SHADOW OF A MAN

By: Harold P. Voyles

A play about Appalachia
DEDICATION

This book is dedicated to my wife, Merida, whose faith and wisdom made writing Shadow of a Man possible.
SHADOW OF A MAN

As the partridge sitteth on eggs and hatcheth them not, so he that getteth riches and not by right shall leave them in the midst of his days and at his end shall be a fool.  

*Jeremiah 17:11*
“Why do you write about Appalachia?” a friend once asked me. Somehow reminiscing about my youth in Harlan County, KY, has given me a greater appreciation for the land and the people. Although I have not lived in the bluegrass state for 28 years, I still call Kentucky home. I was raised at Lynch, once one of the largest coal mining camps in America, boasting a population of 11,000 after World War II. Today the population is about 1,000.

By most estimates, Appalachia had the largest out-migration in U.S. history, with over one million people leaving the region to seek a better life elsewhere.

Over the years, many have sought to paint a realistic portrait of Appalachia through documentaries, literature, movies, music and television. Unfortunately, not all have done so with insight, understanding and an appreciation of the culture.

Someone once said, “You can’t explain Appalachia. You just have to live it.” In my play, Shadow of a Man, I attempt to explain a small part of the story. It is for you, dear reader, to decide if I have done it well.

Harold P. Voyles
SHADOW OF A MAN

The time is 1960 in Hoedown, a fictional mining town in Harlan County, KY., where numerous mine closings during the past decade have devastated the county.

However, people are encouraged when a large coal company announces plans to greatly expand mining operations and provide jobs for the idle miners. To do so, the company needs additional acreage for their proposed expansion.

Will Poser, head of his family, is the largest landowner with 25 acres that the company covets because of its prime location. Will, who keeps negotiations with the company a secret, faces the difficult decision of continuing a way of life that has survived for generations, or selling the land for more money than the family could imagine.

Jesse Collins, former coal miner turned preacher, faces his own struggles. Jesse’s life is intertwined with the Poser family as he attempts to maintain a friendship of more than two decades with Thalia Poser, Will’s wife. However, Jesse’s commitment to his faith as he confronts hypocrisy and greed is a heavy burden to bear.

The play attempts to provide diverse points of view suggesting there are no easy answers to difficult problems—not in America—and especially not in Appalachia.
CAST LISTING

1. Hawthorne Cartwright
2. Jesse Collins
3. Clive McAlister
4. Thurman Moberly
5. Hankins Poser
6. Ollie Poser
7. Thalia Poser
8. Will Poser
9. Harley Simpkins
10. Chester Wiggins
11. Blake Whitaker
CHARACTERS

Hawthorne Cartwright (deacon chairman)
Hawthorne is a manipulative, pompous, yet harmless and somehow likeable rascal. For example, Hawthorne stands to profit personally if he can persuade the pastor to encourage church members to sell their land and church property to the coal company.

Jesse Collins (preacher)
A coal miner turned preacher, Jesse, in younger days, was the fiancé of Thalia Poser. Jesse now carries the duel burden of pastoring his flock and still yearning for his lost love. Jesse is a man who gives so much he is almost running on empty as he tries to save the people and himself.

Clive McAlister (mine superintendent)
Clive wants to expand mining operations, but to do so his company needs land owned by the mountain families. Because of its prime location, obtaining the Poser property is vital to the proposed expansion. Clive, whose loyalty is primarily to the company, knows he must win the trust of the miners if he is to succeed.

Thurman Moberly (chief detective)
Thurman, head of the company’s police force, is a veteran of mine battles fought over the years. Although Thurman is hard-nosed, he respects the miners and wants to treat them fairly. He yearns for a more peaceful life, but realizes he must do his duty if he is to hang on until retirement.

Thalia Poser (Will Poser’s wife)
Thalia prepares for changes in her life as her husband ponders selling land owned by their family for decades. Thalia dreams of becoming an artist as she struggles to maintain her friendship with Jesse without being disloyal to her preoccupied and often insensitive husband.

Hankins Poser (Will’s father)
Hankins, a widower and retired miner, often reminisces about the past, particularly Sarah, his beloved wife. Hankins dreams of moving back to the camp house where he raised his family decades earlier. Driven by a need he does not quite understand, Hankins feels the move will complete something he has left undone.

Ollie Poser (son)
Ollie, a throwback to an earlier generation, believes he can harvest timber, farm the land and thus remain free of the coal industry’s influence. Ollie loves the land and vows to keep it in the family. This pits him against Will, his father, who believes the old way of life is gone forever.

Will Poser (husband and father)
Will worked in the mines while living on the family’s 25 acres, a mile from town. For two decades, he farmed the land by day and mined coal at night. A self-proclaimed old man at 40, Will plans to sell property to the company and buy a place in town, likely alienating everyone in his family.
Harley Simpkins (head company engineer)
Harley basks in his recent accomplishment of building a dam at the head of Flatgap Hollow. He understands that a safe, secure dam is vital to the company’s financial well-being. However, possible violence makes the dam a likely target for those opposing the company.

Chester Wiggins (Hankins’s friend)
Chester who believes “coal mining gets in your blood” had left the coalfields repeatedly, but always returned when the mine reopened. Chester and Hankins’s friendship is rock solid, forged from shared experiences of poverty, brute labor and union organizing.

Blake Whittaker (company detective)
Blake longs to escape the coalfields and seek another way of life. He resents the miners and believes they deserve their lot in life. Blake’s duties often pit him against the miners, but he lacks the wisdom to relate to a people he does not care to understand.
**SHADOW OF A MAN**  
**A Three-Act Play**

*Act One*  
Scene One: The Cabin in the Hollow  
Scene Two: Jesse and Thalia  
Scene Three: Ollie and Hankins  
Scene Four: The negotiations  
Scene Five: Suppertime at the Cabin

*Act Two*  
Scene One: Will and Ollie  
Scene Two: Gap Hollow Baptist Church  
Scene Three: Dawn at the Cabin  
Scene Four: The second Meeting  
Scene Five: The family Circle

*Act Three*  
Scene One: The Truth Shall Set You Free  
Scene Two: The Last Meeting  
Scene Three: You Can Go Home Again  
Scene Four: The Dam  
Scene Five: The Healing Has Begun

Epilogue
ABOUT THE AUTHOR


Shadow of A Man is a work of fiction. Although the setting is Harlan County, KY and the towns of Harlan, Cumberland and Hazard (Perry County) are real, other places are purely fictional. In addition, names, characters and incidents are a product of the author’s imagination and any resemblance to actual persons or events is coincidental.
Lights rise in the cabin in a hollow near Hoedown, a mining town in eastern Kentucky. A mandolin plays softly in the background. The cabin’s kitchen is sparse containing a kitchen table with four chairs, a rectangular table and an old-fashioned cooking stove and a closet. The room has one small window (stage left) a front door (stage right) and back door (center stage).

Will Poser sits at the table clasping his half-full coffee mug. Will, 46, is tall, lanky and ruggedly handsome, but a smirk marks him for an unpleasant companion. Will often broods, suggesting there is a lingering hurt that he is reluctant to confront.

Thalia, his wife, a youthful 43, is tomboyish but pretty. A life of labor gives her physical strength that perplexes Will. Thalia is witty, yet crestfallen. Discontent swirls about her while she yearns for something she cannot articulate, making her seem aloof to those who care for her.

Meanwhile, Thalia hums softly as she flattens dough with a rolling pin at the rectangular table near the window. She works with the dexterity of someone who performs a task so often it becomes effortless.

Unease permeates the air, but it is difficult to pinpoint the source. Through the kitchen window, daylight peeps around the clouds making shadows prance about the room hinting of an intruder. Silence is broken when Will coughs and begins to speak.

Will: You’ve been humming that dang song all morning. Why can’t you just go ahead and sing it? It’s getting on my nerves.

Thalia: I’ll sing when I get through humming.

Will: I’ve been trying all morning to get that tune out of my head. It’s about to drive me crazy.

Thalia: It’s a short trip for some folks.

Will: What’s that supposed to mean?

Thalia does not reply as she cuts dough in strips and places layers over a deep dish filled with apples. She looks out the window at the hill below and absent-mindedly runs a hand through her hair to pat back a loose strand. She opens the oven door and places the dish inside the wood-burning stove before slamming the door and quickly jerking her hand away. She again looks out the window. Gradually a smile blankets her face. Will stands suddenly and clears his throat.

Will: If we ever get a big coal company in here, in a year or two, we’ll have electricity in Fancy Hollow. No more kerosene lamps or candles. Maybe we can get an oil furnace so we don’t burn coal. I get tired of soot everywhere.

Thalia: You can’t beat coal for heat and I like burning candles.

Will: Fancy Hollow. Lord, what a name for this place. Ain’t nothing fancy about it at all.

Thalia: Compared to the way folks live in the mining camp, I’d say we’re doing fine. You know how Fancy Hollow got its name don’t you?
Will: Uh, I don’t recall.
Thalia: Daddy named it after his first sweetheart. Fancy died when she was only 16. You remember the year the flu killed about five or six people in Hoedown.

Will: Yeah, Lambert, my first cousin, was just a baby when he got sick and died in three days. Was it 31’ or 32’ Seems like I can’t remember anything anymore unless it’s useless information.

Thalia: I’m not sure, but I remember after Momma died, Daddy told me he loved only two women his whole life. Fancy and Momma. That’s how Fancy Hollow got its name. I can’t believe I don’t remember her last name.

Will: Daddy? Lord, Thalia, you’re what, 42, 43, and still call him daddy. He’s been gone nine years now.

Thalia: What can I say? I was a daddy’s girl. Daddy and Momma raised four boys and one girl and they determined to make me a tom-boy. Daddy said if I’d been a boy, I could’ve whipped George and Troy. They were the oldest. I could hold my own with the youngest two and I could whip Milton until he turned 14.

Will: I swear your family would rather fight than eat steak. Even your dog and cat was mean. George and Troy were bullies. If they worked at a job like they did fighting, they’d had more money than a bluegrass lawyer. But the two youngest, Milton and Truman, I liked a little bit.

Thalia: My brothers were good boys at heart. But Lord, they loved to play pranks. I remember one Halloween night they ran through the coal camp and toppled 16 outhouses. They claimed it was a record.

Will: Your family don’t have much to brag about, do they?
Thalia: They were always getting in a ruckus, but we were a loving family. Daddy would sit me on his knee and ask me if I was his little girl. If I’d say no, he’d tickle me and sometimes I’d wet my pants. Momma would get mad and say, ‘Lord Ah mighty Daddy.’

Will: Spoiled you bad. Whole family thought you could do no wrong. I recall I made you cry that time when we broke up for a week. George and Troy caught me at the company store and said if I made you cry again I’d better light out for Detroit.

Thalia: Four boys and one girl. What would you expect?
Will: Sound like a little girl still calling him daddy.

Thalia: I just never got used to calling him father, or dad. A daddy is different.

Will: Just a different name for the same thing.

Thalia: It’s more than that. A daddy is a father who isn’t afraid to love.

Will: I know what you’re getting at. You’re always speaking in double meanings.

Thalia: The pie will be done soon. Don’t you love the smell of apples and cinnamon? I really love a wood-burning fire in the fall to beat back the chill. Seems like the cold eventually beats down the good things. If we get electricity in Fancy Hollow, things will change. All the changes won’t be good.

Will: I swear Thalia, the harder I try to make conversation the less sense you make. You shouldn’t spend so much time painting. It causes you to drift off into another world. Sometimes, I feel like I don’t even know you.
**Thalia:** Maybe you never did.

**Will:** I ain’t going to argue all day. That’s all we do anymore. Where the devil is that mailman anyway? Postal Service should’ve fired Doak Owens years ago. They suspended him twice and it made him even slower. He’d stop and chat with a tree stump.

**Thalia:** You can get more sense out a tree stump than some people.

**Will:** There you go again. I swear Thalia, sometimes talking to you is like talking to the mule.

**Thalia:** I just hope you don’t argue with the mule with the same enthusiasm as you do me.

Will, now angry and scowling, walks the length of the cabin twice before he pitches his coffee out the back door and slams the mug on the table.

**Will:** I’m going to the post office. If Doak comes by, put the letter up. I don’t want you or Ollie reading it before I do.

When Will opens the door to leave, Thalia begins to sing loudly and slightly off key. Will hunches his shoulders and lowers his head as the lyrics bullies him off the porch and down the path to his truck. (Lights fade.)

> Whenever I hear church bells ring  
> My spirit soars and I joyfully sing.

**Scene Two**

When lights rise in the cabin, it is past noon. Thalia sits at the kitchen table with a coffee mug and a large art book. An assortment of artist’s brushes, paints and pens lie next to a sketching pad. She stares intently at a drawing and is startled when a heavy, strong hand raps the door. She shakes the table spilling paint on her paper. Thalia mutters under her breath, and then yells for the visitor to enter.

A short, stocky man, about Thalia’s age and height, steps through the door swiping at his coat. Pastor Jesse Collins smiles broadly, but moves cautiously as if each step has been predetermined. His eyes shine with a light whose source is not easily discernible. When Thalia sees Jesse, she throws her shoulders back, lifts her head and smiles.

**Thalia:** Pastor, if it’s not too much trouble, would you mind shutting the door?

**Jesse:** Glad to, Mrs. Poser.

**Thalia:** Jesse, what are you up to besides pester the devil?

**Jesse:** Just got back from a revival. You remember when we were courting and went to a revival over in Harlan? That preacher was a snake-handler.

**Thalia:** I’ve forgotten a lot over the years, but not that.

**Jesse:** We joked that if I became a preacher I wouldn’t handle poison snakes. But who’d thought I’d actually become a man of the word.

**Thalia:** Not me, for sure.

**Jesse:** I can’t believe it’s spitting snow the first day of November.
Thalia: It’s the second. The second day of November. It’s a wonder you know when to show up for church.

Jesse: I did forget a Wednesday night service my first year preaching and Deacon Cartwright wanted to run me off.

Thalia: You should’ve let him. You’d had a lot less worries if you’d stayed in the mines. You almost spilt the church that time you shoved him up against a wall. Did they teach you that in seminary?

Jesse: Not unless you take a loose interpretation of the Good Lord works in mysterious ways. Truth is Hawthorne never did like me.

Thalia: Well, I wonder why?

Jesse: As I recall, neither did your dad. He said I was too ornery to be a man of God and wouldn’t last a year. So Deacon Cartwright wasn’t the only one who wanted to run me off.

Thalia: Daddy wanted to see if you’d fight for what was yours. But you cut tail and run like a third-grader getting clear of a playground bully.

Jesse: You were never mine, Mrs. Poser.

Thalia: I have a first name and you should know it by now.

Jesse: Mrs. Uh, I mean Thalia.

Thalia: You know, Jesse, after all these years, I never once asked you why you left. Well, I’m asking you now. Why didn’t you stay and fight?

Jesse: Thalia, those five acres I was going to buy for us, sold out from under me. Old man Spencer said he’d give me four months to get up the money. I worked in that foundry in Cleveland until I thought I’d died and gone to the lake of fire. Now when I preach about hell, that foundry always crosses my mind. Seems like something always comes to mind that means something else.

Thalia: There was other land.

Jesse: Came home with my left pocket so full of money I leaned to one side. But Spencer had already sold the property to the Johnson boys. The night I found out, if I hadn’t got drunk and got my truck stuck in a ditch, I’d shot Spencer for sure.

Thalia: You men! Why did the good Lord make so many of you? Is land worth more than everything else? How can things that should mean so little mean so much? You left without saying goodbye and stayed gone three years. We thought you were dead.

Jesse: In a way, I was dead.

Thalia: That can’t be the real reason you left. There’s got to be something else.

Jesse: There is something else and one day I just might tell you.

Thalia: You never told me where you went either. I can’t believe I’ve waited over 20 years to ask you. Doak Owens said you were in California.

Jesse: Doak’s got a tongue like an insulted mother-in-law. First word comes to mind, he’ll let fly.

Thalia: Well, where did you go? Or are you too ashamed to tell?
Jesse: Not much to tell. I went back to Cleveland, then Detroit and ended up in Chicago. I lived there for 14 months and made good money. But I stayed holed up in my room on the fourth floor and hardly got out. If I’d stayed much longer, I’d probably never left that room.

Thalia: Jesse, I don’t understand. You were always the life of the party. What happened?

Jesse: Sometimes things move so slow you don’t realize it until it’s too late. It’s like wearing out a good pair of boots. You’re half-barefooted before you notice they’re giving out.

And when you lose something and got no chance of getting it back, it’s like it never was. I remember one summer us kids dammed up the creek with logs and boulders. We had us a fine pool of water about four feet deep. To us it was a river. But one day the company guards caught us swimming and made us tear out the dam. In a few minutes, the water was only shin-deep. A week later, it seemed like us kids had never been swimming in our lives. That’s how the past seemed to me. Like it never was.

Thalia: Jesse, didn’t you have friends?

Jesse: I made plenty of friends in Cleveland and Detroit. I courted a lot of pretty girls too. Those girls, especially in Detroit, loved to hear me talk. They’d tease me about my hillbilly accent. But when I got to Chicago, I just couldn’t do it anymore. I’d stay home on Saturday night and prop my feet on the window sill and watch the pavement cool off. It was so hot it felt like the streets hated you and wanted you to die. When fall came, I’d sit by my window for hours and swear I could smell wood fires burning. I missed October in the mountains so bad I could barely stand it.

Thalia: You always went to church before. Why didn’t you go to church in Chicago?

Jesse: I’m not sure. I’d go out Sunday evening, sit on a church’s steps and listen to the singing and preaching. But I never felt like I belonged anywhere. I couldn’t figure why what use to give me joy caused me pain. If Mom hadn’t died, I guess I’d still be in Chicago looking out that window.

Thalia: Lord, Jesse.

Jesse: I need to go. I thought Will was here and there’s something I wanted to ask him. He’s got a good head for business.

Thalia: You’re the pastor out visiting his flock. There’s nothing wrong with that.

Jesse: You haven’t been to church in eight months.

Thalia: You remember that when you couldn’t remember to take your hat the last time you visited.

Jesse: How come you remember the hat?

Thalia: The last time I went to church, you kept losing your train of thought. Cartwright told the other deacons he didn’t get a thing out of the sermon. I thought I was doing you a favor by staying away.

Jesse: You sat in the first row. You could have sat farther back.

Thalia: By the back door so I could be the first to leave?

Jesse: I need to go.

Thalia: Stay. I fixed a fresh pot of coffee and the apple pie is ready.
Jesse: I love the smell of apple pie baking. I love the fall but I get the blues when the last leaf falls. Say, are you painting again? You could paint scenery for the Christmas play next month.

When Jesse finishes his pie and coffee, he scoots his chair close to Thalia and sees that she is sketching him. He starts to touch her left cheek with the back of his hand, but a cloud passes the window again finally freeing the sun. When he sees his shadow upon the wall—a twisted, grotesque replica of himself, he jerks his hand away. Thalia folds the sketch of Jesse twice and hands it to him. He puts it in his shirt pocket and pats his heart. She smiles.

Thalia: Jesse, Jesse, always so strong.

Jesse: If you only knew.

Thalia: Don’t you get lonely? Don’t you have somebody?

Jesse: It’s been two years, but it’s worse at Christmas. You’d think I’d overcome it being a preacher. Fact is I’m no different from Will or anybody else. When you’re alone too long, you start dying a little at a time. The problem is everybody knows it but you.

Thalia: You’re nothing like Will.

Jesse: I can’t care for a family on my salary.

Thalia: Never say you’re like Will again.

Jesse: I seem to make the wrong move every time. If it was raining ham sandwiches, I’d be inside taking a nap. I’ll think about a thing until I can’t think no more. But when it’s time for action, I go left when I should go right. Sometimes I feel like there’s two of me. I swear when I’m standing still, I think I see my shadow move like it’s got a will of its own. And I don’t even drink. Not anymore anyways.

Thalia: Nothing like him at all.

Jesse: Thalia, I have to go now.

Thalia: Come again and stay for supper.

Jesse: You know I like fried chicken.

Thalia: I wouldn’t trust a preacher that didn’t eat fried chicken.

Jesse: Thalia, you’re something else.

Thalia: Jesse, I’m worried about you. I’ve never seen you talk so much. You’re like a geyser. Usually I have to pull the words out of you.

Jesse: Oh, I’m doing fine. It’s just…

Thalia: What Jesse? Tell me.

Jesse: Kind of hard to explain. I feel like I’m being pulled toward something I can’t resist. I don’t understand anything anymore. Did you know one time I was almost electrocuted in the mines?

Thalia: Lord, no.

Jesse: One day I walked past the transformer where a 7,200-volt supply cable was connected to the back. There must have been a small cut in the cable. You know I’m pretty stout, but it took all my strength to pull away from that cable. I was so weak when I sat down my hands shook.
Somebody handed me a cup of coffee and I couldn’t hold it still. A few minutes later, that cable blew. You wouldn’t believe the noise. The electrician said I was lucky to be alive

*Thalia:* The Good Lord was looking out for you.

*Jesse:* It’s weird, but a part of me wanted to give in to the pull. That’s the way I feel now. I’m being drawn toward something that I fear yet yearn for. It’s like there’s something I’m meant to do and time is getting close.

*Thalia:* I heard you’ve been preaching on Revelations for three months now. You’re happier when you preach about Jesus. I can see it in your face. Jesse, I’m afraid for you.

Suddenly Thalia clasps Jesse’s hand and holds it against her cheek. Thalia’s strength surprises Jesse when he tries to pull his hand away.

*Jesse:* Thalia, please.

*Thalia:* Jesse, Jesse, Jesse.

*Jesse:* I’m going now. Right now.

*Thalia* releases Jesse’s hand and they both bow their heads. (Lights fade)