

Final Written Report

2019 Professional Development Grant

“Robert Altman’s Southern Salome: Oscar Wilde’s Women in Holly Springs,
Mississippi”

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B. Restatement of Professional Enhancement Opportunity

Abstract of conference paper presented:

The 1999 film, *Cookie's Fortune*, directed by Robert Altman, with a screenplay by self-proclaimed "born and bred Texan" Anne Rapp, is set and filmed in Holly Springs, Mississippi. The main female character, Camille Dixon, is directing the play *Salome*, by Oscar Wilde, for an Easter production at the First Presbyterian church in that little southern town. Furthermore, the sign in front of the church claims that the play's authors are both Wilde and Camille. My first response to the film (beyond the humorous hubris of Camille's claiming co-authorship with Wilde) was, "How absurd that anyone, southern or otherwise, would perform Wilde's *Salome* in such a church for such a Christian celebration." Now, years later, I have decided that this odd intertextual British/American, literary/filmic text offers a radical rereading of both Wilde's play (with its expansive background in relation to the character Salome and her multiple representations over time) and the southern gothic misogyny and racism that Altman clearly uses to reconfigure Salome's image as a femme fatale.

In the play, Salome is primarily a source of destructive female sexual desire aimed at seducing John the Baptist, her stepfather Herod's prisoner. In the face of John's persistent refusal, as well as his condemnation of her mother Herodias (whose husband was murdered by his brother Herod, now her husband), Salome's jealous vengeance is empowered by Herod's desire for her. She demands John's head, a murder to which Herod acquiesces, and then she holds it up, kissing the mouth that had refused her

insistent cry, "Suffer me to kiss thy mouth." What is oddly displaced in the film is female sexuality, the center of the play. The villainous Camille and her sister Cora, who plays Salome in the church play, are completely asexual. Even Cora's performance as Salome is emotionless, robotic. The sexual female is Cora's young daughter, Emma, who has innocent, joyful sex with the boyish cop Jason at regular intervals, without negative judgment or any ultimate punishment. In fact, in the final scene, Emma is headed into the woods to have sex with Jason, with the approval of the male cast of friends she leaves fishing on the dock.

What takes the central place of sexuality in the film is race, an issue marginalized although nonetheless present in the play. From the opening scene of the play, whiteness is endlessly iterated, always in relation to femininity and, inevitably, death, whereas in the film, whiteness becomes a signifier of race. When Camille discovers her aunt Cookie's suicide early in the film, she covers it up to protect the family name, because "only crazy people commit suicide." She then allows, even contributes to, the accusation and arrest of a gentle black man, Willie, adopted years ago by Cookie and her husband Buck. We finally discover that Camille is Emma's mother, having had an affair with her sister Cora's husband (who left and died a comically accidental rather than fatefully tragic death). After Camille's rare blood type found on the planted gun at the staging of Cookie's "murder" reveals her, falsely, as a murderer, she takes Willie's place in the jail cell. Her supposedly "half-witted" and cuckolded sister Cora, Salome in the play, refuses to support Camille's alibi (telling the lie her sister had insisted upon to implicate Willie, and ambiguously doing so intentionally rather than as a failure to understand the consequences for her sister). Finally, Cookie's previously undiscovered will leaves

everything to Willie, her dead husband's black nephew as a result of miscegenation a generation ago, and Camille commits suicide in a jail cell while reciting lines from the

C. Brief Review of Professional Enhancement Opportunity

I attended the American Literature Association Annual Conference in Boston and presented my paper there. I flew from Little Rock, AR, to Boston on May 22 and returned on May 27, 2019. Program available at americanliteratureassociation.org

D. Summary of Experiences

My primary teaching area within literature is American, primarily modern and southern. I also teach film, not only the introductory course (every semester), but also numerous special topic courses. The positive feedback I received on my paper will not only help in expanding my teaching of both southern culture and film, but also in my ongoing research in both areas. I was also able to attend numerous other panels relevant to my teaching and scholarship.

E. Conclusions and Recommendations

Doing research and writing always helps make me a better teacher, particularly when that work is so directly connected to my courses. I find that presenting conference papers reminds me that I am also part of a community of scholars. Although I cannot include Altman in my fall course on women filmmakers, I am considering using this film and my reading of it the next time I teach southern literature. Without the funds I received from the ATU Professional Grant, I would not have been able to attend the conference. Thank you for your support