Saturday morning, Blitch kneels alone in the church, praying for forgiveness: his sin and its punishment are frighteningly real to him. When the elders, their wives and Susannah file in, he declares that the girl was innocent and should be forgiven. The elders, unimpressed, leave saying they will expect Blitch at the baptism. Alone with him in the church, Susannah starts to laugh bitterly. When Blitch begs her forgiveness, she says she has forgotten what the word means. On the porch of the Polk house at sundown, Sam returns from his trip to learn what has happened to Susannah during his absence. When he asks why she yielded to the preacher, she says she had no more strength to resist — and besides, everybody believed the worst of her anyway. Furious, Sam takes a gun and heads toward the baptism site at the creek. Not believing he would shoot Blitch, Susannah is shocked to hear a shot ring out. Little Bat runs in with news of the assassination, followed by the elders and others, threatening to lynch Sam and demanding that Susannah leave the valley. Laughing at their attempts to make her feel guilty, she takes a gun and orders them off the property. Undefeated, they retreat. Susannah gives Little Bat false encouragement, then slaps him with all her strength as he approaches. She laughs as he runs away. Then, aware of the loneliness of the exile she has created, she strengthens herself to face it.