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Disruption of the Traditional View of the Southern Past in Bobbie Ann Mason's "Shiloh"

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A major aspect of what is termed Southern Renaissance literature in the US is known to be a striking obsession with the past. "The Southern writers of the post-First World War age," writes Lewis P. Simpson, "inaugurated a struggle to comprehend the nature of memory and history, and to assert the redemptive meaning of the classical-Christian past in its bearing on the present." So, the "Southern literary mind . . . began to seek and to symbolize this antagonism in an image of recovery . . . of memory and history (70). Such an obsession naturally brought with it a condemnation of modern times. Almost "all Southern novelists whose writings have appeared since World War I have criticized the emphasis modern society has placed on technology and consumer economics," as Thomas Daniel Young puts it (1). Thus, US Southern Renaissance fiction is characterized by its depiction of the tension, in Southern society, between tradition and modernity.

Or so is the conventional view. I would like to argue that there are now new voices that are moving Southern fiction towards a different direction. To illustrate, Bobbie Ann Mason in the short story "Shiloh" in her *Shiloh and Other Stories* (1982), although focusing on the said tension, which places her in the tradition of Southern literature, uses the contrast of past versus present to expose the lack of significance that this binary opposition bore in late twentieth century, and since, "to show how this tension no longer carries any significant weight and authority" (Brinkmayer 26). I examine Mason's story in this article to demonstrate how it deviates from and disrupts the traditional view of the past that had been prevalent in Southern fiction.

The fact is that "the past is no longer vital, as it was for Southerners of the early twentieth century who struggled to comprehend the modern experience from a perspective of community and shared history," as Robert H. Brinkmeyer explains (24). Accordingly, Mason establishes a shift from the traditional concerns. As Fred Hobson puts it, "one finds in the *Shiloh* stories nearly a complete absence of nurturing family, community, and religion, those staples of traditional Southern life and literature" (13). Even if the setting of Mason's short stories is the rural South, it is a rural South in a modern America where former regional differences have been leveled by the homogeneity of mainstream culture. Mason's characteristic use of popular culture greatly contributes both to this blurring of regional boundaries that

has ended the isolation of the South from the rest of America, and to its integration into the mainstream.

The lack of significance of the tension of past versus present in “Shiloh” is exposed through the contrast between Leroy and Norma Jean Moffit, the protagonist couple. From the very beginning of the story, these two characters are depicted as standing for two well-differentiated ways of coping with the rapidly evolving present. The accident that causes Leroy’s return home throws Norma Jean into activity and “prompt[s]” her, the reader is told, “to try building herself up.” The idea being conveyed is reinforced by the fact that “she lifts three-pound dumbells to warm up, then progresses to a twenty-pound barbell,” associating her with progression. In contrast, Leroy is presented as a cripple with a “steel pin in his hip” as a result of this accident (Mason, “Shiloh” 9). This image of mutilation and paralysis illustrates his inability to progress in the present. Furthermore, he is mentally incapacitated, afraid as he is of driving again. Indecision characterizes his pattern of behavior.

Leroy is repeatedly connected with the rig which caused his disability. This identification gradually becomes more elaborate as the rig is in turn portrayed through the metaphor of a bird, an image that will be applied to Leroy, too. As his rig is described as a “gigantic bird that has flown home to roost” (Mason, “Shiloh” 9), so Leroy himself has come back to roost; his is “a permanent homecoming” that triggers the conflict in the couple. Leroy’s attitude in life before his accident is characterized as “flying past scenery” (Mason, “Shiloh” 10), thus evidencing, once again through the bird metaphor, his carefree behavior. His attitude to the social environment he is confronted with on his return suggests a failed attempt of sudden assimilation of a fifteen-year period of change. Expressions such as “he realizes” or “he notices” are constantly used in the story, as in the following passage:

> Now that Leroy has come home to stay, he notices how much the town has changed. . . . The farmers who used to gather around the courthouse on Saturday afternoons to play checkers and spit tobacco juice have gone. . . . It has been years since Leroy has thought about the farmers, and they have disappeared without his noticing. (Mason, “Shiloh” 11-12)

Leroy and Norma Jean’s separate activities become a fundamental motif in the portrayal of the widening gap that exists between the two. Now that he is back home, Leroy is devoted to building model kits—a hobby, I argue, that clearly conveys a sense of fragmentation, since it involves putting little pieces together. The scope of this fragmentation is such that it seems to permeate Leroy’s perception of the world, as is the case with the vision of Norma Jean the reader obtains through him as focalizer: her pectorals, her legs (Mason, “Shiloh” 9), her

skin, her curls (Mason, “Shiloh” 11). He will try to put together the bits and pieces since it involves putting together little pieces of his marriage—the only thing left.

In addition, since Leroy is the focalizer throughout the story, fragmentation is related to the way “Shiloh” is narrated. Leroy presents the reader with a profusion of minute details he seems unable to connect and look behind to find their real meaning.

With regard to the narrative technique in “Shiloh,” besides the accumulation of minute details, another formal strategy that foregrounds the sense of the loss of the past is the use of the present tense in the discourse. This adds to the loss of any sense of historicity and points to a lack of transcendence to the past, suiting the thematic content of the story. According to Richard Giannone, the use of the present tense is employed “to dramatize the trap of being separated from a temporal context” (557).

Leroy’s hobby becoming an obsession, he is determined to “build a full-scale log house from a kit,” an idea that underscores, I suggest, his attachment to the regressive culture. He attempts to define a modern identity for himself by turning to his Southern heritage. It is both ironic and futile that he should be so interested in building a home for two people on the verge of separating. The fact is that now that there is no physical distance between them, the spiritual distance between Leroy and his wife has widened. Their differences are reflected perfectly through their opposing attitudes towards the log cabin. Norma Jean not only rejects the idea of living in one, she also forces Leroy to confront reality, warning him that “they won’t let you build a log cabin in any of the new subdivisions” (Mason, “Shiloh” 10).

Unlike Leroy, Norma Jean is able to keep up with the times, and to redefine her identity in a world in constant evolution, as is the one she lives in. In addition to her body building, she is shaping her intellect by “going to night school,” which “sounds intimidating” to her husband. I propose that this combination of physical and intellectual activities transmits an idea of cohesion, as opposed to Leroy’s fragmentation. His inability to understand his wife’s intellectual activity is blatantly expressed when he wonders, “what are you doing this for anyway,” and Norma Jean “shrugs” (Mason, “Shiloh” 19), an outer sign of her inner feelings of alienation from him. In contrast to Norma Jean’s academic learning, Leroy learns from a talk show (Mason, “Shiloh” 11).

There is no doubt that the modern world causes an uneasy feeling in Leroy, as is evidenced when he finds the buildings in the new part of the city “grand and complicated. They depress him” (Mason, “Shiloh” 16). He even takes drugs, in an attempt to evade the present. At the same time, it is suggested that Norma Jean does not find it easy to adapt to the change of time at first: when Leroy gives her as a present an electric organ, a symbol of modernity, “the new instrument had so many

keys and buttons that she was bewildered by it at first." Yet, due to her ability to cope with change, "Norma Jean mastered the organ almost immediately." The function of this electric organ is twofold: on the one hand, it foregrounds Norma Jean's ability to progress; on the other hand, it reinforces the link between Leroy and the past, since he has chosen this present because "when she was in high school she used to play a piano" (Mason, "Shiloh" 11).

It is important to stress at this point that even though Mason is in favor of keeping up with the times, her vision of the tension between the past and the present is not portrayed from a Manichean perspective: negative traits haunt the modern world as well. For example, the death of the couple's only child, with all its implications concerning the disruption of the modern family—that is in opposition to the extended family of the rural South—is connected with going to the movies (Mason, "Shiloh" 12), an emblem of entertainment of the modern world. Moreover, the fact that Leroy buys his drugs from a boy of the same age as his own dead child provides a desolate perception of the new generations. This lack of clear-cut boundaries can also be related to the pervading homogeneity of mainstream culture already mentioned above.

In contrast to Leroy's passivity, Norma Jean stands out with her incessant activity: she tries to organize her husband's life and suggests he could work at a lumberyard (Mason, "Shiloh" 14), relating him, I suggest, with surplus, with disused articles. Her advice both reveals her innermost feelings about her husband and functions as an anticipation of her plans about him, since eventually Leroy himself is going to be a surplus article to be discarded. Once again, Leroy is associated with his disused rig.

This association of Leroy with passivity and Norma Jean with activity turns out to be a subversion of traditional gender roles, since passivity is a quality traditionally attached to women, while activeness would tend to be considered more of a male feature. Thus, the dissolution of strict binary oppositions becomes evident once again. What's more, his mother-in-law Mabel criticizes Leroy for his needlepoint, something "a woman would do" (Mason, "Shiloh" 14). Giannone points out that

> as male traits mark Norma Jean's move toward independence, female qualities underscore Leroy's effort to regain power. . . . Her [Mason's] treatment of gender points up her concern for totality. Norma Jean's body-building and Leroy's modelbuilding derive from the same basic need to complete oneself. She needs male strength to transform her life, and he needs female insight to change his life. (556)

Since the tension of past versus present is impersonated rather systematically in the contrast between a male character and a female one, it comes as no surprise that issues specifically related to gender conflict should play an outstanding role in

"Shiloh." In this sense, the concept of home, a traditionally feminine ambivalent environment often related to women's repression, turns out to be a key space in the process of redefinition of the female character's identity. In turn, the male character is going to be affected rather negatively, as he himself seems to realize:

> "Your name means 'the king,'" Norma Jean says to Leroy that evening. . . . "Am I still king around here?" (Mason, "Shiloh" 21)

The traditional patriarchal saying "every man's house is his castle" has been subverted by Norma Jean's behavior, and Leroy loses his castle, his home, to Norma Jean, who, as I mention later, is an invader, a conqueror able to conquer a new identity for herself. The role played by the traditionally feminine space of the kitchen reflects the importance of the home in Norma Jean's self-assertion process, in the forging of her new identity: she works out (Mason, "Shiloh" 14-15) and writes her compositions, signifying her intellectual growth, in this kitchen. She cooks new, exotic food such as "tacos, lasagna, Bombay chicken" (Mason, "Shiloh" 19)—food in contrast with her former cooking which would include "fried chicken, picnic ham, chocolate pie—all his favorites" (Mason, "Shiloh" 15). As a matter of fact, through the portrayal of Norma Jean, "Shiloh" gives women's issues an undeniable emphasis. I would like to argue that Norma Jean is more than merely a "downhome feminist" who "simply want[s] breathing space in [her] relationship with [her] men," as G. O. Morphew (41-42) maintains about the women characters in Mason's fiction.

Also within the domestic space, the scene of Norma Jean vacuuming is very relevant. Leroy "hears the vacuum cleaner" immediately after his rig is described in an expressive image of decay as "a huge piece of furniture gathering dust in the backyard. Pretty soon it will be an antique" (Mason, "Shiloh" 18). The negative consequences of Leroy's clinging to the past seem to be anticipated in this description of his rig, with which he had been previously identified. It is suggested that although at the moment Norma Jean is cleaning the house in the literal sense, this cleaning spree is going to have a deeper effect, affecting Leroy directly: Norma Jean is going to clean her house in the sense of self and exclude Leroy from her life, as is revealed later in the story.

Another well-known source of oppression, sometimes even of alienation, for women is that generated by the mother-daughter relationship, presented as rather problematic in "Shiloh." Mabel is portrayed as a dominant mother who tries to control her daughter's life even after the latter's marriage, which adds to Norma Jean's feeling of alienation, demonstrated, for example, by Norma Jean's looking "small and helpless" (Mason, "Shiloh" 18) after talking to her mother. Mabel, who is associated with infertility (Note 1) (Mason, "Shiloh" 13), wears a girdle (Mason,

"Shiloh" 14), conveying, I suggest, an idea of stiffness and inflexibility. She coincides with Leroy in his inability to progress.

The changing attitudes of Leroy and Norma Jean to Mabel are also revealing of the increasing distance between them. Leroy moves from "get[ting] along with his mother-in-law primarily by joking with her" (Mason, "Shiloh" 13) to "confiding in her" (Mason, "Shiloh" 19), while Norma Jean's self-assertion process involves facing her dominant mother, and eventually cutting off from her as she does with her husband.

Resulting from these differences, Leroy and Norma Jean are alienated from each other, as is confirmed, for example, when Leroy feels Norma Jean to be a stranger, and "has the sudden impulse to tell Norma Jean about himself, as if he had just met her" (Mason, "Shiloh" 17). His inability to leave the past behind is such that he even appears, I believe, to undergo a process of infantilization, as when he "plays with his log house plans, practicing with a set of Lincoln Logs" (Mason, "Shiloh" 19) or when "he feels awkward, like a boy on a date with an older girl" (Mason, "Shiloh" 22). Even if he "sees things about Norma Jean that he never realized before" (Mason, "Shiloh" 15), it is both tragic and ironic that he is not able to see what lies behind those details he transmits so exhaustively.

In a moment of insight, Leroy reckons that "he is going to lose her" (Mason, "Shiloh" 19), and, in a last attempt to save his marriage, follows Mabel's advice to go to Shiloh, supposedly "the prettiest place, so full of history." According to Mabel, her daughter needs "a little change" (Mason, "Shiloh" 21). In reality, Mabel and Leroy themselves are the ones who need to change; Norma Jean has already been doing so.

The early negative portrayal of Mabel is a foregrounding of the ultimate failure of Leroy's plan, a failure destroying the reader's expectations with regard to the title of the story. Shiloh is a National Monument, a well-known Civil War site. Yet, all conventional and positive expectations become fragmented, just like Leroy's marriage is, when Shiloh is first alluded to in the story. The depiction of Shiloh as devoid of any historical transcendence (Giannone 556, Brinkmeyer 25) befits the approach of the past in Mason. Several images of destruction and decay appear in the park, that connect Shiloh to the idea of disintegration. The image of the log cabin with bullet holes in it points to the vulnerability of Leroy's ideas and the uselessness of trying to oppose the unstoppable flux of time. Moving on with the times is unavoidable. Moreover, Shiloh, surrounded by tourists, conveys a degraded vision of history, and at the same time is related to the spread of popular culture that has already been referred to. Norma Jean is "picking cake crumbs from the cellophane wrapper, like a fussy bird" (Mason, "Shiloh" 22), as if she was picking the crumbs of her marriage to Leroy, the only thing that is left of this marriage. This connection becomes even more evident when the actual breakage occurs:

> They sit in silence and stare at the cemetery for the Union dead. . . . Norma Jean wads up the cake wrapper and squeezes it tightly in her hand. Without looking at Leroy, she says, I want to leave you. (Mason, "Shiloh" 22)

Norma Jean has been depicted in several instances throughout the story as restraining herself from exploding in anger within the traditionally feminine space of the kitchen, as when she is presented "marching through the kitchen. She is doing goose steps" (Mason, "Shiloh" 15), or when she threatens, "[y]ou ain't seen nothing yet. She starts putting away boxes and cans, slamming cabinet doors" (Mason, "Shiloh" 20). Here in Shiloh, she is finally going to express her formerly repressed anger and unconformity. The self-assertion process she undergoes to reaffirm her identity implies breaking the links with both her mother and her husband, two agents of domination that have been preventing her from being herself, as Norma Jean herself points out: "She won't leave me alone—*you* won't leave me alone" (Mason, "Shiloh" 23).

Significantly enough, the death of this relationship takes place in a cemetery. An image of corruption, that of white sepulchres, used to describe the house of Leroy's drug provider (Mason, "Shiloh" 12), reappears:

> The cemetery, a green slope dotted with white markers, looks like a subdivision site. Leroy is trying to comprehend that his marriage is breaking up, but for some reason he is wondering about white slabs in a graveyard. (Mason, "Shiloh" 23)

The notion that remembering and understanding the past leads to an understanding of self, or that in relation to Mason's fiction, "understanding the past is crucial to achieving perspective and growth" (Brinkmeyer 31) does not appear to be fulfilled here, since Leroy's turning to the past suggests a mere attempt of evading the present, instead of stopping to worry about the past in the present:

> He tries to focus on the fact that 35 hundred soldiers died on the grounds around him. He can only think of that war as a board game with plastic soldiers. (Mason, "Shiloh" 23)

Despite his constant travelling, Leroy's mind has remained static. The focus on the intimate life of a couple is amplified to a much wider historical perspective. Apparently, Leroy is aware of his misconception of history, and so we are told that he "knows he is leaving out a lot. History was always just names and dates to him":

> Leroy almost smiles, as he compares the Confederate's daring attack on the Union camps and Virgil Mathis's raid on the bowling alley. General Grant, drunk and furious, shoved the Southerners back to Corinth, where Mabel and Jet Besley were married years later, when Mabel was still thin and good-looking. The next day, Mabel and Jet visited the battleground, and then Norma Jean was born, and then she married Leroy and they had a baby, which they lost, and now Leroy and Norma Jean are there at the same battle ground. . . . It occurs to him that building a house out of logs is similarly empty—too simple. And the real inner workings of a marriage, like most of the story, have escaped him. Now he sees that building a log house is the dumbest idea he could have had. It was clumsy of him to think Norma Jean would want a log house. (Mason, "Shiloh" 23-24)

Leroy says "I'll have to think" rather than "I'll do something." While he is still thinking, "Norma Jean has moved away and is walking through the cemetery, following a serpentine brick path" (Mason, "Shiloh" 24). Although Norma Jean is seen unfavorably, it should be kept in mind that the narrative voice is focalizing through Leroy's mind. At the end of the story, Leroy, once again presented as a cripple in contrast to Norma Jean's activity, insists on the contrast between his inability to progress and her constant progression:

> Leroy gets up to follow his wife, but his good leg is asleep and his bad leg still hurts. Norma Jean is far away, walking rapidly toward the bluff by the river. (Mason, "Shiloh" 24)

The tone of the closing image turns out to be rather negative, since the sky "is unusually pale—the color of the dust ruffle Mabel made for their bed" (Mason, "Shiloh" 24). Thus, it not only lacks in color, but its color is that of a ruffle for the bed of a sterile, failed marriage, a bed that had been described as a "cooling place" (Mason, "Shiloh" 15).

Leroy and Norma Jean, on the basis of the contrasting attitudes they adopt when redefining their identities in a present that is rapidly modernizing, may be classified following the twofold pattern found in another of Mason's short stories, "Residents and Transients":

> In the wild, there are two kinds of cat populations . . . Residents and transients. Some stay put, in their fixed home ranges, and others are on the move. They don't have real homes. Everybody always thought that the ones who establish the territories are the most successful . . .

> They are the strongest, while the transients are the bums, the losers. . . . The thing is—this is what the scientists are wondering about now—it may be that the transients are the superior ones after all, with the greatest curiosity and most intelligence. They can't decide. (135)

Mason herself explained in an interview with Wendy Smith in 1985 that the characters in "Residents and Transients"

> reflect that tension that's in the culture between hanging onto the past and racing toward the future. . . . [T]here are some people who would just never leave home, because that's where they're meant to be; and others are, well, born to run." (qtd. in White 71)

Mason stated that this was the main theme of *Shiloh and Other Stories*. Norma Jean's name, which not only "was Marilyn Monroe's real name," but which "comes from the Normans. They were invaders," (Mason, "Shiloh" 21) clearly identifies herself as a transient. In contrast, Leroy thinks that becoming a resident will suffice to save his marriage, and so he reminds Norma Jean of his "promise to be home from now on." Yet, Norma Jean confesses that "in some ways, a woman prefers a man who wanders. . . . That sounds crazy, I know" (Mason, "Shiloh" 23), rendering Leroy's suggestion useless.

To conclude, as Leroy and his rig are identified again with birds,

> She saves bread heels for the birds. Leroy watches the birds at the feeder. He notices the peculiar way goldfinches fly past the window. They close their wings, then fall, then spread their wings to catch and lift themselves. He wonders if they close their eyes when they fall. Norma Jean closes her eyes when they are in bed. (Mason, "Shiloh" 15)

the reader is aware that having his eyes closed is what Leroy has been doing until that moment. Whether he will be able to open them and start afresh from now onwards, or if, on the contrary, he will go on ignoring what is happening around him, is held in suspension. It is Leroy himself who recalls the fact that "nobody knows anything . . . The answers are always changing" (Mason, "Shiloh" 13). This is regarded as true in the modern world depicted in "Shiloh," where straightforward oppositions no longer work. Leroy lives looking back to the past instead of looking towards the present and the future. While he tries to obviate the progression of time and insists on sticking to an idealized out-of-date conception of the South, Norma

Jean has been able to redefine herself as the times require her to, a choice that seems to be both more reasonable and profitable than Leroy's.

Notes

1 Mabel "inspects the closets and then the plants, informing Norma Jean when a plant is droopy or yellow" (Mason, "Shiloh" 13), an image that, in my opinion, connects Mabel with decay, death and thus identiry.

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