Shiloh Study Guide

Shiloh by Bobbie Ann Mason

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Introduction

After appearing initially in the *New Yorker* magazine in 1982, Bobbie Ann Mason's story "Shiloh" became the title story in her first collection of fiction, *Shiloh and Other Stories,* also published in 1982. The volume was well-received by critics and earned nominations for a National Book Critics Circle Award, an American Book Award, and a PEN/Faulkner Award. Mason also won the 1983 Ernest Hemingway Foundation Award for best first fiction. "Shiloh" has been widely anthologized in literature texts, and critics have demonstrated an ongoing interest in the story.

Readers and critics admire "Shiloh" for the author's spare, unadorned style and her ear for rural Southern speech patterns. Set in western Kentucky, "Shiloh" is the story of a disabled truck driver, Leroy Moffitt, and his wife, Norma Jean. Like Mason's other fictional characters, the Moffitts are rural, working-class Southerners who are affected by the changing culture in which they live. Norma Jean, Leroy, and Mabel Beasley-Norma Jean's mother-are locked in a struggle over the Moffitts' marriage, a struggle that culminates at the Shiloh Civil War battlefield Through this story, Mason addresses the theme of individual identity in a time of social change. As the landscape of rural Kentucky changes, so do the cultural forces exerting pressure on the Moffitts' marriage.

Author Biography

Bobbie Ann Mason was born on May 1, 1940, and grew up on a farm in western Kentucky outside the small town of Mayfield. She attended Mayfield High School and wrote for the school newspaper, and after graduation she went to the University of Kentucky.

Her first job out of college was writing for fan magazines in New York City. Eventually, she earned a master's degree and then a doctorate before becoming a part-time college journalism professor. Before she began writing fiction, she published two books of nonfiction, one on the writer Vladimir Nabokov and the other titled *The Girl Sleuth. A Feminist Guide to the Bobbsey Twins, Nancy Drew, and their Sisters.*

Mason had nineteen stones rejected by the *New Yorker* magazine before her story "Offerings" was accepted. Mason models her characters on people she sees around her in rural Kentucky. Mayfield, like her fictional settings, is a landscape undergoing transition. In a *Time* review of *Shiloh and Other Stories,* R. Z. Sheppard coined the term "ruburb" to describe her settings. A ruburb is a place that is no longer rural but not yet suburban, a place where subdivisions of new houses pop up amongst corn fields.

In a 1985 interview with Lila Havens, Mason said, "I am generally more interested in the cultural effects on men than I am the women characters in my stories because women are in an incredible position right now. . . . I'in interested in these *men* who are immersed in a culture where they had a certain role, and now all of a sudden these women are going off and going to school, getting strange jobs. They're walking out on the men and the men don't know what to do. I feel there's a lot of pathos in that." Mason drew on this interest in her creation of Leroy Moffitt.

Mason has continued to produce a steady stream of well-received literature since her first book of fiction. Her work includes the novel *In Country,* a story about a Kentucky teenager's search for her father who was killed in Vietnam, and her uncle who has been left crippled and haunted by the war. The novel was made into a movie in 1989 starring Bruce Willis and Emily Lloyd. Mason's other works include the novel *Spence + Lilac* (1988) and *Feather Crowns* (1993). She has also written another collection of short stories, *Love Life,* published in 1989.

Plot Summary

"Shiloh" is told from the point of View of Leroy Moffitt, a recently disabled truck driver. As the story opens, Leroy is watching his wife, Norma Jean, lift weights. Leroy was injured in a trucking accident; now he stays at home, smokes marijuana, and makes things from craft kits. It is unclear whether Leroy will ever return to work as a truck driver. From one of his craft kits Leroy has built a model log cabin. Now he wants to build a real log cabin for his wife. Norma Jean, however, is not interested in a log cabin. She works at a Rexall drugstore and wants to improve her mind and body. Consequently, she goes from a weight-lifting class to an adult education composition class. She also spends time learning songs on the organ Leroy bought her for Christmas. She wants Leroy to find a job; having him home all the time makes her uncomfortable

Norma Jean's mother, Mabel Beasley, frequently visits Leroy and Norma Jean. On one visit she becomes enraged when she discovers Norma Jean smoking a cigarette. Norma Jean is mortified that her mother has found out that she smokes and becomes increasingly unhappy with her life from this point on. Mabel repeatedly tells the Moffitts about how she and her late husband, Jet, spent their honeymoon at Shiloh, a Civil War battlefield. She can see that Leroy and Norma Jean are having problems in their marriage and nags them about taking a trip to Shiloh. She believes that such a trip will solve their problems.

Through flashbacks in the story, it is revealed that Leroy was rarely home while he was a trucker. He often took speed while he drove, and he continues to smoke marijuana now that he is disabled. The couple got married because Norma Jean was pregnant. They had a baby named Randy who died of sudden infant death syndrome in the back seat of the Moffitts' car, while his parents watched a movie at a drive-in. Leroy and Norma Jean never discuss Randy's death, though Leroy recalls the baby's death and the trip to the hospital. When Mabel makes a comment to Norma Jean about a baby who is mauled by a dachshund because the baby's mother was negligent, Norma Jean knows that her mother is blaming her for Randy's death.

Leroy continues to pester Norma Jean about building a log cabin for her. Mabel continues to pester Norma Jean and Leroy about going to Shiloh. When Leroy discovers that there is a log cabin at Shiloh, he decides to take Norma Jean there. When they arrive at the battleground, it is not what either of them has expected. They have a picnic lunch at the cemetery for the Union dead, and Norma Jean tells Leroy she wants to leave him. Leroy cannot seem to comprehend that his marriage is falling apart. He realizes that he understands very little about his marriage. In the story's last scene, Norma Jean is walking away from him down a "serpentine brick path." Leroy tries to follow, but his leg hurts him. Norma Jean turns back to him and waves her arms from where she stands on a bluff overlooking the Tennessee River. Leroy cannot understand what her wave means.

Summary

Shiloh is a story told in the third person about a young man, Leroy Moffitt. The man is 34 years old at the time of this story. The story begins with his wife, Norma Jean, lifting weights. Leroy is a truck driver, who has injured his leg in an accident while on the road. He is now home recovering. He is afraid to go back to work as a trucker and decides not to. While he decides what he wants to do next, he starts building models and other crafts. He decides that he wants to build a real log cabin.

Norma Jean simply tells Leroy that they will not allow log cabins in the new subdivisions. Norma Jean works at a cosmetic counter and knows all about makeup. He thinks about oil. He has been feeling more in love with her since he has been home. He does not know how she feels. They had a child who died as an infant. Leroy wonders whether they should finally talk about it.

Leroy buys Norma an organ for Christmas. He listens to her play, and after fifteen years on the road, he has come to settle with her. The town has changed in the last fifteen years. He buys pot from a son of someone who was two years ahead of him in school. Then the story goes on to tell us that he married Norma Jean when they were eighteen. Their child was born a few months later. He died from SIDS in the backseat of the car, while Leroy and Norma Jean were at a drive-in.

Norma Jean's mother, Mabel, is introduced. She is always picking at Norma Jean telling her what to do. They begin talking, and Leroy tells her of his plan to build the log cabin. Norma Jean gets angry and tells him that he will not. He needs to find a job. Mabel suggests that they go to Shiloh. Shiloh is a Civil War battleground in Tennessee. They discuss what he can do for a living. He says that he wants to build the house. Norma Jean tells him that she doesn't want to live in a log cabin and then leaves.

Before his accident, Leroy used to come home, watch TV and eat with Norma Jean. Now, he sees her in a new light. He observes her more closely than before. He realizes that Norma Jean closes her eyes when they are in bed.

One day, Leroy goes for a ride around town. He decides that Norma Jean is right. There are not any log homes in the new subdivisions. He comes home to see her crying, because her mother has finally caught her smoking. Leroy convinces her to play music to calm herself down. As she does, he lights up a joint. He asks her what she thinks again about the idea of him selling his truck and building the cabin. He really wants to know what she thinks about them. She tells him not to start that again.

Leroy thinks about how he used to tell hitchhikers about his life. Suddenly, he feels like he should tell Norma Jean about his life, as if she's forgotten. The next day, Mabel stops by and tells the couple about the dachshund that killed the baby while the mother was in the other room. The woman was charged with neglect. Norma Jean gets upset, because she believes that her mother is just trying to upset her and insinuate that their baby died of neglect.

Leroy gets a beer and shares it with Norma Jean. They sit watching the birds, and then, Leroy plays with the log cabin plans. It is at this point that Leroy realizes that something is happening with his wife. She is taking a composition class at the community college. While both are working on their different projects, Leroy realizes that he is going to lose her.

Leroy confides in Mabel about what is going on with him and Norma Jean. She suggests that he take her to Shiloh. When Norma Jean comes in from the grocery store, Leroy asks her to go with him to Shiloh. Norma Jean gets mad at both her mother and Leroy. Mabel tells Leroy that all she needs is a little change.

Leroy is trying to get Norma Jean to go to Shiloh with him. She is reading a book and telling him what both of their names mean. She finally agrees to go if he will stop staring at her.

That Sunday, they pack a picnic and head to Shiloh. They do not have much to talk about. They spend the day touring the battlefield, looking at different monuments. When they sit down to eat their picnic, Leroy tries to make small talk. Norma Jean finally tells him that she wants to leave him. He tells her that he wants to start over. She says that they had started over already, and this is how it turned out.

Leroy is trying to figure out what went wrong. He thinks about the battlefield as being her parent's special place. He then thinks about them losing their child. He tries to think of ways to keep Norma Jean. The story ends with Norma Jean overlooking the Tennessee River on a bluff, waving her arms.

Analysis

This story is about the life of a couple that does not know how to communicate. It is about a tragedy, and how it affects the couple even fifteen years later. It is also about how two people grow apart, as they get older, because neither knows how to communicate. It is about a man who is trying to regain control of his life, but who is not sure of how to do it. It's also about a woman who is trying to evolve, but she realizes that in order to do that, she has to face the fact that she's outgrown her own marriage.

Communication is the key to keeping any relationship going. It seems that, while he was away on his trips and not spending much time at home, there was no reason for communication. When he gets back for good, there is no communication between the two. There is a real sorrow that seems to have been there since the night that their son died. Leroy does not know how to talk to his wife about it, but truly wants to. He wants to know how she feels and what she feels. However, he's too hesitant and scared to ask. It seems as if he knows that they are having issues, even while the both of them are civil.

The way the story is written, it seems as if the two are acquaintances, not really knowing the other one. The awkwardness is present throughout the story. These are two very different people, void of any interests to hold them together. Norma Jean

seems to be going through some sort of personal crisis, which leads her to explore avenues that she has never taken before. She is trying to better herself.

Leroy, on the other hand, is just the opposite. He is smoking marijuana and not working. This is frustrating in itself to Norma Jean. Then, he talks about wanting to build a house, as if that will be the solution to all their problems. In addition, Norma Jean's mother, Mabel, is very controlling, causing Norma Jean to feel quite suffocated. She thinks about all the tragedy, her mother's control, and her husband throughout the story. Her feelings are never really clearly portrayed. They are only implied by experiences through Leroy's eyes.

Mabel insisting that they go to Shiloh is significant. She wants her daughter to be happy and sees that she is not. She figures that Shiloh had made her so happy, it would do the same for her daughter. There is also the hint that she believes it will save her daughter's marriage.

The story ends oddly. Norma Jean has told Leroy that she wants to leave him. Then, she goes to the rivers edge. Perhaps she is waving because she is free and happy or perhaps it is because she is planning to commit suicide. It is unclear whether she feels that depressed or whether she feels finally free to move on with her life.

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Characters

Mabel Beasley

Mabel Beasley is Norma Jean's mother and Leroy's mother-in-law. She lives near the Moffitts and often comes over to their house. She frequently enters without knocking and one day surprises

Norma Jean and catches her smoking a cigarette. Mabel was displeased when Leroy got Norma Jean pregnant and saw the death of their son as a sort of divine retribution. She lets Norma Jean know that she blames her for the baby's death by telling her a story about a baby who died because of a negligent mother. When she was a bride, Mabel and her husband visited the Shiloh battlefield. She now wants Leroy and Norma Jean to take a trip to Shiloh in hopes that the visit will help them fix the problems in their marriage.

Stevie Hamilton

Stevie Hamilton is the teenaged son of a prominent doctor in Leroy and Norma Jean's town. He is also a drug pusher who supplies Leroy with drugs. When Leroy obtains marijuana from him, the occasion prompts him to reminisce about his own lost son, who would have been about Stevie's age.

Leroy Moffitt

Leroy Moffitt is a disabled trucker living with his wife, Norma Jean, in western Kentucky. The story is told from Leroy's point of view; therefore, readers learn only what he is thinking. After his truck accident, Leroy stays at home, smokes marijuana, and makes things from craft kits. Although Leroy gets along with his mother-in-law by joking with her, he feels that "Mabel has never really forgiven him for disgracing her by getting Norma Jean pregnant."

Leroy knows that his marriage is failing, even if he is slow to accept it. He also realizes that Norma Jean is changing, just as rural Kentucky is changing, but he does not know how to cope with either change. Mostly, he wants to return to how things were in the beginning with Norma Jean, and his plan to build a log cabin is indicative of his tendency to live in the past rather than to look toward the future. Although Leroy loves Norma Jean, be does not know what she thinks about him, about their marriage, or about the death of their infant son, Randy. Mason told Lila Havens in an interview that she is interested in male characters in the midst of cultural change. She stated, "The men don't know what to do." Leroy is such a man. "Nobody knows anything," Leroy thinks. "The answers are always changing."

Norma Jean Moffitt

Norma Jean Moffitt lives in rural western Kentucky with her husband, Leroy Moffitt, who has recently been injured in a trucking accident. She works at a Rexall drugstore, likes to lift weights, play the organ, and cook interesting meals. After many years of seeing her husband so seldom, she is uncomfortable having him home all the time. Norma Jean's efforts at self-improvement demonstrate that she is a forward-looking person who is doing her best to adapt to change.

Norma Jean grows increasingly unhappy with her marriage as the story unfolds. She is not interested in the log cabin that her husband wants to build for her, and she is tired of her mother's meddlesome attitude towards her marriage. When she agrees to visit Shiloh, she finally tells Leroy that she wants to leave him. Her ambiguous gesture at the end of the story serves to further confuse her husband, who cannot accept her for who she is

Randy Moffitt

Randy Moffitt was the Infant son of Norma Jean and Leroy. He died of sudden infant death syndrome while asleep at a drive-in theater with his mother and father. At the time the story takes place, Randy has been dead for fifteen years.

Social Concerns And Themes

Typical of realistic writing generally, Mason's first collection of short stories is strongly oriented toward documenting the social lives of her characters. In Mason's version of life in western Kentucky, these concerns are predominantly economic and familial.

On the one hand, Mason demonstrates at great length the disjunction between the limited horizons of predominantly rural Kentucky life and the world of television and consumer culture with which it collides. This generates one of Mason's often repeated themes, that of the person who desires to flee a constraining environment. On the other hand, she also asserts the powerful pull of familial connections upon these often frustrated individuals.

The emotional world of Mason's fiction is one that is governed frequently by disappointment, compromise, divorce, and diminished expectations. This, however, is principally true of those figures who grew up under the shadow of the end of provincial life and the arrival of mainstream America in western Kentucky. Typically, they have factory jobs in an increasingly threatened industrial base, or they pursue a living on the low-paying fringes of commercial life. The older generation, frequently rural and seemingly innocent of or indifferent to the contemporary world, is the source of familial affiliations, and many of Mason's female characters find themselves torn between the roles of daughter and independent woman in a transformed social world.

The female characters are also usually the focus of the narration, and her work is in this respect characteristic of recent women's fiction in America. But what is perhaps distinctive about Mason's fiction is her singular preoccupation with popular culture. Her frequent references to television programs, popular music, brand names, and fads is used to suggest the limitations of the characters she explores, but it is also a means of demonstrating the emotional sophistication of the responses and the wit of her characters, who exploit this range of references often as an ironic counterpoint to and commentary upon their lives.

Techniques

Mason's fiction has been described by one reviewer as "shopping mall realism," and one of its most conspicuous achievements is its overall appearance of artlessness. This avoidance of obvious stylization is consistent with the aspiration of a realistic writer to present fiction as an accurate and faithful transcription of the real world, not as an elaborate and contrived story. To substantiate this claim to authenticity, Mason dwells upon the circumstantial details of the experience she describes, and this is particularly true of her use of popular culture. In contrast to those writers who depend upon references to other literary works to give their texts resonance, Mason relies upon popular culture as source of many of her allusions. For example, Norma Jean of "Shiloh," as the narrator notes, bears the real first names of Marilyn Monroe.

Shiloh and Other Stories belongs to the literary tradition of the related short story series. James Joyce'sDubliners (1914) is a good example of such a text, but much closer to Mason is Ernest Hemingway's first book of short stories, In Our Time (1925). With respect to her contemporaries, Mason is squarely within the tradition of recent American minimalist writing, and one might compare Shiloh and Other Stories with the similar collection by Raymond Carver, Cathedral (1983).

Themes

The American Dream

For most people, the American Dream is the belief that if one works hard and long enough, one will achieve financial and emotional security. With his accident, however, Leroy is confronted with the truth: he lives in a rented home, he has no child, and his wife has lost interest in him. He attempts to resurrect his idea of the American Dream by making plans to build a log cabin. However, even this dream evaporates as his wife tells him that she wants to leave him. Norma Jean also buys into the American Dream but lives an empty life. She works at a drug store and is confronted with cosmetics and beauty magazines promising to change her life. She lifts weights and writes compositions. She cooks exotic food and plays the organ. She makes lists of things Leroy can do. In spite of her dreams and hard work, however, she too finds the American Dream elusive.

Change and Transformation

In "Shiloh," Leroy and Norma Jean are victims of rapid social change. Subdivisions and shopping malls are quickly changing their formerly rural Kentucky environment. Leroy "cruises the new subdivisions, feeling like a criminal rehearsing for a robbery. . . . All the houses look grand and complicated. They depress him." Leroy resists change, looking backward to an earlier time. He wants to build a log cabin-a traditional dwelling. Furthermore, he wants to start his marriage over again. "You and me could start allover again," he tells Norma Jean. "Right back at the beginning." Norma Jean, however, has no desire to go back to the 'beginning. She attempts to transform herself in the face of change. Her weightlifting, adult education classes, and exotic cooking are symptomatic of her desire for transformation. She dismisses Leroy's notion of a log cabin; the subdivisions are more to her liking. Leroy embraces tradition, but Norma Jean rejects It. "You ain't seen nothing yet," Norma Jean says to her mother. When she tells Leroy she wants to leave him, she rejects not only Leroy but also the tradition of marriage.

Identity and the Search for Self

Closely related to social change and transformation is the search for new identities by the characters of "Shiloh." Until his accident, Leroy had identified himself with his big rig, which now sits useless in his yard. Now Leroy sits in his house and makes needlepoint pillows. He searches for some way to reestablish himself as the head of the household and finally settles on the idea of building a log cabin. Norma Jean's search for self emerges in her attempts at self-improvement. When she married at eighteen, she had imagined herself as a housewife and mother. With the death of her child and the disability of her husband, however, she finds that she needs a new identity. Norma Jean's movement from one self-improvement project to another suggests that she is not

certain about the self she is trying to uncover. During her life, her Identity has been defined by her relationship first to her mother and then to Leroy. Although she is uncertain of the Identity she wants to assume, she knows that she can no longer allow her mother and Leroy to define her. In response to Leroy's assertion that they could start all over again, she replies, "She won't leave me *alone--you* won't leave me alone." She adds: "I feel eighteen again. I can't face that all over again."

Gender Roles

At least part of the identity crisis that Leroy and Norma Jean face can be attributed to their reversal of traditional gender roles. When Leroy shows Mabel his needlepoint pillow cover, she responds, "That's what a woman would do." Now that Leroy can no longer work, Norma Jean holds down the role of primary breadwinner for the family. Her interest in building her pectoral muscles is also a traditional male preoccupation. Norma Jean points out to Leroy that his name means "the king." However, when Leroy asks, "Am I still the king around here?" Norma Jean responds by flexing her biceps and feeling them for hardness. The term "flexing one's muscles" is often used metaphorically to describe someone who is trying to exert ills or her power in a situation. In this case, Norma Jean is getting ready to assert her independence. In the final reversal of the story, it is Norma Jean who drives the car when she and Leroy go to Shiloh. Leroy, the long-distance truck driver, sits in the passenger seat as his wife drives him to the site of the Confederate defeat.

Death

The theme of death weaves its way through the text of "Shiloh." In the background is the death of the infant Randy, the only fruit of the union between Leroy and Norma Jean. Their way of life in rural Kentucky is also dying, buried beneath subdivisions and shopping malls. The critical scene in the story-the breakup (or death) of Leroy and Norma Jean's marriage--takes place in the Union cemetery at the Shiloh battlefield As Norma Jean walks away from Leroy after telling him that she wants to leave him, Leroy "tries to focus on the fact that thirty-five hundred soldiers died on the grounds around him." Each of the themes discussed above arrives at a kind of death: the death of traditional culture, the death of the American Dream, the death of old selves, identities, and roles, and, finally, the death of the Moffitts' marriage.

Style

Point of View

Although a number of critics see "Shiloh" as a feminist saga of a woman flexing her muscles and taking flight, "Shiloh" is really Leroy's story. The story is told entirely from his point of view. Point of View, sometimes called narrative perspective, is the term used to describe the way in which the Writer presents the material of a story to the reader. "Shiloh" is told from a third-person, limited point of view. That is, readers see only what Leroy sees and hear only what Leroy hears. In addition, because the story is told from Leroy's point of view, readers are privy to Leroy's thoughts and memories, but not to Norma Jean's or to her mother's. Because of this, readers' reactions to the others in the story are conditioned by Leroy's perspective.

Narrative

The term "narrative" relates to how events unfold in a story. A narrative can be arranged chronologically, in which the events that occur first are depicted first, or according to any number of plans that the writer might want to follow. The narrative of "Shiloh" is in present tense, which gives readers the sense that the story is unfolding before their eyes. In addition, although the overall narration moves from an earlier point in time to a later point in time, there are flashbacks embedded in the story. Sometimes an event or thought in the present will trigger a memory for Leroy, and this is how readers learn about the Moffitts' past. For example, when Leroy buys marijuana from Stevie Hamilton, he reflects that his infant son, Randy, would have been about Stevie's age had he lived. This thought leads to the memory of the night of Randy's death.

Setting

The setting of a story includes not only the geographical location in which the story is set but the time period of the story as well. The setting can also include the occupations of the characters and their religious, moral, emotional, and social environments. In "Shiloh," the geographic setting is western Kentucky as *it* existed in the early 1980s, when the story was written. In addition, Mason creates a world of working-class, marginally educated characters In an *interview* with Lila Havens, Mason stated, "My characters are members of the shopping mall generation." These characters inhabit a world *in* transition. In "Shiloh," the old culture of rural Kentucky is being replaced by the suburban, consumer-oriented culture of late twentieth-century America. In addition to the contemporary setting of western Kentucky, Mason also refers to an earlier time in the title of the story and in the placement of its climactic scene. These references to Shiloh invoke the Civil War and the death of the Old South. Placing the breakup of the Moffitts' marriage in the Shiloh battlefield focuses readers' attention on the civil war between Norma Jean and Leroy and the birth of the New South.

Symbols and Imagery

The terms symbol and image are closely related but not Identical in meaning. In literature, a symbol is an object that stands for something else, usually an abstract idea. An image is a concrete picture and can function as a symbol. Often a writer will use repeated, similar images to give them symbolic meaning. In a short article in *The Explicator,* Stewart Cooke demonstrates the uses of imagery in "Shiloh." For example, Leroy's wrecked truck, sitting in the yard while Leroy sits in the house, is a symbol for the disabled Leroy himself. In addition, however, Mason describes the truck with this image: "It sits *in* the backyard, like a gigantic bird that has flown home to roost." A bit later, she describes the way Norma Jean picks at cake crumbs "like a fussy bird." Leroy thinks about the way Norma Jean makes love as he watches birds at the feeder. Finally, in the last scene, Norma Jean stands waving her arms, as *if* she is about to take flight. As Cooke points out, through the use of bird imagery, Mason warns us that Norma Jean is about to leave Leroy, or, *in* the popular expression, "fly the coop."

Of course, the most obvious symbol in the story is Shiloh itself, a battlefield on which thousands of soldiers died; *it* becomes the final battlefield of the Moffitts' marriage. As Robert H. Brinkmeyer, Jr., points out, "In the literature of the Southern renaissance Civil War battlefields and Confederate graveyards are usually extremely significant, often initiating profound meditation and interior probings."

He suggests that Mason's story provides "one of the clearest statements of the contemporary loss of historical vision that was once so significant to the Southern mind." The significance of the Shiloh battlefield is lost on Leroy and Norma; they know *it* only as the spot where Mabel and Jet Beasley spent their honeymoon. Norma Jean and Leroy skirmish amidst the graves of fallen soldiers, yet Leroy falls to recognize the irony of the Moffitt civil war being played out on the site of so brutal a Civil War battle. He admits that he *"is* leaving out the *insides* of history." Consequently, Just as he is unable to understand the significance of the battlefield, he is unable to understand the significance of this moment in his marriage.

Historical Context

Virtually every reviewer of "Shiloh" notes that the story is set in rural western Kentucky, a location undergoing rapid cultural change. This is the Kentucky in which Mason herself grew up. As a result, she is able to create believable characters caught in the transiti0n between the old, pastoral, rural world of farms and close-knit communities and the modern, anonymous, suburban world of shopping malls and fast-food restaurants. In "Shiloh," for example, Leroy did not notice the change in his hometown while he was on the road as a trucker. However, now that Leroy has come home to stay, "he notices how much the town has changed. Subdivisions are spreading across western Kentucky like an oil slick."

Some of these changes are noticeable from demographic information about the area. For example, in 1980, 73 percent of western Kentucky's residents had completed grammar school, but by 1990, the figure had jumped to 84 percent. This statistic is reflected in Mason's story: Leroy and Norma Jean had little formal education, but Norma Jean comes to realize the value of school and begins taking adult education classes. Similarly, in 1980 only 11 percent of Kentuckians had completed at least one year of college. By 1990, over 19 percent had. Other statistics *point* to shifting cultural patterns in formerly rural Kentucky. In 1985, Graves County (where Mason grew up) per capita income was $10,900, but by 1995 this figure had risen to $18,900. Out of 14,500 homes in the county, 42 percent have been built since the 1970s.

Socially, Leroy and Norma Jean are working-class white people caught in a time of diminishing expectations. When Leroy claims that he plans on building a log cabin for them, Norma Jean responds, "Like *heck* you are You'll have to find a job first. Nobody can afford to build now." In the early years of Ronald Reagan's presidency, a severe recession gripped the United States. High interest rates, double-digit inflation, and high unemployment squeezed the working classes, while many wealthy Americans reaped the benefits of Reagan' s system of "trickle-down economics." In 1982, unemployment was 10.8 percent-the highest since the Great Depression-and the number of Americans living below the poverty line was the highest in seventeen years. Despite this, the stock market set record highs and traded record numbers of shares.

These economic trends correlate with other social trends, like the rising divorce rate, which peaked in 1981 at 5.3 per 1,000 marriages, as more and more women (like Norma Jean) became financially independent. In 1966, around the time the Moffitts were married, the divorce rate was 2.5 per 1,000 marriages. Additionally, the average length for all first marriages that end in divorce is 11 years, and the average age at divorce for men is 35, for women the average age 1S 33. These figures closely correspond with the Moffitts' situation. Mason put a human face on statistics in creating the characters of Leroy and Norma Jean.

Mason herself has commented many times on her concern with working-class people. In her interview with Lila Havens, she noted, "I'in constantly preoccupied with the class struggle and I'in exploring various kinds of culture shock-people moving from one class

to another, people being threatened by other people's ways and values-and the way those attitudes come into play with each other, especially when people do leave home or when the outside world comes prancing in via the television. "

Critical Overview

Mason's story "Shiloh" became the title story in her first collection of fiction, *Shiloh and Other Stories,* published in 1982. The volume was well received by critics and earned nominations for a National Book Critics Circle Award, an American Book Award, and a PEN/Faulkner Award. Mason also won the 1983 Ernest Hemingway Foundation Award for best first fiction. "Shiloh" has been widely anthologized in literature texts, and critics have demonstrated an ongoing interest in the story.

In a review of *Shiloh and Other Stories* in *Newsweek,* for example, Gene Lyons compared Mason to Arkansas novelist Charles Portis, best known as the author of *True Grit,* for her simple, straightforward prose. In another review in *The New Republic,* noted novelist and short story writer Anne Tyler praised Mason as "a full-fledged master of the short story." She also wrote that although *Shiloh and Other Stories* was Mason's first book of fiction, "there is nothing unformed or merely promising about her."

Shiloh and Other Stories was not without its detractors, however. The most common negative comments concerned the characters' lack of development in the stories. Patricia Vigdennan, writing in *The Nation,* suggested that the stories end with "a closeness that seems tacked on." She also charged 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." In addition, some early reviewers, while lavish in their praise, nonetheless faulted Mason for the similarity of her stories. Robert Towers in *The New York Review of Books* wrote that "individually effective as they are, there is a degree of sameness to the collection."

Beyond reviews of her book printed in the months after Its publication, Mason's work has attracted significant scholarly and critical attention. In addition, current Criticism is moving in creative and innovative directions. For example, Hal Blythe and Charlie Sweet in an article written for *Studies in Short Fiction,* have attempted to connect Leroy with the mythical Fisher King of the Grail legend. Other critics have concentrated on close readings of "Shiloh." Stewart Cooke examines the uses of bird imagery, connecting Leroy to a large roosting bird and Norma Jean to a bird about to take flight.

Mason has expressed some ambivalence toward feminist examinations of her work. As she commented in an interview with Lila Havens, she is more interested in the changes her male characters undergo. Nonetheless, in a 1989 article for *The Southern Literary Journal,* G. O. Morphew examined Mason's female characters and concluded that "the down-home feminists of these stories do not want what their city cousins want: equal legal and political rights, equal access to careers, equal pay, government support of child care, and so on. Mason's women simply want breathing space in their relationships with their men."

Because so many of Mason's stories concern characters caught up in cultural change, some literary critics have focused on this theme in Mason's work. Albert Wilhelm, a critic who has written widely on Mason's stories, studied this in an essay for *The Midwest*

Quarterly. William views the journey to Shiloh as a rite of passage in which the characters move from an old culture to a newly emerging one. In an essay in *The Southern Literary Journal,* William wrote that "culture shock and its jarring effects on an individual's sense of identity" is the theme that" dominates the sixteen pieces in *Shiloh and Other Stories.*

Finally, Mason has been identified as a minimalist-that is, a writer who creates lean, focused prose filled with concrete details. Because of this categorization, her work has been compared and contrasted with that of Raymond Carver, Charles Portis, and Ann Beattie. Barbara Henning undertakes such a study in her essay in *Modem Fiction Studies.* Henning detailed the elements of Mason's work. She argued that both Mason's and Carver's characters "have managed to survive Without protesting in a world with reduced economic and emotional possibilities. Their anxieties and disappointments are instead displaced through drug and alcohol use and through an even more deadening activity: a steady focus on the random details of everyday life."

Criticism

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Critical Essay #1

In the following essay, Mason discusses the evolutionary process of writing "Shiloh" as a story that revealed itself to her slowly. She cautions that although the destination of Shiloh may have symbolic overtones, it is integral to the story and should not be separated from its context in any analysis.

I have been pleased and very surprised by the popularity of my story "Shiloh." I could not have imagined when I wrote It that It would be widely anthologized and that students would be discussing it in class. I did not think that far ahead. I couldn't, if I expected to keep my attention on what was unfolding in the story.

In trying to recall how this story came about, I can share with you something of the writing process. As students, you read a finished work, and you try to read it as fully as possible. But from the writer's point of view, during the writing itself, that finished work is far from realized. The writer can only start with a blank page and a sense of wonder. The writer can't guarantee that the story she writes will match the one in her mind. Fiction has a way of happening when you are making other plans.

When I began this story, I had been thinking about two minor characters in another story, a pm named C. W. and Betty. I wondered if I could get closer to C. W and Betty by writing a story about them. I changed their names to Leroy and Norma Jean. I did not know what to expect. I kept thinking about something I had overheard someone say to a coworker, "It's amazing that I have strong feet, coming from two parents that never had strong feet at all."

These were the two inspirations for my story. These two bits did not seem to be anything to build a story on. But I like to start with something that strikes my fancy and then see where It goes. Almost immediately, I wrote the first sentence, "Leroy Moffitt's wife, Norma Jean, is working on her pectorals." Now where was this going? I let that scene go on for a bit, to see if anything interesting would happen. Then I wondered, who are they?

It came to me: Leroy is a truck driver.

I invented this. I made it up. It felt scary, as if! were going to start driving a truck myself. What did I know about driving a truck? Nothing. I wondered what I could do with these characters if I didn't know anything about Leroy's occupation. Should I go out and do research? It occurred to me that maybe he had an accident and was homebound now. Now I was off the hook, and I had found a new direction for the story. The story is not about driving a truck, it's about what happens when Leroy comes home from the road. I started to sense that this story was about a marriage. I kept going, begging my imagination to carry me through. I wondered how Norma Jean spent her time. The Rexall drugstore came to mind, because I had worked in a Rexall at the soda fountain when I was in high school. I wondered what happened to Leroy and Norma Jean in high school. I thought of the baby. The loss of their child, years ago, had defined their

marriage. This surprised me. It set the tone for what was to follow. Now that Leroy is home again, they are thrown together again, as 1£ they were starting over. Now the changes around them will appear in sharp focus, and they will have to deal with how they have changed inside.

And so I kept on in this way, taking wrong turns at times, and meandering for long stretches that had to be cut out because they added little interest, direction, or depth to the story. Then a third main character, Norma Jean's mother, whose personality casts a light on the whole story, entered the scene. Mabel is a strong force in Norma Jean's life, especially with Leroy away from home so much. The characters are talking along, when all of a sudden, Mabel suggests that Leroy take Norma Jean to Shiloh. I had not planned this. I thought of it at the same moment Mabel said it. It was as though she-an imaginary character-had said it rather than that I had written it The word "Shiloh" came sailing into my mind, out of a memory long ago of class field trips to the Shiloh battleground. I never went on one of the trips, but there was so much talk of them that the word "Shiloh" had a mystique about it. And it seemed appropriate at this point.

Now the story had a focus and a direction. This trip to Shiloh was going to be the selling for determining the outcome of this marriage. I followed Leroy and Norma Jean along, through the domestic scenes, and then to the battleground. I had discovered the story by being open to the characters and being willing to see what they would do, to write down anything that came into my head just to see if I could use it.

I rewrote the story many times, throwing out what was inappropriate and developing parts that were crucial to bringing the story of this marriage to life. As I worked to deepen the story, Norma Jean and Leroy became more real to me, and I began to feel truly the sadness of their situation, their loss, and the dissolving of their marriage. I tried to take account of the changes taking place in their small town, so that I could have some context for understanding what was happening with them. It seemed to me that a great deal had been lost, and that the characters were struggling with how they were going to live their lives in the face of great social changes.

If you are studying literature for the first time, I hope you will read the story for its feelings, its details, the way the characters talk, what kind of world they live in, what things are meaningful to them, and what feelings their lives evoke in you. I don't like to reduce the story to themes and symbols, which may be useful as signposts, but cannot ultimately be separated from the story itself. In this story, Shiloh is a destination, and maybe someone will say it is a symbol of some kind, but there are many things to say about Shiloh as a destination that can't be simply taken apart from the story. I would like for Shiloh to be so much a part of the story that you can't remove it I like to feel the images-such as the dust ruffle on the bed, the crinkled-cotton texture of Mabel's face, the crumbs on the cellophane cake wrapper-as if I could hold them between my fingers. I hope such textures make the story real enough that you can believe you are right there with Leroy and Norma Jean on their way to Shiloh.

Source: Bobble Ann Mason, "Commentary on 'Shiloh'," for *Short Stories for Students,* Gale, 1998.

Critical Essay #2

Henningfeld is an assistant professor of English at Adrian College, in Adrian, Michigan. In the essay below, she offers a general introduction to "Shiloh."

Bobbie Ann Mason's short story "Shiloh" appeared initially in the *New Yorker* and later became the title story of her first collection. Reviewers praised Mason for her spare realism and her ear for the language of the people of western Kentucky.

Several critics have identified Mason's style as an example of minimalism, a literary movement characterized by spare, unornamented prose and use of specific, concrete detail. Minimalist fiction often takes as its subject the small events in the lives of characters. Such writers as the late Raymond Carver, Ann Beattie, and Jayne Anne Phillips, as well as Mason, have been identified with this style of writing. Sometimes, critics use the term "K-Mart fiction" to describe the style.

Mason herself is uncomfortable with labels. In an interview with Bonnie Lyons and Bill Oliver which appeared in *Contemporary Literature,* Mason stated, "I'in not sure what's meant by minimalism. I'in not sure if it means something that is just so spare that there is hardly anything there, or if it describes something that is deliberately pared down with great artistic effect, or if it's just a misnomer for what happens in any good short story, economy." Regardless of the label attached to Mason's prose, style is very important to her. She reports that she tries "to approximate language that's very blunt and Anglo-Saxon."

In a critical essay appearing in *Modern Fiction Studies,* Barbara Henning details the negative re ception that Mason's "blunt and Anglo-Saxon" writing has rece1ved in recent years. She reports that both Mason and Raymond Carver have been accused of creating characters who lead "flat and robotic" lives. Henning argues that such stories require a special kind of reading. Rather than trying to interpret the story as we read it, we should "suspend the interpretive moment." By doing so, we can experience the accumulation of details and arrive at an understanding of the situation at the same time as the narrator. Furthermore, according to Henning, "the characters, setting, and situation are revealed in 'Shiloh' through an accumulation of synecdochic details. . . the narrator and Leroy concentrate on the particular as a substitute for the general, emphasizing Leroy's inability and unwillingness to understand his environment and his wife."

By "synecdoche detail" Henning means that Mason accumulates details which represent parts of the Moffitts' lives and that these parts, in turn, reveal the whole. A careful examination of the detail and the dialogue of "Shiloh" can demonstrate this argument.

Readers who encounter the fiction of Bobbie Ann Mason through *Shiloh and Other Stories* discover a world of ordinary, working-class Southerners. Mason's characters drive trucks, work at Wal-Mart, eat at Burger Chef, and watch "M* A *S*H" on television.

Their English is not always standard, and their education is generally marginal. "Shiloh" is a saga of such individuals. Like Mason's other fictional characters, Leroy Moffitt and his wife Norma Jean are rural Kentuckians who are affected by the changing culture in which they live. The pastoral landscapes around them are quickly being paved into streets for subdivisions and parking lots for shopping malls. Such changes separate the characters from their traditions. They live in a world where "nobody knows anything" and where "answers are always changing."

Not only do Leroy and Norma Jean struggle with cultural change, they struggle with changes in each other. Leroy, a trucker, has been injured in an accident and can no longer drive his big rig. Consequently, he is at home all of time. Norma Jean now lifts weights, works at the Rexall cosmetics counter, and seems uncomfortable around her husband. Mabel Beasley, Norma Jean's mother, frequently visits the Moffitts' house and often criticizes Norma Jean's housekeeping. Her interference adds tension to Norma Jean's search for a new identity. Mabel, however, believes that the couple can solve their marital difficulties by simply taking a trip to the place where she spent her first honeymoon-the Shiloh battlefield.

The story opens with Leroy watching Norma Jean lift weights. Leroy thinks she looks like Wonder Woman, all pectorals and legs. From the first paragraph, as Norma Jean attempts to build herself up, Leroy attempts to build Norma Jean into the woman he thinks he married. But he fails to realize that, like the changing landscape, Norma Jean has changed over the fifteen years of their marriage.

When Norma Jean sits down to play songs from the 1960s on her electric organ, she complains, "I didn't like those old songs back then. . . . But I have this crazy feeling I missed something." Leroy immediately tells her, "You didn't miss a thing." In doing this, Leroy tries to build a history for Norma Jean in which there are no missing parts. As Leroy continues to watch Norma Jean play the organ, he reflects that he is "finally settling down with the woman he loves." But what does he love about this woman? His reflection continues: "She is still pretty. Her skin is flawless. Her frosted curls resemble pencil trimmings." Again, by attaching the details of Norma Jean's appearance to the thought that this is the woman he loves, Leroy continues to build his model of Norma Jean.

At the same time that Leroy is figuratively building his model of Norma Jean, he is literally building a model of a log cabin. Just as he idealizes Norma Jean, he idealizes the life-size log cabin that he wants to build for her. Although Norma Jean says repeatedly that she does not want to live in a log cabin, Leroy continues to insist that she does.

On one of her visits to her daughter's house, Mabel tells Norma Jean about a baby who has been eaten by a dachshund because the baby's mother was neglectful. Norma Jean sees this as a veiled reference to her own baby, who died in infancy of sudden infant death syndrome. Norma Jean says, "The very idea, her bringing up a subject like that! Saying it was neglect." Leroy's immediate response is: "She didn't mean it." In so doing, he undercuts Norma Jean's attempt to talk about her dead baby and her

relationship with her mother. Again, Leroy attempts through the dialogue to control and build Norma Jean into his own image.

Ironically, although Leroy notices that his hometown has changed, he is unable to see, or at least acknowledge, changes in his wife. "Something is happening," the narrator reports, "Norma Jean is going to night school" What is happening are strong shifts in Norma Jean's identity and in the structure of the Moffitt marriage. However, although Leroy senses that Norma Jean is "miles away" and although "he knows he is going to lose her," he seems unable to acknowledge to himself the changes in his wife and the changes in his marriage.

The problem, of course, is that Leroy is attempting to assemble a whole person and a whole marriage using only the flat, surface details of their daily lives. Leroy has been seeing Norma Jean as the composite of her parts rather than as a whole person. As with his sense of history, he has left out the details of his marriage and his wife. Although he tries to create Norma Jean by telling her what to think and what to do, she eludes him; although he tries to build a house that will take Norma Jean back to the beginning of their marriage, he ultimately fails.

In the climactic scene, Leroy and Norma Jean travel to Shiloh, the Civil War battlefield that Mabel has been urging them to visit. Leroy does not recognize the irony of going to a battlefield to try to make peace with his wife. They discover that the battlefield is not as they had expected it. Furthermore, the log cabin that Leroy wanted to see is full of bullet holes. "That's not the kind of log house I've got in mind," says Leroy.

In both cases, Leroy's imagined Shiloh is different than the reality of Shiloh. This discrepancy is rooted in Leroy's habit of seeing only parts of things, not their totality. With Shiloh, for example, he is only aware of one small fact: that it is the place where Mabel and her late husband spent their honeymoon. Although he is vaguely aware that a battle was fought there, he does not realize that it is the site of a Confederate defeat.

Leroy himself is headed for defeat. As Norma Jean and Leroy share a picnic lunch on grounds overlooking the white slabs of a cemetery, Norma Jean says, "I want to leave you."

Leroy's response is that of a man whose building project has suddenly turned out wrong because he has mismeasured the pieces: "Leroy takes a bottle of Coke out of the cooler and flips off the cap. He holds the bottle poised near his mouth but cannot remember to take a drink. Finally he says, 'No, you don't'." He denies that Norma Jean could want such a thing. "I won't let you," Leroy continues. Ironically, Leroy does not see that it is this kind of response that has gotten him into his predicament. However, Norma Jean is through being told what to do by her mother and her husband, and she will no longer let the two of them define her existence with their words.

In a gesture that is symptomatic of the Moffitt marriage-a marriage in which even the death of their infant son is repressed- "Leroy takes a lungful of smoke and closes his eyes as Norma Jean's words sink in." His immediate response to radical change is to

close his eyes. With his eyes still closed, he reviews events: "He tries to focus on the fact that thirty-five hundred soldiers died on the grounds around him. He can only think of that war as aboard game with plastic soldiers. . . . General Grant, drunk and furious, shoved the Southerners back to Corinth, where Mabel and Jet Beasley were married years later. . . . 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 here at the same battleground. Leroy knows he is leaving out a lot. He is leaving out the insides of history. History was always just names and dates to him. 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 history, have escaped him."

Leroy finally seems to realize that he has been looking only at the surface details of hIs marriage, not at the whole, complicated relationship. When he opens hIs eyes, however, Norma Jean "has moved away and is walking through the cemetery, following a serpentine brick path." As the story closes, Norma Jean is too far away for him to speak to her. Nonetheless, she turns back toward Leroy "and waves her arms." Leroy is uncertain what the gesture means.

The final scene of the story, depicting what could be the final scene of the Moffitts' marriage, is permeated with the theme of death. Leroy's reference to their dead baby, the death of his dream of building a log cabin, and, of course, the realization that he is surrounded by both Union and Confederate dead serve to underscore pain, anguish, and finality. Whether or not there will be a rebirth of the Moffitts' marriage is unclear. In this moment, the past has died, and the future remains ambiguous, just like Norma Jean's wordless gesture.

Source: Diane Andrews Henningfeld, "Overview of 'Shiloh' ," in *Short Stories for Students,* Gale, 1998

Critical Essay #3

Cooke is affiliated with McGill University in Montreal. In the following excerpt, he explores Norma Jean's quest for growth and change in "Shiloh," as well as Mason's use of imagery in the story.

Much of the critical commentary on Bobbie Ann Mason's short stones has focused on the effects of social change on her characters' sense of self

Accordingly, the consensus is that Norma Jean Moffitt, the heroine of "Shiloh," is a "good example of a character who attempts to construct a new identity" (Albert E. Wilhelm, "Making Over," *Southern Literary Journal,* 1987,77). Thus, [Tina] Bucher writes of "Norma Jean's quest for independence" ("Changing Roles," *Border States,* 1991, 50); G. O. Morphew calls her a "down-home feminist" *(Southern Literary Journal,* 1986, 41); [Robert H.] Brinkmeyer describes her "open-armed embrace of a world promising the potential for growth and freedom" ("Rocking," *Southern Literary Journal,* 1987, 12); and Wilhelm labels her a "good-old Southern girl" who "is definitely striving to be a new woman" ("Private," *Midwest Quarterly,* 1987,277).

In support of these contentions, one can point to the ending of the story where, having told her husband Leroy that she wants to leave him, Norma Jean walks quickly through the cemetery at Shiloh, pursued by the limping Leroy, who is both literally and symbolically unable to keep up with her:

Norma Jean is far away, walking rapidly toward the bluff by the river, and he likes to hobble after her Norma Jean has reached the bluff, and she is lolling out over the Tennessee River Now she turns toward Leroy and waves her arms. Is she beckoning to him? She seems to be doing an exercise for her chest muscles The sky is unusually pale-the color of the dust ruffle Mabel made for their bed.

The ending brings together a number of motifs that support the critics' claims as well as Mason's own assertion that Norma Jean's "life is on the way up" (Wilhelm, "An Interview with Bobbie Ann Mason," *Southern Quarterly,* 1988, 35). At the center of this cluster is the image of a flying bird, represented by Norma Jean's waving arms. Both thematically and structurally, the Imagery of birds permeates the story by means of a contrast between Norma Jean, who is ready to end the marriage, to spread her wings and fly, and Leroy, who has returned to the nest and is desperately hoping to start their marriage afresh.

Leroy, a long-distance trucker who has spent most of the last 15 years on the road, has come home to stay after a highway accident that has wrecked his tractor-trailer rig. The rig, emblematic of his former lifestyle, "sits in the backyard, like a gigantic bird that has flown home to roost." Leroy, himself, "finally settling down with the woman he loves" yet aware of his wife's dissatisfaction, is obsessed with the idea of building a log house, which he hopes will be "a real home." Norma Jean, on the other hand, is more concerned with "building herself up," with creating a new self-image that will enable her

to overcome her dependence on her husband and her mother. She takes a variety of classes, from weight lifting to cooking exotic foods to English composition, in an attempt to become a new woman, to find a new organizing principle for her life. At the very moment that Leroy has stopped moving, Norma Jean has begun to move forward.

It is Leroy who first associates his wife with the birds that he watches at the feeder in the back yard:

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 She wants the lights turned out. Even then, he is sure she closes her eyes.

Norma Jean's closing of her eyes in bed, like her staring off into a corner when she chops onions, "as if she can't bear to look," is symptomatic of her ability to avoid the truth of her marriage. There is more to the analogy, however, than Leroy realizes. And among Mason's critics, only Barbara Henning [in "Minimalism," *Modem Fiction Studies,* 1989] asks whether "we [are] to make an analogy between the characters and the feeding birds." Although she suggests that "these details. . . offer the reader a moment to hesitate and to make comparisons within the context, finding a metaphoric framework in which to understand the situation," she does not develop the notion, concluding only that "Mason's juxtaposition of these two images presents Leroy as toying with the idea that Norma Jean might also be floundering. "

In actuality, the flight of the birds symbolizes the trajectory of Norma Jean's life. Like the goldfinches, Norma Jean, who found herself pregnant at the age of 18, had closed her wings and fallen into marriage, not because she was in love, but because she wished to spare her mother Mabel the disgrace of having an unwed mother in the family. When the baby died of SIDS while Leroy and Norma Jean were at a drive-in watching *Dr. Strangelove,* a movie in which the world is destroyed, their world was in a sense also destroyed. Their marriage Since then has been an empty shell, which has lasted only because Leroy was away from home so often and because, like the "off-white dust ruffle" that Mabel makes for their bed, Norma Jean is adept at covering things up, at hiding the truth.

The accident that keeps Leroy at home forces Norma Jean to confront him and opens her eyes to the emptiness of a marriage made tolerable only by his frequent absence-"In some ways, a woman prefers a man who wanders," she says. Her mother's catching her smoking, however, precipitates her decision to leave-"That set something off," she tells Leroy. The last step in her growing sense of independence is the realization that she no longer needs to submit to her mother's wishes. Nor does she need to continue ill a loveless marriage. The final battle in her undeclared war takes place, appropriately enough, at Shiloh, where, "picking cake crumbs from the cellophane wrapper, like a fussy bird," she announces her decision to leave:

"She won't leave me *alone--you* won't leave me alone." Norma Jean seems to be crying, but she is looking away Tommm. "I feel eighteen again. I can't face that all over again." She starts walking away.

Faced with the prospect of beginning anew, Norma Jean is not about to repeat her past mistakes. As she stands on the bluff waving her arms under a pale sky, the color of Mabel's dust ruffle, she is no longer hiding the truth. Metaphorically, she has stopped falling, opened her eyes, spread her wings, and lifted herself. Neither Leroy nor Mabel will have the strength to hold her back this time.

Source: Stewart J. Cooke, "Mason's 'Shioh'," in *The Explicator,* Vol. 51, No.3, Spnng, 1993, pp. 196--99.

Critical Essay #4

In the following excerpt, Morphew analyses the character Norma Jean Moffitt in "Shiloh" and briefly discusses the function of military imagery in the story.

Much has been written about the loss of identity experienced by the characters of Bobbie Ann Mason's short stories; the people of *Shiloh and Other Stories* in particular seem to be confused by the onslaught of pop culture, the media, and other forces of social change. The males, perhaps, seem the more affected, and more ineffectual in their attempts to seize or to create some new center for their lives. The women, at least most of them, react to their frustration and discontent more forcefully; they are or become down-home feminists, and the degree of their feminist responses within their culture is largely determined by education, by economic empowerment, and by age, or by some combination of the three. . . .

It is important to see that the down-home feminists of these stories do not want what their city cousins want: equal legal and political rights, equal access to careers, equal pay, government support of child care, and so on. Mason's women simply want breathing space in their relationships with their men. Sometimes only divorce, always initiated by the women, will provide the degree of change these women seek but sometimes their assertiveness merely aims for a change of pace-casual adultery, for example.

The culture of Mason's Western Kentucky is focused on the lower class, defined by a general lack of higher education, by consumer taste, and, increasingly, by choice of leisure activity. Mason's characters have enough discretionary income to buy such big-ticket items as campers and organs, and enough time to take continuing education classes, or, in the case of Shelby, the preacher in "The Retreat," even the flexibility to follow an avocation which does not support him and his family (he is an electrician during the week). . . .

Like Georgian [a character in "The Retreat"] Norma Jean, the main female character of "Shiloh," is unhappily married. She, too, is restless, or, as she says, ". . . I have this crazy feeling I missed something." The constant presence of her husband, Leroy, a trucker "finally settling down with the woman he loves" because of an accident, is more than Norma Jean can stand. She also must cope with a domineering mother, Mabel, who spends a lot of time with Norma Jean: "When she visits, she inspects the closets and then the plants, informing Norma Jean when a plant is droopy or yellow." Even though Norma Jean is thirty-four, she still hides her smoking habit from Mabel, until one day Mabel barges in and catches her-as Norma Jean says, "She don't know the meaning of the word 'knock'."

Because she is so dominated by her mother, Norma Jean skirmishes as much with Mabel as with Leroy in her struggle to free herself from a marriage she no longer wants. The struggle is long and difficult because the tradition of the sanctity of marriage in this culture is old and strong. Norma Jean confronts her mother directly as the story

develops. At one point Mabel rebukes Norma Jean for saying "for Christ's sake" and Norma Jean retaliates with, , 'You ain't seen nothing yet." Mabel, sure that Norma Jean will settle down if she willjust go on a "second honeymoon," provokes even stronger language during the same conversation: "When are you going to *shut up* about Shiloh, Mama?"

Norma Jean has not used direct confrontation with Leroy; instead, she has sought to create emotional distance by taking up a series of activities that pointedly do not include Leroy. First, she tries bodybuilding, then jogging, then night school. Once, Norma Jean hands Leroy a list, "Things you could do," she says but the alliance of Leroy and Mabel is too strong for her to make her move at home.

Mason's timely usage of military language heightens the marital strife in "Shiloh." In response to Norma Jean's list, Leroy discusses his latest project, the log house he wants to build for them. Norma Jean ignores him as she does her exercises, "marching through the kitchen. . . doing goose steps." Also, there is the origin of Norma Jean's name: ". . . from the Normans. They were mvaders." This she tells Leroy on their way to Shiloh. Norma Jean's acceptance of her mother's suggestion that she and Leroy go to Shiloh is itself a brilliant tactical move: she has split her enemies. By himself, Leroy is no match for Norma Jean, and, like the Union army of the original battle of Shiloh, she is the aggressor, the invader, and she wins her own battle when she announces she is leaving Leroy.

Certainly Norma Jean has a stronger personality than Georgeann and Mason must allow for this, or else Mason would simply write the same story with the same characters again and again. Still, Norma Jean can support herself-she is a sales clerk at a Rexall drugstore-whereas Georgeann has never worked outside the home. Norma Jean has also had some exposure to higher education through an "adult-education course in composition" and her first paper garners a B, yet another confidence builder. Finally, Norma Jean has had fifteen years of living by herself while Leroy was on the road and this solitude has developed a cherished independence in her, or, as she puts it, "In some ways, a woman prefers a man who wanders."

Source: G. O. Morphew, "Downhome Feminists in *Shiloh and Other Stories,"* in *Southern Literary Journal,* Vol. 21, No.2, Spring, 1989, pp. 41-9.

Critical Essay #5

Henning teaches English at Long Island University. In the following excerpt, she examines Mason's metaphorical use of details to reveal characters and situations in "Shiloh. "

Mason's story "Shiloh" is about two people and a community who are affected by their beliefs in the American dream and the myth of progress: you can succeed and build a happy life for yourself and your family in this country if you keep up with the times and if you work hard. Leroy Moffitt and Norma Jean, a couple who have been married for fifteen years, find their lives disrupted not only by the trucking accident that has rendered Leroy disabled and unemployed but also by the changes that are occurring in their home town in Kentucky. While the community around them is being built up ("Subdivisions are spreading across western Kentucky like an oil slick "), Norma Jean is building muscles and constructing compositions. Leroy, who passes time smoking marijuana, refuses to look for work; instead, he spends his time practicing at building by putting together craft kits. Finally, despite Norma Jean's refusal to live in a log cabin, he orders a fullsize cabin in a kit as a built-in old-fashioned solution for saving his marriage. The act of building offers the reader a framework for understanding this story.

Mason foregrounds details to emphasize the static, spatial nature of the characters' lives. By referring nonchalantly to commercial items-using trade names instead of types: Coke, Lincoln Logs, and *The Donahue Show* instead of soda, toy logs, and TV talk shows-Mason, as well as Carver, disrupt the reader's conventional expectations for more universal details, causing us to hesitate and to focus on the day-to-day detail. The characters, setting, and situation are revealed in "Shiloh" through an accumulation of synecdochic details such as these; the narrator and Leroy concentrate on the particular as a substitute for the general, emphasizing Leroy's inability and unwillingness to understand his environment and his wife. Norma Jean is also revealed through Leroy's consciousness as a series of anatomical details. The narrator concentrates on her body parts, foregrounding her pectorals, her legs, her arms, her knees, her ankles, her hard biceps, her chest muscles, and on her two pound weights. Norma Jean is never depicted as a whole person because Leroy and the empathic narrator are unable to see her in that way.

When a scene ends in Mason's work, it almost always ends with a focus on a specific image. After Norma Jean complains to Leroy about comments her mother had made about a baby who was killed by a dog, Mason ends with a detail: "For a long time, they sit by the kitchen window watching the birds at the feeder." Then silence, switch of scene. Leroy does not answer her. Are the birds random details selected so that we can experience his loss of words? Or are we to make an analogy between the characters and the feeding birds? These details are selected out of a whole context and offered to us as lingering details, parts of a whole. This final image stands out, causing the narrative to come to a standstill, displacing Leroy's and Norma's pain about their failing relationship and the earlier loss of a baby to crib death, by concentrating on another aspect of the context. These details also offer the reader a moment to hesitate and to

make comparisons within the context, finding a metaphoric framework in which to understand the situation.

Leroy's rig is now "a huge piece of furniture gathering dust in the backyard." His world is disintegrating into details, and he cannot decide what to do, so his wife-who would rather have him on the road-tries to decide for him. She reads from a list: "Things you could do. . . . You could get a job as a guard at Union Carbide, where they'd let you set on a stool. You could get on at the lumberyard. You could do a little carpenter work, if you want to build so bad. You could-."

Before Leroy's accident he had taken Benzedrine tablets and spent his time "flying past scenery" in ills truck; after the accident, however, when he is home and high on marijuana, he drives his car and the "Power steering and an automatic shift make a car feel so small and inconsequential that his body is hardly involved in the driving process." The reader cannot help but compare Leroy's driving processes, in both instances, to the way he lives his life, numbly fitting into the system without making connections between details. He is out of date attempting to move backward in history instead of forward into the future where opportunity supposedly lies for someone who believes in the American dream. Leroy is, like the rig, a random insignificant detail, a useless piece of old furniture. And Norma Jean is cleaning house. As readers, we have a choice. We can read metaphorically, making connections between the deteriorating truck, Leroy's body, Leroy and Norma Jean's relationship, life in the suburbs, and the language used, a language that concentrates on details-or we can pass everything by as part of the setting.

Leroy is an observer who wants desperately to go back in time and make things right, but he is unable to act, unable to make connections between facts and details.

He sees things about Norma Jean that he never realized before. When she chops onions, she stares off into a corner, as If she can't bear to look. She puts on her house slippers almost precisely at nine o'clock every evening and nudges her Jogging shoes under the couch. 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 She wants the lights turned out Even then, he is sure she closes her eyes

He watches Norma Jean in the same way that he watches the birds. The birds are not compared to Norma Jean; instead, they are offered as "selected" details in the context. Leroy Just happens to be watching the birds as he is thinking about Norma Jean in bed. Mason's juxtaposition of these two images presents Leroy as toying with the idea that Norma Jean might also be floundering; he never confronts the idea directly. When he comes back to his reverie about Norma Jean, after looking at the birds, he wonders if she closes her eyes when she falls, just as he had wondered about the birds. We recognize, by bringing these two metonymies together, that even though Norma Jean is building up her strength, she is a creature of habIt who cannot face intimacy in the light.

Finally, Leroy decides to do what Mabel, Norma's mother (who was raised in a log cabin and hates log cabins), has been urging; he plans a trip to Shiloh, Tennessee, where Mabel and her husband had their honeymoon, a place Mabel explains is full of "history," a Civil War battleground. When the couple goes to Shiloh, they find a log cabin, full of bullet holes. Even Leroy has to laugh. Shiloh is not what Mabel had built it up to be, and it does not hold the same meaning or history for them as It does for Mabel. "Norma Jean wads up her cake wrapper and squeezes it tightly in her hand." She has been building up her strength for this one moment in Shiloh when, in the middle of a battlefield, she will demolish in her fist Leroy's hope for unity, his hope to reconstruct their relationship. "Without looking at Leroy, she says, 'I want to leave you' ." Again the reader cannot help but make an analogy between

Leroy and Norma Jean's encounter and the battles that were fought in Shiloh, a place where Norma Jean's parents began their marriage, a place where lives were lost, where blood was shed, where the shelter is full of bullet holes, a place where Leroy simply looks in the other direction.

Leroy realizes, near the end of the story, the limited way he has seen the world.

Leroy knows he is leaving out a lot. He is leaving out the insides of history. History was always Just names and dates to him. 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 history, 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. It was a crazy idea 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. He opens his eyes. Norma Jean has moved away and is walking through the cemetery, following a serpentine brick path

It is Leroy who has had his eyes closed, not Norma Jean. She is far away from him, and while he has been concentrating on her parts and building an empty metaphor to hold them, she has left him. He is ready to make new plans, but he has again displaced his anger in details: now she is following a "serpentine" brick path. In the final lines, by focusing on the sky, he further displaces the anxiety he is experiencing because of Norma Jean's announcement: "The sky is unusually pale-the color of the dust ruffle Mabel made for their bed."

Mason offers us one example after another Leroy's body, the truck, the car, the craft kits-and the use of trade names, anatomical details in place of the whole, fore grounded details, as well as exam pies, focus our attention on the "part" rather than the "whole." These synecdoches create a kind of "understatement" and at the same time an aura of special shared knowledge between reader and narrator. In Mason's story, the details also regionalize the story, showing the particular culture that is being lost. A concentration on these types of details and a focus on the activity of building serve as displacements for Leroy's feelings about his marriage and his life, emphasizing the pain and alienation Norma Jean and he are experiencing.

To survive in a modern world, Norma Jean is willing to give up the past and any ideas and rituals involved with their heritage, including their marriage. She believes in the American dream. She must move forward, and she perceives the development of technology as a step forward. From Norma Jean's point of view, malls, television shows, and suburbs improve one's style of living. A log cabin, though, is not as valuable as a condominium in the suburbs, so Leroy-with his dream of a log cabin, his unwillingness to get back to work, and his desire to stop speeding by details-is a failure, in terms of the myth of progress. He is caught in the middle. Because of modernization there is no place in Kentucky for Leroy to build his cabin. Besides that, his understanding of history is distorted; living in a cabin was never such a wonderful experience, as Mabel explains to him, and as the bullet-ridden cabin at Shiloh testifies. It is a no-win situation for Leroy. Perhaps his mistake-in the context of this story-is that he orders a "kit" to build the cabin, embracing modernization at the same time as opposing it.

The parallels between building up strength, building a model house, building a meaningful relationship, and building a future do not quite work. Norma does improve her muscle tone, but Leroy's house is never built, and their relationship is deteriorating. She enters the mainstream, but in the process she begins to lose her culture and community. One cannot "build" to improve, especially if the foundation-history, relationships, and community-is being demolished. In this story, in semimral Kentucky, now well on the way to being developed, a newly passive husband with a modern wife and a ready-made log cabin will not fit into a suburban maze. And no one in particular is responsible.

Source: Barbara Henning, "Minimalism and the American Dream: 'Shiloh' by Bobbie Ann Mason and 'Preservation' by Raymond Carver," in *Modern Fiction Studies,* Vol. 35, No 4, Winter, 1988, pp. 689-98.

Critical Essay #6

In the following excerpts from a longer article about the collection of stories in which "Shiloh" appears, Wilhelm presents his view of the interrelated themes of social change and personal identity in "Shiloh."

She grew up on a small dairy farm in rural Kentucky. A few years later she had migrated to New York City and was writing features on Fabian, Annette Funicello, and Ann-Margaret for *Movie Life* magazine. As a child her favorite reading materials were Nancy Drew and other girl sleuth mysteries. As a young woman she published a scholarly study of Nabokov's *Ada.*

Given these divergent circumstances of her own life, It is hardly surprising that Bobbie Ann Mason should be interested in culture shock and its Jarring effects on an individual's sense of identity. This theme dominates the sixteen pieces in *Shiloh and Other Stories,* her major work of fiction which was nominated for the National Book Award in 1983. Throughout this collection Mason dramatizes the bewildering effects of rapid social change on the residents of a typical "ruburb" -an area in Western Kentucky that is "no longer rural but not yet suburban" [R. Z. Sheppard, *Time,* 3 Jan. 1983]. Again and again in these stories old verities are questioned as farm families watch talk-show discussions of drug use, abortion, and premarital sex. Old relationships are strained as wives begin to lift weights or play video games with strange men. In such contexts the sense of self is besieged from all sides and becomes highly vulnerable. As O. B. Hardison has observed [in *Entering the Maze: Identity and Change in Modern Culture,* 1981], "Identity seems to be unshakable, but Its apparent stability is an illusion. As the world changes, identity changes. . . . Because the mind and the world develop at different rates and in different ways, during times of rapid change they cease to be complementary. .. . The result is a widening gap between the world as it exists in the mind and the world as it is experienced-between identity formed by tradition and identity demanded by the present" (xi-xii).

Mason's stories document many efforts to bridge such a gap. Although the behavior of her characters is diverse, two basic patterns are apparent. When faced with confusion about their proper roles, they tend to become either doers or seekers. They stay put and attempt to construct a new identity or they light out for the territories in the hope of discovering one. In short, they try to make over or they make off. Both patterns are, of course, deeply entrenched in American history. The former reflects the Puritan emphasis on building a new order through work. The latter repeats the typical response of the wanderer from Natty Bumppo to Jack Kerouac. (The occupations of Mason' s characters frequently parallel these basic patterns. For example, many of her male characters are either construction workers or truck drivers.)

One good example of a character who attempts to construct a new identity is Norma Jean Moffitt in

the book's title story. Even though her double given name may suggest a typical good-old Southern girl, Norma Jean is definitely striving to be a new woman. Like many of Mason's characters, her days are filled With the contemporary equivalents of what Arnold van Gennep [in *The Rites of Passage,* 1960] has termed sympathetic rites--ceremonies "based on belief in the reciprocal action of like on like, of Opposite on opposite, of the container and the contained . . . of image and real object or real being."

For example, her efforts to build a new body by lifting weights reveal also her efforts to build a new self. She doesn't know exactly what to make of her husband and her marriage, so she frantically makes all sorts of other things. By making electric organ music she strives for new harmony. By cooking exotic new foods she hopes to become what she eats.

Her husband Leroy (no longer the king of his castle) has to dodge the barbells swung by Norma Jean, but he too is obsessed with making things. He occupies himself With craft kits (popsicle stick constructions, string art, a snap-together B-17 Flying Fortress) as if putting together these small parts can create a more comprehensive sense of order. No doubt he is also seeking *craft* in its root sense of *power* or *strength.* In an effort to create a real home, Leroy is even thinking of "building a full-scale log house from a kit." Having failed to make a family because of the accidental death of their baby, he and Norma Jean must now "create a new marriage." Although Leroy admits that a log cabin will be out of place in the new subdivisions, he apparently sees such a construction as a means of returning to a more stable past. He and Norma Jean could join together in a cabin-raising and revert to the time of those more resourceful Kentuckians like Abe Lincoln or Daniel Boone. . . .

Although Leroy and Norma Jean Moffitt in "Shiloh" are both avid makers, this story also ends with a futile journey. Actually Leroy has spent many days on the road. Before his accident he drove his tractor-trailer rig "to kingdom come and back," but he realizes that he never took time "to examine anything." Now, at the urging of his mother-in-law, he embarks with Norma Jean on a journey of reconciliation to Shiloh. In an effort to find peace, they ironically go to a battlefield Since Leroy is interested in building a log home, they go to see an old cabin in the park. When they arrive, however, it is surrounded by tourists looking at bullet holes in the walls. The final irony which caps this ill-fated trip is that Leroy and Norma Jean discuss their falling marriage while sitting in a cemetery. .. .

The characters in Mason's stories are a cast of valiant strugglers. They attempt to create order through various sympathetic rites, but their magic is frequently powerless. They journey through wide expanses without ever finding a real sense of place. In spite of all their efforts they repeatedly find themselves caught in the dilemma described by Orrin Klapp [in *Collective Search for Identity,* 1969]: "In the accumulation of new things, it is possible for society to pass the optimum point in the ratio between the new and the old. . . between innovation and acculturation on the one hand and tradition on the other. Beyond this optimum point, where society is roused to creativity by introduction of new elements, is a danger point where consensus and integrity of the person break down." In her "few square miles of native turf' (Towers, *New York Review of Books,* 16 Dec. 1982), Mason graphically depicts such a society.

Source: Albert E. Wilhelm, "Making Over or Making Off: The Problem of Identity in Bobble Ann Mason's Short Fiction," in *The Southern Literary Journal,* Vol 18, No 2, Spring, 1986, pp. 76-82.

Topics for Further Study

One critic has called contemporary Writers like Raymond Carver, Ann Beattie, and Bobbie Ann Mason "K-Mart realists." What do you think this term means? Do you feel it is accurate?

The South has inspired many talented women writers. Two of the most popular are Flannery O'Connor and Eudora Welty. Read a story by each of these authors and discuss how their perceptions of the South differ from Mason's.

Critics Hal Blythe and Charlie Sweet have compared Leroy Moffitt to the Fisher King of the Holy Grail legend. Find out who the Fisher King was, and explain if you think this is a valid comparison.

Compare and Contrast

1980s: Sudden infant death syndrome has been a recognized medical disease since 1970. In 1988, there are 5,476 infant deaths from SIDS in the United States.

1990s: Estimates regarding the number of deaths caused by SIDS in the United States range from 3,000 to 7,000 per year. Experts determine that putting babies to sleep on their backs can prevent SIDS. In 1994, only 30 percent of babies are put to sleep on their backs. By 1997, the number rises to 79 percent.

1980s: Marijuana use among high scholars is steadily declining. By 1989, 33 percent of high school seniors report having smoked marijuana, down from 50 percent in 1979. Until the late 1980s, when the federal Drug Enforcement Administration holds hearings on reclassifying marijuana as a legal, prescribable substance, marijuana is quietly used as a medical treatment for some conditions.

1990s: Many experts still believe that the dangers of marijuana are unknown. Nevertheless, cultivation of marijuana in the United States is on the rise and accounts for nearly 25 percent of the U.S. market in 1990. In 1996, the use of marijuana for medical purposes, typically for glaucoma and to relieve nausea caused by cancer treatments, becomes legal in California and Arizona after voters approve controversial propositions.

1980s: After the introduction of laws in the 1970s that make divorce easier to obtain, divorce rates rise. In 1982, the divorce rate in the United States is 5.1 per 1,000 people.

1990s: It is widely held that one out of every two marriages ends in divorce. The U.S. Census Bureau notes that from 1970 to 1996, the number of divorced persons has quadrupled. On an average day in the United States, more than 3,000 divorces are finalized.

What Do I Read Next?

In Country is Mason's 1985 novel about eighteen-year-old Samantha Hughes's quest to understand her father's death in the Vietnam War and to understand herself.

Mason's 1989 collection of short stones, *Love Life,* introduces more characters caught in changing circumstances.

Shelby Foote's *Shiloh* (1952) is a fictional account of the Civil War battle told from a variety of perspectives.

The American Story: Short Stories from the Rea Award (1993), edited by Michael Rea, offers a selection of stories by such authors as Raymond Carver, Joyce Carol Oates, Ann Beattie, Charles Baxter, and Grace Paley, among others, for the student wishing to further an understanding of the short story genre and of minimalist writing.

The War in Kentucky: From Shiloh to Perryville is James McDonough's 1994 exploration of the importance of Kentucky in the Civil War.

New Women and New Fiction: Short Stories since the Sixties (1986) is a collection of stories by such contemporary women writers as Cynthia Ozick, Toni Cade Bambara, Anne Tyler, Fay Weldon and Ann Beattie, among others.

Raymond Carver's *Where I'm Calling From: New and Selected Stories* (1988) is widely considered a collection of minimalist masterpieces.

Key Questions

Abundant opportunity for discussion of familial and social relationships exists in the various stories Mason presents in this collection. Readers might want to list the many themes they encounter, such as parenthood, sibling relationships, spousal relationships, forgiveness, the power of memory, etc., then go back and find such themes in individual stories to note how the varied plots can focus upon identical themes. Most readers will see themselves in one or more of Mason's characters, or at least an aspect of themselves. An enjoyable exercise is the discussion of which character individual group members are most strongly attracted to and why.

1. Discuss the effects of depressed economic conditions upon the various characters of Mason's short stories.

2. How does television work as a negative influence in the lives of Mason's short stories.

3. Choose one female character from a Mason story who you think best represents Mason's idea of a "heroine".

Explain why.

4. Choose one male character from a Mason story who you think best represents Mason's idea of a "hero". Explain why.

5. In "Drawing Names", why is Carolyn attracted to Jim? How can you defend this aspect of Mason's plot as realistic?

6. Explain which of the stories is your favorite and why.

7. Can any positive message be drawn from the dissolution of the relationship between Leroy and Norma Jean in "Shiloh"?

8. Discuss the theme of communication seen in "Rookers."

9. In "Nancy Culpepper", the theme of personal identity is seen in Nancy's curiosity regarding her ancestors. Does she ever reach "closure" regarding her own identity and place in the family?

10. Which, if any, of Mason's short story characters seems determined to carry on family traditions? Analyze why each feels this necessity.

Further Study

"Bobbie Ann Mason," in *Short Story Criticism,* Vol. 4, edited by Thomas Votteler, Gale, 1990, pp 298-311.

Includes reprinted criticism on Mason's short stories.

Brinkmeyer, Robert H., Jr. "Finding One's History. Bobbie Ann Mason and Contemporary Southern Literature," In *The Southern Literary Journal,* Vol. 19, No.2, Spring, 1987, pp. 20-33.

Concentrates on the sense of history In Mason's work as well as Mason's place in the history of Southern literature.

Mason, Bobbie Ann, Bonnie Lyons, and Bill Oliver. An interview in *Contemporary Literature,* Vol. 32, No.4, Winter' 1991, pp. 449-70.

Covers Mason's work through 1991 and focuses on her understanding of the themes of her stories as well as her writing process.

Related Titles

While Shiloh and Other Stories might be said to anticipate much of Mason's subsequent fiction in its thematic concerns and technical strategies, at least one story foreshadows a subsequent work. The Culpepper family is the subject of Mason's second novel Spence + Lila (1989), which is in many a ways a metaphoric extension of the events outlined in Mason's story, "Nancy Culpepper."

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Short Stories for Students (SSfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's□For Students□ Literature line, SSfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on □classic□ novels

frequently studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of SSfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of SSfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of □classic□ novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members□educational professionals□ helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in SSfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed□for instance, the narrator in Invisible Man-the character is listed as □The Narrator□ and alphabetized as □Narrator.□ If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. □ Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name □Jean Louise Finch□ would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname □Scout Finch.□
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- Criticism: an essay commissioned by SSfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).

- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an □at-a-glance□ comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author's time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

SSfS includes □The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature,□ a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children's Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Short Stories for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the SSfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the SSfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.

Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

Citing Short Stories for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Short Stories for Students may use the following general forms. These examples are based on MLA style; teachers may request that students adhere to a different style, so the following examples may be adapted as needed. When citing text from SSfS that is not attributed to a particular author (i.e., the Themes, Style, Historical Context sections, etc.), the following format should be used in the bibliography section:

□Night.□ Short Stories for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234-35.

When quoting the specially commissioned essay from SSfS (usually the first piece under the □Criticism□ subhead), the following format should be used:

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on □Winesburg, Ohio.□ Short Stories for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 335-39.

When quoting a journal or newspaper essay that is reprinted in a volume of SSfS, the following form may be used:

Malak, Amin. □Margaret Atwood's □The Handmaid's Tale and the Dystopian Tradition,□ Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9-16; excerpted and reprinted in Short Stories for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133-36.

When quoting material reprinted from a book that appears in a volume of SSfS, the following form may be used:

Adams, Timothy Dow. □Richard Wright: □Wearing the Mask,□ in Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69-83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59-61.

We Welcome Your Suggestions

The editor of Short Stories for Students welcomes your comments and ideas. Readers who wish to suggest novels to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editor. You may contact the editor via email at: ForStudentsEditors@gale.com. Or write to the editor at:

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