

FINAL REPORT

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT GRANT PROJECT

"Cultural Vehicles: Movies and Marxism in Bobbie Ann Mason's 'Shiloh'"

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This final report addresses the results of a professional enhancement project funded by an ATU Professional Development Grant. This report follows the instructions provided in the *Guidelines for Professional Development Grants*.

- A. Title Page (see above)
- B. Restatement of Professional Enhancement Opportunity

Abstract of conference paper presented:

Bobbie Ann Mason is a major southern contemporary writer whose story "Shiloh" is her most anthologized work. Part of my interest in her work is to show her resistance, as a woman writer, to much of what passes for the largely masculine southern literary tradition. One of the familiar complaints about contemporary southern literature, particularly by women, is reflected in Fred Hobson's claim in 1991 that they are not "concerned with the sweep of history or with the public arena, or both." "Shiloh," however, by its very title, conjures up the Civil War, a battleground that serves as the setting for the final dissolution of Leroy and Norma Jean's marriage. Yet Mason includes a telling detail that argues against the charge that Mason's is an apolitical, ahistorical text. The films she mentions in the story (the couple is watching a double feature at the local drive-in when their infant son dies in the back seat, a death that contributes to the death of their marriage) summon up not only southern history, but, even more directly, a sexual politics that generates sympathy for Norma Jean over any identification with Leroy, whose point of view skews readers' sympathies toward him, or old south notions of masculinity that inevitably lead to war.

One of Leroy's failures is leaving out the "insides of history," making it "too simple." The two films are clues to what the "insides of history" might be—sexual politics and male blindness to those politics. Both films are from the early 1960s, a time of heightened political protest about war and gender inequalities: "Lover Come Back" and "Dr. Strangelove"—an odd combination, until one examines the sexual politics that underlie the first, a conservative romantic comedy, and the second, a dark anti-war satire. In a reading of *In Country*, Stephen N. doCarmo cites Frederic Jameson's complaint that "mass culture, ceaselessly reproducing images of the past, only contributes to the

eclipsing of real history by a flat and artificial 'historicism,'" and then argues that, in Mason's novel, the female protagonist's "tactical use" of popular culture heightens the historical sense and becomes "the starting point" of "radical politics." Although the characters in "Shiloh" don't exhibit the self- (or historical) awareness of that novel, the films they see are significant signifiers of popular culture as the historical starting point for a more radical sexual politics. It seems to me that the cultural vehicles they watch from their vehicle point to a different kind of historicizing at work in the story.

In "Lover Come Back," starring Doris Day and Rock Hudson, a successful working woman ends up succumbing to the lecherous machinations of a lying male competitor who gets her pregnant and convinces her to marry him as she's wheeled into the delivery room. Leroy and Norma Jean marry because she gets pregnant at 18, and then, years after the child dies, she leaves him for an independent life of work and self-actualization, a reversal of the film's plot. The romanticized plot of the film becomes a more realistic, even feminist, plot in the story. There is also a gender reversal that, in the film, is a sexist joke, but, in the story, results in Norma Jean's increasing independence. (Not only that, although there isn't space to discuss it in this abstract, there is a surprising southern subplot about the Civil War in the film, a topic Rock Hudson duplicitously uses to steal a client from Doris Day.) The other film, "Dr. Strangelove," is a more overtly political film, and yet it, too, has a running theme of the exploitation of women as a perhaps not so subtle underpinning of the patriarchal machinations that result in nuclear war.

C. Brief Review of Professional Enhancement Opportunity

I attended the Society for the Study of Southern Literature conference in Williamsburg, VA, and presented my paper there. I flew out of Little Rock on April 16 and returned on April 21, 2008.

D. Summary of Experiences

My primary teaching area within literature is American and, within that, southern. This is the primary conference in southern literature, and is held every two years. Not only did I manage to get positive feedback on my paper, I was also able to attend numerous other panels relevant to my teaching and scholarship. A final benefit was the opportunity to make contact with new and old friends in my field, three of whom are now editing major journals in southern literature and expressed interest in my work.

E. Conclusions and Recommendations

Over the summer, I was able to expand the paper I presented into an article, "Talking Back to the Tradition: Bobbie Ann Mason's 'Shiloh,'" which is now under consideration for publication among selected essays from the conference. Without the funds I received from the ATU Professional Grant, I would not have been able to attend the conference and progressed toward publishing the essay that resulted.