

Final Written Report

Professional Development Grant

“The Abject Feminine in Ellen Douglas’s *A Lifetime Burning*”

October 2010

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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 her 1982 novel *A Lifetime Burning*, Ellen Douglas deploys persistent images of the abject feminine in order to subvert their patriarchal uses. Her project here is to some degree a direct response to such images in the southern literary tradition, most specifically in Faulkner. In an address on the topic of “Faulkner’s Women” in 1980, Douglas concludes that the “rage and outrage and fear and hatred” in Faulkner’s representations of women “is not expressed against one individual woman, but clearly against women as sexual creatures” (157). She admits wanting “a hand in rewriting, re-inventing the record” that posits women as “vampires” or “very demons of vengeance,” and in resisting the idea that women “can and must be blamed *as women* for just about everything” (154; her emphasis). In Faulkner’s world, she adds, “Women can impinge on the world and on men only through their sexuality” (163). However, such “fantasies of feminine evil,” as Bram Dijkstra labels them, are present from canonical literature (and certainly not merely southern) through popular culture texts like the horror film.

Faulkner commented that, in penning the tale of Ole Miss femme fatale Temple Drake in *Sanctuary*, “I invented the most horrific tale I could imagine” (qtd. in Meriwether 177). I find it significant that readers have used similar language about

Douglas's *A Lifetime Burning*. Eudora Welty calls it "a rare novel [where] the *mystery* of ordinary life . . . is *hair-raisingly* and most satisfactorily present" (qtd. in Speir 30; my emphasis). Susan Millar Williams tells Douglas it is her favorite Douglas book, adding, "And I think that's because it *scared me to death* when I read it. It is really one of the most disturbing novels that I've ever encountered" (195; my emphasis). I am arguing that the source of such responses lies in her rewriting of the abject feminine (so central to horror) rooted in images of the female body and female sexuality. Using feminist psychoanalytic theory (particularly theories central to studies of film noir and horror film, and, of course, Julia Kristeva's work on abjection), I analyze the circulation and recuperation of such images in this novel.

Douglas's text seems at first to replicate such imagery, to offer yet another story in which female desire is an obstacle, a problem to be solved; in which the womb is devouring and female reproduction horrific; in which women are both the bleeding wound of a castrated victim and, at the same time, a knife-wielding castrating figure intent upon destroying male subjectivity and sexuality. The protagonist, Corinne, is a post-menopausal woman whose body itself is horrific in part because the evidence of its aging, of its decay, summons up the fragility of the symbolic order that reads her body as horrific in its overt debt to nature. That aging, and, more significantly, desiring female body is what the symbolic must "radically exclude," and yet, as Kristeva insists, "from its place of banishment, the abject does not cease challenging its master" (2). The disturbing images Corinne offers of herself are ultimately revealed as IMAGES, self-created and yet culturally constructed; internalized and yet set forth here for examination and analysis--and all in a text that endlessly undermines its own authority.

### C. Brief Review of Professional Enhancement Opportunity

I attended the American Literature Association conference on Fiction, and presented my paper there. I drove from Russellville to Little Rock and flew from there on October 7, 2010, and returned on October 10.

#### D. Summary of Experiences

My primary teaching area within literature is American. This conference was sponsored by the American Literature Association, which is the primary organization specific to my field. Since this conference was limited to fiction, that made it even more specific to my scholarly work, which is all on fiction. This paper is part of a larger ongoing scholarly work, and the feedback I received will be quite helpful in furthering that project. 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.

#### E. Conclusions and Recommendations

I am working on a publishable version of this essay. Without the funds I received from the ATU Professional Grant, I would not have been able to attend the conference and progress toward publishing this essay.