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BOBBIE ANN MASON'S PORTRAYAL OF MODERN WESTERN KENTUCKY

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In 1982, Bobbie Ann Mason, who was born and reared on a farm near Paducah, Kentucky, published a collection of short stories entitled *Shiloh and Other Stories*. This collection, made up of sixteen pieces published previously in such magazines as *The New Yorker*, *Atlantic Monthly*, *the North American Review*, *the Paris Review*, *Virginia Quarterly Review*, *Vanity Fair*, and *Esquire*, won the PEN/Hemingway Award for First Fiction and was a finalist for the National Book Critics Award, the American Book Award, and the PEN/Faulkner Award. The title story of the collection, "Shiloh," was selected for *Best American Short Stories of 1981*.

Mason's fiction is about the rural and small-town poor of western Kentucky (south of Paducah, not far from Kentucky Lake). Even when Mason's characters are small-town poor, they are only one or two removes from being rural poor, as usually their parents and always their grandparents are such, and this change is symptomatic of the profound demographic, social, and moral changes that have come to western Kentucky, changes that have generally produced confusion, ennui, and alienation, changes that are "paradigmatic of the contemporary South, and to an extent of modern America" (Ryan 294).

Some of the changes that the characters in *Shiloh* experience have to do with the nature of human life, changes brought on by death, disease and aging, not with the changes that modern society has brought; but these changes are not so common, nor so troublesome, in Mason's stories as the changes brought on by a changing society. These changes, as Edwin T. Arnold correctly observes, are brought about by the fact that the present "has effectively displaced, transformed, and cheapened the traditional," and Mason's characters are depicted as they lose their strengths and beliefs and find nothing substantial to replace them (136).

For example, in Mason's stories we see characters, such as Leroy in "Shiloh," who suddenly realize that Kentucky life around them has changed while they, as Edwin in "A New Wave Format" discovers, "have gone through life rather blindly" (216). Leroy sees that "subdivisions are spreading across western Kentucky like an oil slick" (3). It occurs to him that "the farmers who used to gather around the courthouse square 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" (4). Many of the farmers like Bill in "The Ocean" are selling their farms, buying fancy campers, and setting out for Florida. Cleo sells her husband's farm in "Old Things" because it is her way of cheating on him and of getting rid of all reminders of the past. There are a few characters, usually young people who once left the country but who have come back, who fight the loss of farms to K-Marts and subdivisions; for they realize as does Mary Lou in "Residents and Transients" that they need cornfields (122). But all too often, the land has changed before the characters realize what has happened, and in most cases the characters do not really care, although some, such as Dolores in "The Climber," mourn the passing of trees, "cut down in full bud," to make way for workshops for husbands who hope to make a little additional income by building picnic tables" (111).

In addition to changes in the face of western Kentucky as people leave the farm, the people themselves are changing. For the first time, children like Nancy Culpepper, Judy, and Sabrina are going to Murray State and "learning for a fact" that people evolved from animals (261). Mabel in "Shiloh" not only goes to Paducah Community College, staying up late outlining paragraphs and writing compositions, but she attends body-building classes, and, most significantly, discovers that she wants to leave Leroy. Georgeann in "The Retreat" also wants to leave her husband, who is "the cream of creation and all, and he's sweet as can be, but he turns out to be the wrong one . . . " (143). Linda, Waldeen, Sandra, Peggy, and Carolyn not only want to leave their husbands, but they do, supporting themselves by working at J.C. Penney's, Kroger, and K-Mart. For the most part these women are unsettled and do not believe, as their mothers did, that they have to stay with a man just because they married him. "Times are different now," Iris tells Pappy in "Drawing Names." We're just as good as the men" (104).

Not only do the women leave the men, but the men leave the women, sometimes for other women, sometimes to go West as does Tom in "Still Life with Watermelons," leading one character to comment, "This day and time, people just do what they please. They just hit the road" (29). In "Old Things" Linda tells her mother that "people don't have to do what they don't want to as much now as they used to" (88). All of these characters, both men and women, are restless. The fact that we almost never learn just what makes them so restless, except that they all feel that they have missed something, something important, perhaps leads to the charge that "Mason takes us into her characters' new Kentucky homes and then runs a made-for-TV movie. Her people's emotions come across merely as dots on the screen" (Vigderman 345). By the same token, it is not unreasonable to suggest that unhappy moderns often do not know exactly what is wrong. They simply feel at loose ends. Mason portrays this, but makes little or no attempt to explain it -- perhaps because she cannot, perhaps because she does not have to.

In short, the families in western Kentucky, like families all across the nation, have broken up or are breaking up. Again, Mason does not delve into why this is true; it is true and she portrays it. She does, however, mourn the death of the traditional family because she believes that the breakup of a family destroys the individuals in the family. Mary Lou in "The Rookers" voices this idea when she compares the breakup of the family to what her daughter has learned about protons in quantum mechanics at Murray State. She thinks, "If you break up a group the individuals could disappear out of existence" (29). Like protons, individuals don't exist outside the group; they lose their identity, and this is what is happening to the modern Kentuckian. In short, "the loss of place and identity is one of the connecting themes of Bobbie Ann Mason's stories" (Arnold 137).

In most of these stories, it takes a traumatic event of some kind to make the characters see that the land has changed or that they no longer know who they are. In Leroy's case, it is his accident and injury in his rig that make him see that the land has changed, that Norma Jean has changed, and that "in all the years he was on the road he never took time to examine anything. He was always flying past scenery" (2). In "New Wave Format," it is Edwin's fear of losing his young girl friend -- he is forty-three and Sabrina is only twenty -- that makes him understand that while life all around him has changed, "he still feels like the same person, unchanged, that he was twenty years ago" (215). He has skimmed through life, not taking it very seriously, failing to develop real relationships with people. He suddenly realizes that this is why his first two wives left him. Now he really has to make an effort, or he will lose Sabrina.

It is Norma Jean's mother's catching her smoking after twenty years that makes her decide to act on the changes that have occurred in her. "Everything was fine till Mama caught me smoking," she says. "That set something off." In reality, though, while this is the catalyst that jars Norma Jean, she must admit: "No, it wasn't fine. I don't know what I'm saying" (15).

Mason's stories also provide us with insight into how we react to these "changing times." Several of Mason's characters react to the changes in their lives by trying, at least momentarily, to go back. Leroy thinks that he can hold onto his wife if he can go back to a simpler time. He decides to accomplish this by building her a log cabin for which he goes so far as to order the blueprints and to build a miniature out of Lincoln Logs. Mabel, Leroy's mother-in-law, is convinced that if Leroy and Norma Jean will go to Shiloh where she and her husband went on their honeymoon, they can somehow begin their fifteen-year-old marriage anew. So does Leroy. He says to Norma, "You and me could start all over again. Right back at the beginning" (15). It is ironic, fitting, and symbolic that it is at Shiloh that Norma tells him she wants to leave him. By story's end, Leroy knows that he cannot go back as "it occurs to him that building a house of logs is . . . empty -- too simple. . . . Now he sees that building a log house is the dumbest idea he could have had. . . . It was a crazy idea" (16). He realizes that "the real inner workings of a marriage, like most of history, have escaped him" (16). Like many of Mason's characters, however, Leroy is endeared to us because he attempts to deal with the problems brought on by the changes in Norma Jean. In the final analysis he tries to deal with the changes, not fight them. He thinks to himself that "he'll have to think of something else, quickly. He will wad the blueprints into tight balls and fling them into the lake. . . . Then he'll get moving again" (16). Despite the fact that Norma Jean has moved away from him and is "walking through the cemetary, following a serpentine brick path," despite the fact that she is "far away," despite the fact that "the sky is unusually pale," Leroy "tries to hobble toward her" (16). Mason says, "I like to think of my characters as being innocent but full of hope and energy (2)." This is certainly the case with Leroy.

In reaction to her own sense of aging and her daughter's leaving her husband and returning home with two children, Cleo of "Old Things," who has always abhorred old things and the past, symbolically re-embraces the past at the flea market when she buys back a whatnot, made by her husband, that she had sold the moment he was dead. While buying back the whatnot is an attempt to step back in time, it is also symbolic of Cleo's wish and need to escape from the troubling present; for on this whatnot is a train, and

> Cleo looks at the train. . . . For a moment she can see the train gliding silently through the pleasant scene, as quietly as someone dreaming, and she can imagine her family aboard the train as it crosses a fertile valley -- like the place down by the creek that Jake loved -- on its way out West. On the train, her well-behaved sons and their children are looking out the window, and Linda and Bob are driving the train, guiding the cowcatcher down the track, while Tammy and Davey patiently count the telephone poles and watch the passing scenery. Cleo is following unafraid in the caboose, as the train passes through the golden meadow and they all wave at the future and smile perfect smiles. (93)

Although Cleo has said earlier that "there's no use trying to hang onto anything. You just lose it in the end. You might as well just not care" (91), she does care, and her reaction to change is to escape to the past and to dream of the land and the family as it used to be.

Mack and Mary Lou in "The Rookers" are suffering from empty-nest syndrome, and Mack makes several different kinds of attempts to deal with this change in his life. He attempts to read philosophy because he thinks his daughter Judy, who has gone to Murray State, is studying philosophy, but she is taking physics. In the final analysis, however, Mack increasingly withdraws, sending Mary Lou to buy his building supplies and becoming obsessed with calling the weather number on the phone. Like a good number of Mason's characters, Mary Lou has a moment of insight when she realizes that "Mack calls the temperature number because he is afraid to talk on the telephone, and by listening to a recording, he doesn't have to reply. It's his way of pretending that he's involved" (33). He is becoming disconnected from everybody (29). At the same time, a recording about the

weather represents a small degree of certainty that he can find nowhere else.

Georgeann, in "The Retreat," is married to a preacher who chops off the heads of sick chickens because "he believes in the necessity of things" (138). When she finally realizes how she has always felt about him, she tries ineffectually to leave him. At the end of the story, however, Georgeann "crashes down blindly" on the neck of a sick chicken and "feels nothing, only that she has done her duty" (147), just as her husband would have. One can thus assume that the title of the story, "The Retreat," has more than one meaning and that Georgeann h as "retreated" from possible change.

The results of the changes taking place in Mason's western Kentucky are many and varied; and, as Mary Sue in "Residents and Transients" says, these changes make people "jittery." Thus, these shifting relationships are still confusing to characters like Waldeen Murdock in "Graveyard Day," who thinks that a stepfather is "something like a substitute host on a talk show" (173). People feel fragmented. They are in one culture but part of another. While Mason does not advocate a sentimental return to the past, her most satisfying characters are those, such as Nancy Culpepper, in "Nancy Culpepper" and "Lying Daggo," and Sandra, in "The Offering," who live in the present but who find stability in family, place, tradition, and history.

Nancy Culpepper, the most educated of all Mason's women, is the assistant principal of a small private school in Pennsylvania where she lives with her husband, Jack, a free lance photographer, and her son, Robert. While Nancy is truly a modern woman, she is very committed, not to holding onto the past, as Jack sometimes accuses her of being, but to understanding its relationship to her. When she discovers that she is the second Nancy Culpepper, she says, "It was like time-lapse photography. I was standing there looking into the past and the future at the same time . . ." (187-88). She is fascinated to know t hat she is the second Nancy Culpepper, a woman whose wedding photograph reveals "bright eyes . . . fixed on something far away" (187), fixed on the future, the modern Nancy believes, not the past.

Sandra of "Offerings" is another Mason character who is a thoroughly modern woman who has a healthy relationship to the past. She is divorced and loves to drink bourbon-and-coke; but at the same time, she has given up city life to live alone, with eight cats, in a shabby farm house, reminiscent of the one on her grandparents' farm which she can barely remember. She much prefers this life to spending her weekends "watching go-go dancers in smoky bars" in Louisville (53). Sandra is completely in tune with herself and with nature around her, so much so that she is willing, she says, to offer her ducks as a sacrifice to nature. Like Nancy Culpepper, she is one of the few fulfilled women in Mason's world. Sandra finds stability and identity in the modern changing world, not by living in the past but by relating to the past through nature.

Bobbie Ann Mason's central theme is the movement of the modern world into a traditional society and the problems that causes. Her characters are everyday, decent, caring people who are struggling to deal with a world in transition. Mason believes that all of us -- North, South, East, or West -- can identify with them; for, she says, "By and large, we're all dealing with a chaotic new experience in the modern world" (2). Mason's characters enlarge our view of each other and of ourselves as we deal with the problems caused by a rapidly changing world.

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