Final Written Report

Professional Development Grant

“Southern Virgins, Whores, and Menopausal Monsters”

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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:

In Robert Penn Warren’s *All the King’s Men*, Jack Burden’s two wives embody 
that age-old virgin/whore opposition. A recurring image of Anne links her with Ophelia’s 
floating corpse (a pervasive image of female “perversity” Bram Dijkstra traces in fin-de-
siecle art): “I suddenly remembered . . . Anne’s face, lying back, with the eyes closed 
and the moonlight pouring over it . . . when she had floated on the water, her face turned 
up to the purple-green darkening sky, her eyes closed” (276). That image stops him from 
having sex with her because sex would “plunge her into the full, dark stream of the 
world” (310). She would, in other words, join him in that human endeavor implicit in the 
final words of the novel: “go into the convulsion of the world, out of history into history 
and the awful responsibility of Time” (438). Instead, she can wave to him from the 
margin.

He describes Lois, Anne’s antithesis, in overtly monstrous images of female 
sexuality: “a beautiful, juicy, soft, vibrant, sweet-smelling, sweet-breathed machine for 
provoking and satisfying the appetite,” until her humanity asserts itself (in speaking, for 
example) to infect his “innocent Eden” (304). The unravished bride, Anne, is a 
desexualized, dehumanized, dehistoricized corpse, while Lois is dehumanized and
dehistoricized, through sexualized mythology, as a rapacious vagina dentata who “began to resemble a beautiful luscious bivalve open and pulsing in the glimmering deep and I some small speck of marine life being drawn remorselessly” (304).

As Barbara Creed’s study of horror films shows, such imagery is ancient because “woman’s reproductive functions mark her as monstrous” (83). In *From Mouse to Mermaid*, one noted pattern in Disney films is that only pre-sexual girls and elderly (post-sexual) women can be positive female figures, while middle-aged, presumed still-sexual women are primarily villainous. What I would assert is that menopausal and postmenopausal women are monstrous, too. When Jack imagines a forty-years-older Lois, she becomes even more horrific, and, like Ursula in *The Little Mermaid*, is “bloated with the entire universe,” her mouth a “dark, hot orifice” (307-08). Lisa Niles’s reading of Elizabeth Gaskell’s *Cranford* discusses the Victorian “pathologization of women’s bodies as they age,” the presumption not only that menopause leads to disease and even insanity, but also that the persistence of menopausal and postmenopausal sexual desire was socially stigmatized, considered at least inappropriate, and at most perverse.

In Lillian Smith’s *Strange Fruit*, the postmenopausal Alma Deen, who represses her children’s sexuality (her son’s miscegenistic, and her daughter’s lesbian), has no such persistent desire, but, then, she never enjoyed even socially sanctioned, reproductive, heterosexual sex. She is, of course, a monstrous character for multiple reasons, but, as Gary Richards points out, her “desexualized body” is “horrific and even monstrous, with its cavernous wrinkles and tufts of hair” (109). There is, however, at least one southern text that takes such monstrous images of the sexualized, aging female body and reconfigures them: Ellen Douglas’s *A Lifetime Burning*. Corinne, the narrator, confronts
her aging, abject, desiring body, and, in the process of the narrative, explores the cultural
labyrinth of the monstrous-feminine so prevalent in southern culture to finally reject such
patriarchal paradigms.

C. Brief Review of Professional Enhancement Opportunity

I attended the American Literature Association Symposium on the American Gothic in
Savannah, GA, and presented my paper there. I flew out of Little Rock on February 21,
2013, and returned on February 24, 2013.

D. Summary of Experiences

My primary teaching area within literature is modern and southern American. I am the
primary teacher of Modern American Literature, a required course for all our majors, and
the only teacher of our course on southern literature. Not only did I receive
overwhelmingly positive feedback on my paper (I think my favorite was that “this paper
has legs”), I was also able to attend numerous other panels relevant to my teaching and
scholarship.

E. Conclusions and Recommendations

This paper is part of a larger project. I have written on the monstrous-feminine before,
and on Ellen Douglas, but this approach is significantly different from my previous work
by incorporating concepts of the menopausal and post-menopausal body. This paper also
includes texts I have never written about before. Without the funds I received from the
ATU Professional Grant, I would not have been able to attend the conference.