

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-old 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.