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BOBBIE ANN MASON'S POSTSOUTHERNISM: THE DECLINE OF RELIGION IN
FOUR STORIES FROM SHILOH AND OTHER STORIES

By

Katherine Brantley Salter

A Thesis
Submitted to the Faculty of
Mississippi State University
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for the Degree of Master of Arts
in English
in the Department of English

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By

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A consistent theme in author Bobbie Ann Mason's short story collection *Shiloh and Other Stories* is a break from the traditional religious customs of the U.S. South. As children become adults and move away and as marriages crumble, characters' Christian faith fades, entering their minds only frustrated disillusion. Through their scathing, sarcastic quips and references, Mason's characters exhibit distaste for the traditional attitude toward Christianity in the South. Therefore, Mason's stories deconstruct not only the notion of Christianity's role in the South, but that of the communal strength of family.

Using Martyn Bone's definition of "postsouthern" literature in his book *The Postsouthern Sense of Place in Contemporary Fiction* as literature that shatters previous preconceptions of the South, this research seeks to show how Mason's work fits into this burgeoning literary realm although unmentioned in Bone's book.

DEDICATION

I would like to dedicate this research to my late grandmother Alline Haskins Salter, who taught me to persevere, whatever my lot.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Without the assistance and encouragement from my thesis committee members Dr. Kelly Marsh and Dr. Gregory Bentley, this project would not have been possible. The instruction and opportunity provided to me by the faculty of the Mississippi State University Department of English is unmatched in my academic experience thus far. Finally, I am most appreciative of my thesis director Dr. Ted Atkinson's unfailing patience during the completion of this project. His accomplishments in the field of literary scholarship are constant source of inspiration to me, and I am honored to have had this opportunity to work with him.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
DEDICATION	ii
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	iii
CHAPTER	
I. INTRODUCTION	1
II. THROUGH A CHILD’S EYES	11
III. MARRIAGES OF THE MINDS	28
IV. CONCLUSION.....	49
WORKS CITED	53

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

A major vehicle through which author Bobbie Ann Mason deconstructs the South as a distinct region bound so tightly by traditional ideals is her attention to religion and how it functions in the lives of present-day Southerners. An overarching theme in Mason's 1982 short story collection *Shiloh and Other Stories* is the sardonic, witty verbal jabs that her characters take at Christianity—specifically, organized religion and the institution of the church. Mason's characters look beyond the communal, united front of the churches in their communities and find fault in the individual members because they see them as liars and as having a double standard in their way of life. This tendency is often a result of increased connection with the rest of the world through modern technology such as television and other forms of entertainment and media. What generations before theirs may have considered absolute truths often invalid or at the least multidimensional to Mason's contemporary Southerners, and for this reason, her characters view traditional religion as transparent and untrustworthy. However, the characters' nonparticipation in traditional religious practices does not preclude them from the same sort of search for subjectivity which defines spirituality as a whole. While the church may not have what they consider to be an active role in their lives, the characters are still affected by the church through their interpretation of it as a flawed, hollow place that may very well exist purely as a social playground under the mere banner of serious

religious commitment. Instead of looking for subjectivity in the traditional religious arena, they attempt whether successfully or not to find it in the secular world.

This tumultuous search for meaning in the somewhat uncharted territory of secular life is a benchmark of the postmodern literary movement, which—as exhibited here in Mason’s treatment of religion—had a marked influence on Southern literature as we presently know it. Mason and other contemporary Southern authors are clear examples of artists who labor under what Harold Bloom called “the anxiety of influence” (58). Maybe more than any other writers in recent American literature, Southern authors have faced the intimidating task of succeeding a generation of literary giants that includes, but is certainly not limited to, writers such as William Faulkner, Eudora Welty, and Robert Penn Warren. This issue of influence is further magnified because of traditional societal, cultural, and economic paradigms that have perpetuated the conception of Southern literature as necessarily regional.

Additionally, these writers emerged during the flourishing postmodern movement. Burdened with the severe influence of their Southern literary predecessors, as well as an awareness of the growing popularity of new, unconventional narrative techniques ushered in by postmodernists the world over, Southern contemporary writers began producing work that, while centered on Southern characters and usually set in the region, departed from the work of their predecessors in their disregard for the “backward glance,” a term coined by Allen Tate in “The New Provincialism” to set a thematic standard for Southern literature—a measure of quality posing as universal but actually subjective (Tate 545). While the Southern Renaissance is often described in terms of a “critical spirit,” a turn to the South with critique in mind, the generation of writers that followed this era is defined more by a self-conscious awareness of “the South” as a construct, with a subject of

parody in mind. Instead of celebrating old traditions or lamenting the loss of them, writers of contemporary Southern literature instead have tended to question, challenge, and at times mock the traits that have historically defined the South. In postmodern fashion, Southern characters began look beyond the limits of their traditional society because as technological and infrastructural advances progressed, they had an increased capability to do so. They started to see the layers that existed beneath what they previously considered to be unquestionable fact and naturally began to posit that their Southern traditions were flawed. This literature, although relatively in the early stages of cultural development, is most often referred to as “postsouthern.”

Lewis Simpson coined the term “postsouthern” in his 1980 article “The Closure of History in a Postsouthern America,” and criticism of new representations of the South firmly anchors the term. Simpson’s article discusses how the “history of the literary mind of the south” has fallen into nonexistence, therefore exposing the Southern Renaissance literature’s concern with history as defunct and ushering in a “postsouthern” turn—the term now generally used to loosely define Southern literature produced after and strongly influenced by the trends of Postmodernism (Simpson 268).

Simpson’s coinage of the term “postsouthern” opened the door for further critical responses. For example, in his book *Inventing Southern Literature*, Michael Kreyling responds to Simpson’s idea of postsouthernism, further validating the line of demarcation between literature of the Southern Renaissance and the literature of the region written in the wake of the Postmodern movement. For Kreyling, “postsouthern” simply serves as a constructive, “enabling word” which allows for critical exploration of the effects of postmodernism on the new generation of Southern writers, particularly in terms of parody. Kreyling proposes that through a postmodernist employment of parody,

contemporary Southern writers have deliberately begun to question both the sociological and psychological characteristics traditionally associated with the South.

However, in *The Real South: Southern Narrative in the Age of Cultural Reproduction*, Scott Romine balks at Kreyling's assessment, pointing out that "postsouthernism" under Kreyling's parameters does not account for the physical, geographical South. For Romine, the South as it is represented in contemporary literature consists only of immaterial, conceptual images. He asserts that due to this lack of materiality, any illustration of "place" in postsouthern literature limits itself to parodic illustrations. Stressing simulated images of the South, Romine is less concerned with authenticity—or, as the title of his book calls it, a "real" South in the traditional sense—than he is with how the singular South as a monolithic region, and indeed the numerous ideological Souths, persist through narratives to which people turn for assured solidarity and identity.

Representations of both physical place and the psychological sense of place, while key factors in the literature of the Southern Renaissance, have not entirely disappeared from the contemporary canon. Rather, the general approach toward these representations has changed in tandem with technological and industrial advances that have altered the landscape. In his foreword to *Southern Writers at Century's End*, James Justus defines the theme of a "sense of place" which is used to characterize the Southern literary canon as a whole. Placing this theme into the context of the Southern Renaissance, the generation that arguably defined Southern literature as we read and interpret it today, Justus says, "The Southern Renaissance itself...was premised on the assumption that writing from the South was distinctly different from that generated in other parts of the country...one of the defining traits always listed...with...highest priority, was

Southerners' heightened sense of place" (xi). However, he continues to discuss how the use of this theme in the Renaissance does not at all resemble the approach that Southern literature has taken since that era. He firmly assesses, "If traditionalists, in defining the particular slant of modern Southern fiction, insist upon the dominance of the organic community...then the great period known as the Southern Renaissance has passed" (Justus xii).

In accordance with Justus, Romine discusses in his book *The Narrative Forms of Southern Community* the ways in which the theme of community has evolved since the Southern Renaissance. He claims that the theme still clearly exists, but that its importance has significantly dwindled. Where "place" was once a monolithic entity whose geographical location, characteristics, and parameters were rooted deeply in the psyche of its inhabitants, communities as they are represented in the more contemporary fiction have much less of a stronghold in the characters' psyches and in the narrative:

Community survives in southern literature, but in an ideologically diluted form...To what extent, then, does community survive? First...vestigially in the sense of place that has long been designated...as a distinctive...trait of southern literature. Even if there is nothing distinctively southern about place, it is equally clear that place has served a distinctive function in southern literature, where historically it has tended to absorb and negate, as a concrete icon...anxieties associated with the hegemonic order. Place is...a name for and a form of ideology; it is never 'just place.' While place...exert[s] a weak pressure in contemporary narrative, it...serves more as a mere setting and less as a determinant than it did in the fiction of a half century ago; place means less because less meaning is displaced to it. (Romine, *Narrative* 204)

Although Romine argues in both of his books that the importance of place has greatly diminished in the contemporary literature, he does not refute that "place" still plays a

role. He therefore opens up the possibility that, though definitely changed and probably diluted, the Southern sense of place has begun to shift more toward narrative constructions of Southern places that offer stability in a rapidly changing Southern culture. Less concerned with authenticity, Romine proposes that through postsouthern literary representations, the South as a distinct geographical place has become increasingly imagined and much less tangible. A critic who recognizes this possibility, identifies its presence, and observes how the new representations of place are still concretely significant is Martyn Bone. Bone bridges Kreyling's and Romine's conflicting views in his 2005 book *The Postsouthern Sense of Place in Contemporary Fiction*. First, Bone agrees with Kreyling that self-reflexiveness is a key trait in Southern contemporary literature. However, Bone polices Romine's argument, claiming that the parodies highlighted by Kreyling do not become so mired in abstraction that they fail to represent the geographical landscape of a post-New Deal South that has moved away from the agrarian lifestyle toward the industry-driven world of capitalism. Instead, an attention to concrete physical detail in parodic narratives lays the foundation for critiques of other postsouthern shifts in the South.

Of the many themes generally associated with the literature of the South until postsouthernism, Bone focuses attention on the image of the South as a predominantly agricultural, farm-based society and how the authors of the contemporary novels that he analyzes do not compromise accurate recognitions of the Southern physical landscape, thus capturing the changes that the region has undergone during the boom of capitalism. He critiques the idea of prescribing the South too strongly as purely theoretical or imagined, claiming that it limits understanding of capitalism's effects. For example, Bone cites the argument that the rapidly expanding urban areas of the South such as Atlanta

exhibit “placelessness” for Southern inhabitants who generally associate their sense of place with rural agrarianism, asserting that it does not sufficiently account for capitalism’s material effects on the Southern geographical landscape. Bone says that ideas such as these that would far too strongly render Atlanta as devoid of a Southern sense of place represent “the extent to which neo-Agrarian southern literary criticism has been conceptually unable, and ideologically unwilling, to consider seriously the material, geographical redevelopment of the region and the related representational shifts in fiction” (ix).

Bone’s argument here that contemporary representations of the South within the parameters of increased modernity has not only been recognized in the contemporary fiction but has been reinvented in depth helps set the stage for recognizing how in a grassroots manner contemporary writers interrogate the various other traditional characteristics of the agrarian South, which have also sustained changes. While Bone’s book thoroughly analyzes how the contemporary literature has questioned traditional geographical and economic representations of the South by presenting the region as it appears in a capitalist world, it does not account for how other shibboleths of Southern literature and culture have been interrogated, questioned, and deconstructed in the contemporary literature.

While Bone’s argument exemplifies criticism exploring the shift toward postsouthern ideals as specifically evidenced by modern representations of the South’s physicality in context with increasing capitalism, other mediums through which to explore the move toward postsouthernism exist within postsouthern literature. If rural geography and agrarian economics have given way to a more industrialized, technologically enhanced landscape made far more homogeneous in relation to the rest of

the country and of the world, then surely societal behaviors, ideals, and values would undergo the same kind of changes as the physical world. Perhaps one of the key traits most notably associated with the South is its inhabitants' strong belief in Christianity, expressed particularly through the organization of churches.

Traditionally, a devout Christian faith was considered a trademark characteristic of the ideal Southern gentleman—a perennial figure in monolithic constructions of Southernness. In an excerpt from *Social Life in Old Virginia Before the War*, published in 1897, Thomas Nelson Page lays out a solid blueprint for expectations of both men and women during this period. Page refers specifically to Virginia here, but Virginian traditions defined rules adopted in other Southern states. Of the male figure, Page declares that he “believed in God...To be a Virginia gentleman was his first duty; it embraced being a Christian and all the virtues. He lived as one...In religion he was as orthodox as the parson. He might not be a professing member of the church, but he was one of its pillars” (45-48). Although it foreshadows the idea presented in the stories analyzed here that church attendance has societal ramifications equal to or possibly greater than that of substantive theological belief, Page’s assessment of religion’s place in the life of the traditional Southerner makes abundantly clear how Christian spirituality can be understood as at least equally fundamental to traditional constructions of Southern identity as the agrarian physical environment discussed by Bone.

However, at the moment, an insufficient amount of criticism exists on the subject of the shift from traditional Christian habits in the South to a more secular lifestyle to fully understand its ramifications. Examination of the changing religious environment of the South and its effects on the mindsets and attitudes of Southerners is, like Bone’s discussion of capitalist versus agrarian economies, essential for a more comprehensive

and strongly realized understanding of how the South has changed as a whole in the face of modernity.

As a case in point, I extend the reach of Bone's theory to a discussion of how Kentucky author Bobbie Ann Mason, through her characters' rejection of Christian religious practices in representative stories from *Shiloh and Other Stories*, deconstructs the traditional shibboleths of Southern literature much in the same manner as the authors Bone analyzes have deconstructed the Agrarian ideals of the South as a dominantly agricultural society without failing to recognize its physical existence and the effects of an increasingly capitalistic economy on its landscape. These four representative stories serve as representative texts that demonstrate the prevalence of the theme, and therefore allow for a deeper, more strategic analysis. Through my analysis of these stories, I discuss how Mason defies conventional religious characteristics usually associated with the South while never compromising her characters' sense of place.

Mason's attention to place so strongly resonates throughout her stories that, in some of the narratives, a distinct geographical location functions almost as a character itself. Mason refuses to deny that the South as a unique physical place still exists, yet through her characters' marked rejection of the church, its practices, and its importance within the community, she clearly suggests a less ideologically rigid society, one in which characters openly reject religious dogma and social conformity even as religion remains a pervasive influence in the South. While her skepticism about the efficacy of religion is a theme that resonates throughout the collection, another underlying characteristic of the stories is their setting in rural Western Kentucky. Mason's stories are rigidly united in their location; even in rare story wherein the bulk of the action takes place outside of the state, Kentucky plays a major role in the characters' mindset.

Mason's devotion to Western Kentucky and her accurate, detailed description of the environment fit the criteria for Bone's argument that contemporary Southern writers do account for the onslaught of capitalism on the region's physical terrain while still interrogating antiquated traditions. Apart from their consistent settings, another unifying theme is the repeated instances throughout the collection of the various characters' loss of interest and respect for the old religious values of their ancestors. These incidents occur against physical, geographical backdrops which function importantly in the characters' emotional actions and reactions. Mason does not shy away from representing the physical South as it truthfully appears in modern society, but highlighting these changes in the environment seems to serve as a starting point for her to explore societal and psychological changes as well. A clear focus on increased mobility and transition as her characters repeatedly move away from their rural homes to more urban environments helps her to exhibit the idea that modernity and all of its transitory offerings also result in a shift in traditional religious values.

As if building her portrait of the new South from the ground up, Mason's characters are, like their physical environment, affected by modern advances. These effects are illustrated most notably through their nontraditional opinions and understandings about the church, which are heavily influenced by increased physical and cultural accessibility. Mason's stories suggest that these advancing alterations to the environment naturally give way to changes in its inhabitants and vice versa. In this sense, Mason's stories, through their exploration of contemporary religious habits, also exhibit the South as an imagined geography—a narrative construction of Western Kentucky that captures the ways in which alterations to spaces result in changes to characters' senses of place.

CHAPTER II

THROUGH A CHILD'S EYES

A major trope that unites two of the stories in *Shiloh and Other Stories* in their attention to religion is the overarching theme of youth, childhood, and rebirth. Significant perspectives from children appear in both “Detroit Skyline, 1949” and in “The Climber.” In addition to these young characters, consistent examples of adults undergoing an emotional reinvention—in effect being “born again—also occur in both stories. Yet in these cases, that reinvention is in some ways stunted. Lunetta in “Detroit Skyline, 1949” provides a solid example of this pattern. Perceived and told from the perspective of a nine-year-old narrator named Peggy, Lunetta acts like a churchgoing woman and inevitably realizes the hollowness of that mask in light of last-minute changes to her plans. This weakness, along with obvious anxiety toward Cold War and Communist fears force Peggy to reject her previous reliance on a guardian angel for protection and decide that spiritual belief is no longer the route to security.

“Detroit Skyline, 1949” explores the immediate effects of World War II on American society. The narrator, Peggy, along with her mother, has traveled from their home state of Kentucky to visit family and friends in the mother’s hometown of Detroit. During the story, see not only how Peggy herself handles these effects as well as how members of the older generations have dealt with them. Among numerous other psychological and sociological ramifications of the war suggested by the characters’ actions in the story, a prevalent break from pre-war societal traditions is apparent. One

significant representative of this phenomenon appears through the characters' attitudes toward church attendance. Apart from not attending, some of the characters show negative attitudes toward it, while another character reveals motives behind church attendance that have nothing at all to do with religious values, tradition, or respect for the church.

These attitudes toward religion and the marked anxiety toward Communism exhibited by all of the adults in the household cause Peggy to naively blame the stressful dynamic of her society on religion. Like a lot of young girls, Peggy believes that she has a guardian angel that watches over her and protects her and is fully responsible for her safety. When she feels that her safety is threatened, she loses faith in that angel and, to her, he in turn ceases to look after her. What she does not realize, however, is that the real source of her anxiety and that of everyone else is a severe misunderstanding of the Communist scare—a misunderstanding that is fortified by fear and biased media coverage.

Lunetta, a supporting character in "Detroit Skyline, 1949," is one of the adults whose characteristics are illustrated through Peggy's point of view as that of person who conforms to the interest of others in order to feel confident and validated. In the instance highlighted in the story, Lunetta is dating a man who is an active church member. In order to spend time with him and to maintain their good relationship, Lunetta goes through all of the traditional motions of waking up early on Sunday morning, dressing up, and putting on makeup so that she can attend church with him. Seemingly anxious and self-aware of her unmarried state, her conformity registers as obvious to others, specifically the narrator and her family with whom Lunetta has a longtime friendship. Lunetta's attention to her physical appearance is odious to those around her who do not

attend church, and when her boyfriend cancels their trip to church at the last minute, she looks even more out of place as she sits eating breakfast in her church clothes. In this sense, Lunetta's clothing and makeup appear to be a sort of costume. Lunetta's refusal to engage in alternative activities appropriate to her well-dressed state also suggests that her intentions for going to church hinged solely upon the social benefit of maintaining her relationship with her boyfriend and not on any real interest in the spiritual component of church. Although Lunetta uses church as a way to reshape herself into someone whose interest would appeal to her significant other, she ultimately fails. As hard as she works to mold herself into an enthusiastic churchgoer, the irony of the situation reaches its ultimate peak when, after all, her boyfriend decides to skip church. This episode illustrates to Peggy and to readers compelled to understand the scene through the child's eyes that Lunetta is "gloomy and distracted" (47). Peggy says that she "almost forgave her for upsetting me...but then she launched into a complicated story..." (47). The previous day, Lunetta mentions some Communist sympathizers at a rally, which scares Peggy and gives her nightmares. Peggy mentions that she feels as though her guardian angel did not watch over her as usual that night, but instead chooses to blame Lunetta. Later in the story, however, Peggy shifts that blame from Lunetta to the angel. Apart from affecting Peggy's understanding of who is to blame for the bad things that happen in her world, the scene with Lunetta provides other implications about the direct relationship between religious practices and obligatory societal expectations.

One morning, Peggy, her mother, her cousin Betsy Lou, and her Uncle Boone sit on the porch of Boone's house having a lazy breakfast. Peggy says, "It was Sunday, and the heat wave continued. We all sat on the porch, looking at the Sunday papers" (46). From their languid behavior, it is obvious that none of them plans to attend church that

morning, and one can assume from Boone's habitual newspaper reading that this particular Sunday is no different from any other. Also significant is that even though Peggy and her mother are now residents of the South, they appear to have no opposition to skipping church, either; instead, they do not abide by the social pressures and conventions regarding religion in the region during this time period. Beyond simply not attending church, Boone and Betty Lou have both exhibited a sardonic attitude toward church early in the story through their sharp analyses of the behavior of their family friend, Lunetta. Betty Lou describes her as "always dressed up in one of them Sunday go-to-meetin' outfits in case she might come across a man to marry," which highlights the intersection between religious rituals and social relations (42). Betty Lou never refers to church by its name, but instead jokingly refers to it as "go-to-meetin'", which seems to suggest that Betty Lou does not have much regard for any sanctity of the institution and also suggests that Betty only views church as a sort of playground for society, a place that people only care about keeping up appearances. Instead of chastising the teenaged Betty Lou for her sharp-tongued remarks about the adult Lunetta, Boone then adds to his daughter's interpretation of Lunetta, calling her heavy makeup a form of "man-bait" (42).

Later in the story, we discover how astute Boone and Betty Lou's understanding of Lunetta's actions truly are because at the aforementioned Sunday breakfast, Lunetta is also present. Peggy says, "Lunetta had dressed up for church, but the man she planned to go with had gone to visit his mother's grave instead" (44). Apart from confirming Boone's and Betty Lou's suspicions about her motive for going to church, Lunetta represents a mindset that views church only in terms of its social benefits. Any commitment based on religion alone is not strong enough to withstand the loss of those benefits. In *The Encyclopedia of Religion in the South*, critic Dianne Bunch notes, in light

of tense race relations nationwide but especially in the South, “[following] the war, Southerners looked more toward religion to support their separateness. The assurance of the forgiveness from sin and guilt became an even stronger social ethic, allowing Southern churches in the evangelical tradition to expand and become even more integrated with the Southern social fabric. Religion...was used to legitimize the Southern way of life” (364). The close relationship between the church and society had existed long before the post-WWII era, as exhibited by Bunch’s assessment that religion helped Southerners to justify their participation in slavery. She says, “...refusing to admit personal guilt kept one outside of the Southern community, yet an acceptance of that guilt, which privileges the individual over society, supported slavery in the Old South and churchgoing became a Christian and civic responsibility used to stabilize all Southern institutions” (363). Mason extends this focus on church as a social obligation but subjects that notion to a postsouthern scrutiny. She highlights the absence of the sacred ritual of attending church by presenting it as a mere social gesture at best and optional at worst. Lunetta’s situation reflects that her interest in going to church hinges on the man in whom she is romantically interested and therefore that she, too, although perhaps unconsciously, subscribes to the traditional idea that attending church affects one’s social standing. Her refusal to attend church, however, suggests that this traditional tie between society and church is no longer strong enough to warrant church attendance. Additionally, her boyfriend’s devotion to church and his commitment to Lunetta prove to be vacant when compared to his need to visit his mother’s grave. The man also represents a loose commitment to attending church, even though the reason for his absence is not in any way immoral. His act of visiting the grave also suggests that he values personal spiritual activity over public displays; instead of merely attending a church meeting, he

tends to his mother's grave without guidance from a pastor or the physical support of his fellow churchgoers.

After she is stood up by her date, Lunetta appears content to merely sit around the kitchen in her church clothes and mope about her predicament. Morosely, she tells Betty Lou that he "sure did love his mother" (47). Her sadness in this statement stems, however, not from any regret over his attention to his mother as it detracts from his church attendance, but in how it hinders his relationship with Lunetta. Betty Lou proposes that Lunetta take charge of the situation and make the best of it:

"Why don't you go to church, anyway?" asked Betsy Lou.
"You're all dressed up."

"I just don't have it in me," said Lunetta (47).

Lunetta's bleak outlook in this scene is ironic in that it could be understood as more than a sad reaction to her broken church date. The line "I just don't have it in me" can also be read as a statement on faith. The quote opens up the many layers of reasons for Lunetta's refusal to go to church without her beau. She does not attend the service out of obvious disappointment in her date's failed obligation, but also possibly because she does not inherently possess any belief or religious conviction—or at least enough to motivate her to attend church alone.

Throughout the story, Peggy appears to be nothing more than a relatively silent witness to the happenings surrounding her, processing them but never giving much opinion about them. However, she finally forms a united idea about everything that has occurred during her trip. With uncertainties about the Cold War and Communism looming in the historical backdrop of this story and concerning nearly every adult character in the story, Peggy finally hypothesizes that the Reds were the root of every

negative occurrence in the lives of her and her family. This “understanding” is accompanied by her strong conviction that “I hadn’t trusted my guardian angel, so he had failed to protect me” (51). Apart from the obvious connection between angels and religion and their subsequent failure, Peggy here begins to relate believing in such figures as angels as frivolous, which represents yet another postmodern search for tangible evidence in what is for Peggy an increasingly abstract world. The cacophony of adult voices surrounding her influences her feelings most of all, and like the dinette table in “The Rookers,” the access to multiple opinions serves as a stronger catalyst for interpretation than does the solitary figure of a guardian angel.

Lunetta’s broken church date contributes to Peggy’s defeated yet resolute mindset that evil, human figures have somehow trumped those of supposed goodness and faith. Peggy’s disappointment in the angel is twofold; she blames herself for her disbelief and that disbelief resulted in the angel’s ignorance of her. However, her disappointment is a petty, childish displacement of blame. The cause of her confusion is actually the religious ambivalence of the adults who surround her as well as those adults’ interpretations of the societal fear of Communism. Their fear is pervaded by media-driven fanaticism, and they too fail to truly comprehend the truth of the Communist role in the world following the second World War.

The simple, childish naiveté which precludes Peggy’s fully developed understanding of the social conventions which govern religious practices appears again in “The Climber.” Likewise, a child in this story makes a startling mention of Jesus Christ that foreshadows the main character’s conflicting feelings toward Christianity and suggests how the younger generation views Christianity and what the future of organized religion in the South might look like if attitudes such as his persist and are not just words

of empty, youthful rebellion. However jarring his quips may be, he is still too young to fully understand the implications of what he says.

"The Climber" tells the story of a woman named Delores who has recently discovered a lump in her breast and over the course of the narrative learns the severity of that discovery while she deals with the natural anxieties associated with such a stressful health problem. Prior to the action of the story, Delores has had a biopsy performed on the lump; on the day the story takes place, Delores has an appointment to see her doctor concerning the results of that test. Meanwhile, some men have come at her husband Glenn's request to cut down an eighty-foot tree next to their house. This process of cutting down the tree "confuses Delores" because it happens at the "inopportune time" of the same day as her gynecologist appointment (107).

The childish perspective of this story appears at its outset when a neighborhood boy named Petey with whom Delores and Glenn are both fairly familiar climbs the same tree that Glenn has decided to chop down. When Delores goes outside to ask Petey to come down from the tree, the boy makes a startling analogy during their conversation:

'Jesus is a vampire,' says Petey.

'Where'd you get that idea?'

'My brother said so.'

'How does he know?'

'He studied it. In a book.'

'I've heard a lot of things, but I never heard that.' (109).

Delores's calm reaction to Petey's comparison of Jesus to a vampire indicates her disconcern for traditional religious ideals. Instead of chastising Petey for his bold statement, she reacts rather flippantly, going along with his playfulness and pretending to

be genuinely interested in it. Also significant is the comparison itself between Jesus and one of the scariest creatures in legendary history. First, comparing Jesus to such an evil figure suggests not only that Jesus is considered by the younger generation as unsacred enough to be publicly compared to a famous symbol of evil, but that Jesus is perhaps considered to be a form of evil himself. This is especially true considering that vampires are largely considered to be mysterious creatures that hover between the natural and supernatural realms.

Instead of simply ignoring Christianity or refusing to participate in its traditional practices as evidenced by Mack and Mary Lou in “Rookers” and by Georgeann in “The Retreat,” Petey’s remark may lead readers to believe that a member of the younger generation may view Christianity so negatively as to compare it to evil. However, since this reading implies that Petey does not fully understand the implications of his analogy, and there exists a suggestion in the text that young Petey is merely parroting his older brother, a stronger analysis of this scene should focus more on the implications of Petey’s analogy for Delores and subsequently, for the readers. For Delores, this analogy does not generate a terribly emotional reaction either way. She neither admonishes Petey for what he says nor replies in agreement. Instead, she appears to barely acknowledge it, seemingly understanding its immature context and giving it, at least directly, no further thought. However, for the reader, the analogy jumpstarts further references to Christianity, specifically Jesus, which recur throughout the rest of the story as Delores ponders the meaning of life. Petey’s comparison of Jesus to a vampire serves to symbolically equalize the two figures, and if considered closely, they do share a few important traits. First, both Jesus and the vampire have human and nonhuman characteristics. They physically appear to be human, but in the spiritual sense, the

vampire is a dead soul and Jesus is merely the embodiment of a spirit. They are connected to ordinary humans, but inherently, they are not. In addition, as evil as vampires are, they are also mythical. Like vampires, Jesus is, in a sense, a myth as well. Theologians often discuss the historical Jesus—the living figure—and the mythic Jesus as narrated by Christian faith following the crucifixion. By comparing Jesus to a figure that does not exist, Petey's comparison seems to suggest the possibility that Jesus does not exist, either, or at least a kind of mythic balancing act. Lastly, as dangerous as the vampire figure is, it is also seductive. Their predatory tactic is to lure victims with mystery, eroticism, and romance. The comparison of the vampire to Jesus also implicates that the world's attraction to Jesus is equally as seductive, albeit in different ways. Christianity attracts the masses for the eternal pleasures that faith in its beliefs offers, but the underlying risk of that belief is dangerous in that often the figureheads of Christianity abuse their power profitably for monetary, earthly gain. The comparison in this case asks the question of whether Jesus—or more broadly, organized religion—is actually good or evil. Petey's analogy matter-of-factly weaves Jesus and vampires into the same cultural fabric, an idea that is emblematic of both postmodern and postsouthern understandings of cultural traditions.

Although Delores does not react much to Petey's statements, she does show significant concerns about what Glen does with the tree. The removal of the tree which Petey climbs represents the shift from an agrarian economic environment in the South to that of a more capitalistic, modern economy. The men unabashedly chop down a tree with years of history on the property in the name of starting a new business—a furniture workshop, specifically—with no real promise of success. Their actions prove that they place much more value on entrepreneurship than on any respect for history, further

illuminating the postsouthern break from professed traditional Southern ideals to those of a more modern South. Also important to note is that this profession of ideals has often masked a profit motive in the South or denied one after the fact. Glen A. Love suggests that acts such as cutting down the tree in this story represent society's decreased association of the physical landscape with a preservation of tradition and their increased view of nature as dynamic opportunity for change. He observes, "If the key terms for relatively untrammelled nature in the past were simplicity and permanence, those terms have shifted in an ecologically concerned present to complexity and change" (85). Perhaps contemporary Southerners' association of the absence of nature with change serves as an example of why Delores appears regretful about her husband cutting down the tree. Also, if she does in fact link the tree with change, this relationship would then further illustrate Delores's marked anxiety toward the impending shifts in her life that cancer would bring about. Such changes would include but not be limited to the physical effects on her body such as losing a breast or possibly both, but her life may be shortened significantly. Also, in what life she would have left, she may feel riddled by feelings of poor self-esteem due to the possible physical alterations her body would endure. Her body would lose its femininity and trade it for a more masculine physique, and this gender-based shift is the cause of anxiety among many Southern treatments of an altered, more modern landscape. If Delores lost her breast, her traditional lush physique would be destroyed, and if more old trees such as the one in her yard are cut down, the South loses its traditional physique as well.

The removal of the tree for economic opportunity clarifies to Delores the prospect of altering her body through surgery. Traditionally, Southern literature tends to feminize the agrarian landscape and therefore treat its harsh alterations as it endures the onset of

industry and capitalism as a form of masculinization. Of this traditional tendency, Townsend Ludington asserts, “Women’s physical bodies, within themselves or displaced onto the southern landscape, are presented visually in ways that demonstrate the southern cultural uneasiness over what the feminine could or should contain” (Ludington 95). In this story, Mason offers an ironic, postsouthern take on this pattern of southern literature. Delores’s fears about the changes that her body will undergo if she is in fact diagnosed with cancer are, in the end, unwarranted as her biopsy comes back benign. Mason seems to suggest here that the neo-agrarian anxieties about modernization are as benign as Delores’s tumor.

Delores’s understated sadness about cutting down the tree stems not from her attachment to the tree’s history, but from her conflicting feelings toward change. Her outlook on change seems to direct her religious ideals as well. Delores watches the elaborate process of the tree’s removal, and eventually goes to the doctor, who informs her that the lump is merely fibrocystic disease, and nothing to worry about. Throughout the story, as Delores faces the natural fears and anxieties induced by such a life-changing event as potentially being diagnosed with cancer, Christian faith appears prominent as a source of contemplation for Delores. Although she and Glenn do not attend church and do not exhibit any other feelings toward Christianity than at best nonparticipation and disinterest, faith seems to serve as an avenue through which Delores explores the brevity and meaning of her life.

Throughout the story Delores exhibits a lack of religious faith, but over the course of the narrative she begins at least to ponder what her life would be like if she were a more faithful person—a measured contemplation of what being “born again” would entail. This self-reevaluation is primarily a result of her anxiety over the potentially

threatening results of her biopsy. Until she goes to the doctor, she worries over what a bad diagnosis would mean for her life. Later, when the doctor reveals to her that she has nothing to worry about and that the only effect of the fibrocystic disease on her life will mean a significant change toward a much healthier diet, she further ponders her faith likely because her life has, for all intents and purposes, been spared by the news of the disease. Apart from her nervousness over the results of her biopsy, a seemingly insignificant, even to Delores, television program sparks her contemplations on faith.

We find Delores at the story's outset with her television turned to a religious station, but without her showing any real interest in the show. The program features a former astronaut who has come on the show not only to discuss his experiences in space but also to give a testimony to his belief in God:

The...astronaut claims that walking on the moon was nothing compared to walking with Jesus. Walking with Jesus is forever, but the moon trip was just three days. The preacher emcee...moves with slow-motion bounces, as though trying to get the feel of the astronaut's walk on the moon. The preacher has on a pink plaid jacket, and because the TV color isn't tuned properly, his face is the same bright shade. (106)

This image of the preacher is comical and makes him appear foolish. The illustration of the program as badly tuned indicates a lack of attention either on the part of the cable company, on Delores, or on both to properly tune the channel so that it appears to its best aesthetic potential. Additionally, the image of his skin matching the color of his already strangely colored coat exhibits the preacher as a figure to be ridiculed. Although from an objective viewpoint the evangelist's message and rhetoric could be substantive, Delores's subjective opinion of him finds him to be essentially valueless and therefore unworthy of

serious attention. His image also foreground distortion, suggesting a connection between visual image and the actual content of the program.

Delores's lack of mental investment in the program is significant. Instead of seriously watching the show, she only has it switched for a nominal reason having little if anything to do with the primary premise of the show. The narrator says:

Dolores has the Christian channel on only for the music. She likes to think she is impervious to evangelists. She usually laughs at the way they talk so urgently, even happily, about the end of the world. But today the show sends a chill through her. After the astronaut leaves, a missions specialist describes the 'gap of unbelief' that can only be bridged by Jesus Christ. The gap of unbelief sounds threatening, like the missile gap. (106).

Although Delores generally finds humor in televangelists, their message, and their rhetoric, on the day that she is to discover the fate of her health, she is for some reason moved to more substantive emotions. The idea of having no faith strikes fear in her, and her comparison of faithlessness to one of the greatest sources of anxiety felt by the U.S. during the Cold War magnifies her fear even further. Obviously, the Cold War would have underscored Delores's entire life, and the relation between faith and this major aspect of that war seems to suggest that anxiety toward faithlessness has also been a lifelong presence for Delores. A feature of the Cold War in terms of ideological strategies on both sides was to compel citizens to place their faith in either democracy or Communism—which for both cases, translated to faith in the state—by highlighting the potential for apocalyptic destruction. In Delores's view, this strategy is, arguably, not entirely different from the aims of televangelical communication. The Cold War reference also connects this story to “Detroit Skyline, 1949” in that both draw analogies between images of Communism and images of Christianity. In both cases, these images

are the source of fear and anxiety because they are misinterpreted by the characters. They are also used as a way of displacing the blame for that anxiety. As Peggy falsely understands the source of her anxiety to be her disbelief in a guardian angel, Delores interprets the televangelist's message to be nothing more than the same sort of trumped of fanaticism that pervaded the nationwide uncertainty toward Communism in her childhood.

Multimedia again prompts Delores to reflect on her life occurs later in the story when she is waiting in the doctor's office. The theme of rebirth is again revisited here through Delores's recollection of the band on the radio's reinvention of themselves. In this scene, she overhears some familiar music playing over the radio stereo system. The band that is singing the song in this scene was popular in her youth, which causes her to remember her childhood and compare the difference between the band as she knew it then and how it appears now. As she listens to the music she considers the group's shift from a career in the religious music industry to one in a more secular scene. The narrator says, "The Oak Ridge Boys are singing 'Elvira' on the radio. The Oak Ridge Boys used to be a gospel quartet when Delores was a child. Now, inexplicably, they are a group of young men with blow-dried hair, singing country-rock songs about love" (112). In order to remain relevant, The Oak Ridge Boys have reinvented themselves by reverting back toward youthful tendencies, changing everything from the tone and approach of their music to even their physical appearances.

Although the narrator ironically calls The Oak Ridge Boys' musical morphing "inexplicable" to Delores, there are actually a number of probable reasons for their reinvention. Delores's brief observation about The Oak Ridge Boys here signifies not only the specific band's crossover from the spiritual music area to the secular, but it also

reflects how the cultural aspects of the South have undergone the same tension between secularism and Christian religion as have its individual inhabitants. Secularism and religion often manifest themselves in the musical traditions most native to the South, such as the country and blues genres. Also important is the manner in which the narrator describes The Oak Ridge Boys' present physicality. It is important to note that The Oak Ridge Boys were founded in the 1940s and between then and the timeframe of this narrative, the group went through changes in members due to age in some instances and artistic disagreements in others. At the time of this story, the group's production team had encouraged them to move away from old-fashioned gospel to a fresher, contemporary sound. However, regardless of their actual age, the salient point is that The Oak Ridge Boys have embraced secular aims, drifting away from their traditional gospel roots – and this movement is inherently postsouthern. The description of the band as “young men with blow-dried hair” is used to exhibit how both artistically and physically The Oak Ridge Boys have tried to reinvent themselves to adhere to the desires of a younger society. Their music now reflects the more secular interests of their target audience, and they further associate themselves with the younger crowd by altering their physical appearance.

Aging and the subsequent issue of mortality appear to be a concern not only to The Oak Ridge Boys but to Delores as well. While The Oak Ridge Boys appear to be concerned with the sustainability of their musical careers, Delores's confrontation with the possibility of cancer generates from her a marked concentration on the purpose and direction of her life. Consequently, when the doctor gives her the results of her biopsy and tells her the details of fibrocystic disease, he warns Delores that in order to manage the disease, she will need to adopt a healthier diet. While she certainly expresses gratitude

for her health and her new lease on life, she also “feels cheated...[and] wonders what it would take to make a person want to walk with the Lord, a feeling that would be greater than walking on the moon” (116). Because her life is no longer in jeopardy and she can stop thinking about her mortality, Delores seems a bit disappointed. Her disappointment results from the anticipation she feels toward change. Although Glenn’s tree removal project disconcerts her and would lead readers initially to view her as opposed to change, she seems to positively grow emotionally when faced with the possible changes that cancer would have brought into her life. When the only alteration that she ends up with is a small change in her diet, she feels disappointed, realizing that her life will go on in the same routine and fashion as it did before the tumor scare. Her psychic growth is stunted here; she merely reverts back to disappointment instead of learning from the experience and actually allowing it to change her.

Through Peggy’s recollection of Lunetta and Delores’s encounter with peril, Mason shows diluted religious experiences. Although in no way can these experiences be categorized as direct, positive turns toward Christianity, they do exhibit consideration toward spirituality in the broader sense of the term. Peggy’s relationship with her guardian angel and Delores’s contemplations of the meaning of her life represent some need within these characters for a spiritual connection with something larger than themselves and their physical beings, but they do not translate directly into Christian spirituality. The influence of mass culture, informed by Cold War politics, exerts a significant force on the characters’ construction of meaning. Mason proves that even outside the realm of traditional Christianity or other conventional forms of spirituality, postsouthern Southerners still feel the need for psychic fulfillment.

CHAPTER III

MARRIAGES OF THE MINDS

A second trope that appears in two more stories concerned at least partly with religious dysfunction in deteriorating marriages. In “The Rookers,” an upper-middle-aged couple, Mack and Mary Lou, is socially distant from the community at the story’s outset and an increasing emotional distance between the husband and wife becomes evident as the story progresses. Although their marriage does not seem to be in danger of ending, it is obviously undergoing a remarkable change in light of their daughters all having moved away from home. The transience of their daughters triggers an understated anxiety in the couple toward their place in the social fabric of their own family, and in that of society as a whole. Their daughters’ absence implies another recurring theme throughout the collection, which is a focus on increased geographical mobility, a feature which affects the lives of all Southerners in the face of booming urban growth and technological, industry-based capitalism that has resulted in society’s move away from small rural communities to more urban environments and in the changing face of religion.

In order to cope with their loneliness, Mack and Betty Lou have adopted new, time-consuming hobbies. Mack has begun passing his newfound free time by doing some woodworking projects out of their home in a small western Kentucky town, while Mary Lou becomes immersed in a card game group that she joins and eventually frequently hosts at her house. This ritualistic card game represents her only steadfast ritual, arguably replacing that of religion in her life and also in the lives of her playing companions. An

analysis of the religious components of this story should begin with Mack's woodworking, as it proves to be one of the most blatantly referent scenes to religion in the collection. Exploring significantly the idea of hypocrisy within organized religion, Mason offers a postsouthern view characterized by levity and less by urgency. When discussing hypocrisy, neither Mack nor Mary Lou seems particularly unhinged or upset by it. Instead, they joke lightly about it and continue going about their normal actions. If anything, the conversation shows their united front toward organized religion. They recognize the presence of hypocrisy much as they might recognize a cloud in the sky. They accept it as a key element of the current religious landscape.

The unnamed third-person narrator says, "For some neighbors, Mack made a dinette booth out of a church pew salvaged from an abandoned country church. The sanding took days" (18). In an exchange with his wife, Mack justifies his reason for taking so long to sand down the pew: "I'm sanding off the layers of hypocrisy." To this, Mary Lou replies, "You sound like that guy who used to stand out on the corner and yell when church let out on Sunday... 'Here come the hyps,' he'd say." Mack asks who he was, and Mary Lou replies, "Oh, just some guy in town. That was years ago. He led a crusade against fluoride, too." Mack responds, "Fluoride's okay. It hardens the teeth" (19).

This minute exchange between the couple could, at first, be read as nothing more than comic relief intended to establish the characters of both Mack and Mary Lou and to illustrate the dynamic of their marriage. However, if studied closely, the couple's short conversation presents much information about the mindset of the average contemporary Southerner and the collective contemporary Southern town.

By converting the wooden pew, a structure originally designed for a church and clearly associated with organized Christian religious practices, into a table to be incorporated into someone's personal home, likely for secular uses, Mack's project shows this society's desire for more personal convenience than church can provide. If the church from which Mack obtained the pew has been left deserted, dilapidated, and in complete disrepair, obviously there is lack of interest in its upkeep. Another clue that illustrates a lack of interest in organized religion is the ease with which Mack takes possession of the pew. Instead of asking someone affiliated with the church for the pew, or even paying for it, Mack appears to have taken the pews by his own free will with no fear and no evidence of any questioning from church officials. Subsequently, the image of a pew unused in its traditional setting, unmonitored by church patrons or officials, and undergoing alternative, secular use within people's homes in the community strongly conveys the message that traditional religious practices have lost their significance and their meaning in the lives of contemporary Southerners. If occurring at all, these religious practices are not taking place within the church but instead in the more expedient arena of the home. The use of the pew as a dinette in the home makes the pew a centerpiece around which people can talk face to face with one another, whereas in the church those sitting on the pew cannot face one another and must listen quietly to the person at the pulpit. In this sense, moving to the pew to the home in the form of a dinette suggests modern society's increasing value on communicative freedoms. Instead of listening to one person's opinions, they want to engage in more active, open discussions. This again represents the postmodern theme of the neverending search. In church, people can only hear the thoughts of one person – the pastor – but at home, they are unlimited as to who can speak. These details highlight another important theme in Mason's collection

regarding religion, which is the idea that while secularism has not completely overtaken religion, secularism and religion are in tense conflict with one another.

However, if Mack's and Mary Lou's behavior during their conversation in this scene represents the norm in their society, then religion is likely not even observed much within the home, if at all. Mack's biting association of the church with hypocrisy does not read as a wavering statement—instead, he says it with conviction, implying that he has probably held this view for a long time and holds no shame in this outlook. Additionally, Mary Lou's agreement with him on the matter, while not exhibited by any verbal confirmation, appears more strongly in the absence of dissent. She, too, plays directly into the joking tone of the conversation, even responding with a verbal jab of her own about a person who stands in the open street and publicly defiles churchgoers in her hometown. The instance discussed is a kind of quasi-parable in that it is instructive about religion for Mack and Mary Lou. It teaches them that even when their practices are ridiculed, those who still attend church do little to squash that ridicule, and that lack of action further pervades negative interpretations of their practices and may suggest a lack of conviction in what they believe. This lack of conviction could be further understood to be the same sort of sentiment expressed by Lunetta in "Detroit Skyline, 1949"—a sentiment in which church attendance no longer translates to genuine spiritual belief but instead to societal obligations.

This man to whom Mary Lou refers, who has repeatedly cried "hypocrisy" on an open street corner in the town, is important for a couple of reasons. First, she refers to him in a distant, third-person fashion, illustrating the fact that she has only heard rumors about the man instead of actually witnessing him for herself—likely because she and Mack do not attend church. Secondly, in her reminiscence about the incident, Mary Lou

never suggests that the churchgoers reacted to this criticism. His right to free speech would of course protect him legally from punishment, but no church member ever challenges or confronts him. Especially because he performed this act on multiple occasions, Mary Lou's description of him would suggest that the church members did not take much offense at what he said, implying a lack of real conviction in their own faith. Certainly if the church members were at all stringent in their religion, they would have found a way to punish him. However, Mary Lou's flippant mention of his fluoride campaign projects him as someone whose habitual protests were never taken seriously, were likely nothing more than the source of jokes and mockery, as evidenced by Mary Lou and Mack's conversation about him. While the man is solitary in his rejection of religion, it is the church members' failure to reprimand him or their need to ignore the implications of what he says that suggests a lackadaisical attitude toward their faith at best and, at worst, that they believe themselves to be hypocrites and thus justified in receiving the harsh rebuke.

Although Mack and Mary Lou take their liberties in mocking other members of their community, they do not spend much time socializing within the community themselves. Except for Mary Ann's card game group that she meets with on a weekly basis, Mack and Mary Lou seem to live somewhat on the fringe of their society, independent and removed from social interaction. In light of their daughters' absence, Mack focuses on his woodworking, and Mary Lou immerses herself in her card game, which they may be for them a healthier use of time and energy than going to church. However, Mary Ann's card game group meets frequently—oftentimes at their house—and as the story progresses, Mary Ann appears increasingly enamored with the card game and reliant upon its occurrence for friendship, companionship, and all interpersonal

relationships outside of her marriage to Mack. When her youngest daughter comes home from college to visit, Mary Lou seems to be at a complete loss for how to interact with her daughter or sufficiently entertain her; this inability progresses to the point of Mary Lou's insistence that her daughter participate in the card game. Mary Lou's ritual of the card game suggests that the contemporary Southerner still desires social interaction but does not rely upon church in order to maintain outside connections. However, this game serves a substitute for church attendance in her life, and the parallels between the two are marked. The most significant likeness is that the game meets at the same time and at the same place every week, much like a church service. The attendees are always the same and reflect a sort of membership. This carries the "home church" theme started by Mack's pew-to-dinette project; Mary Lou's house is essentially the church figure for the Rook ritual—the place where members go to practice their ritual with other believers, or in this case, players. Through the more secular avenue of the card game, Mary Lou channels the traditional Southern habitual church attendance and the need for social interaction as provided by the religious institution.

In "The Retreat," a woman named Georgeann Pickett deals with the disintegration of her marriage to a pastor named Shelby. Of this story, G.O. Morpew observes that "religion is not a dominating presence in Georgeann's inner life nor does it play much of a role in the lives of any of Mason's central female characters. For them, religion is just in the landscape, like the corn fields that surround the Kentucky farm houses" (43). Laura Fine, in an article titled "Going Nowhere Slow," which looks at how popular culture has replaced the role of religion in the lives of contemporary Southerners, says that "...Georgeann is married to a pastor, but her husband's view of the world is a nearly obsolete one. Not only must he work as a licensed electrician to be able to afford to

preach, but his faith in the value of spirituality is one not even his wife can share” (89). If understood by Georgeann to be a part of the landscape as Morpew describes, then religion can be understood to be in the same sort of peril as Delores’s femininity in “The Climber.”

As Georgeann slowly recognizes the failure of the relationship and attempts unsuccessfully to leave her husband at the story's conclusion, we witness what happens when, as Georgeann describes it, she is married to "the cream of creation and all, and he's sweet as can be, but he turns out to be the wrong one . . ." (143). Her reference to Shelby as “the cream of creation” conjures images, of course, of the Biblical Creation. If Shelby is to be regarded here as the best of all men, Georgeann’s dissatisfaction with him proves that a life spent in the clergy detracts from what she considers to be a desirable relationship. In addition to the failing marital relationship between Georgeann and Shelby, numerous other instances of the community’s disinterest in church appear strongly evident in this story, as another one of its central conflicts is the looming disbandment of the church where Shelby serves as preacher and the effects of that event not only on him and Georgeann but also on the attitude of the community.

The first instance of Georgeann’s indifference toward church participation and spending time with her husband occurs in the opening descriptive lines of the story when the narrator reveals that "Georgeann has put off packing for the annual church retreat." Although we never receive an exact reason for her procrastination, we can almost certainly assume from her subsequent rudeness to her husband that it is a product of her animosity toward him and her role as a preacher’s wife. Sensing Georgeann’s tense disinterest in attending the retreat as much as the reader does, her husband interrogates her as she is repairing a choir robe:

"Don't you want to go?" he asks her one evening. "You used to just love to go."

"I wish they'd do something different just once. Something besides pray and yak at each other." Georgeann is basting facings on a child's choir robe, and she looks at him testily as she bites off a thread. (128)

Shelby's questioning here reveals not only the emotional gulf that exists between him and his wife, between their past situation and their present, but also a marked unenthusiastic attitude on the part of Georgeann toward customary religious practices or his holier-than-thou attitude. Traditionally, Southerners looked forward to such activities as prayer and, arguably, any opportunity to do so without interruption such as this retreat would be considered with high regard. However, Georgeann's fierce admonishment of prayer and religious fellowship reveals that at least one facet of her disillusionment with church is in the emptiness of its rituals. Because she wants them to do "something different," she calls for serious change in one of the most steadfast practices of Southern society. Her wish here represents the character of Georgeann as progressive and open to other alternatives, but also as bored with traditional religious practices. In this scene, Georgeann seems to call for change within the traditional habits and practices of her marriage, as well as in the church.

Another early indicator of nontraditional attitudes toward religion in this story appears when the narrator recounts the circumstances under which Georgeann and Shelby met and married at a young age. Two aspects of their relationship's history hold much significance in this vein. First, Georgeann's mother, instead of being supportive of the match, devalues it. In traditional terms, a man of the cloth would be respectable and worthy of societal praise; however, Georgeann's mother immediately jumps to the damaging possibilities that marriage might bring. The narrator says, "When Georgeann

married Shelby Pickett, her mother warned her about the disadvantages of marrying a preacher" (128). Instead of clinging to the heartening qualities that could have been associated with Shelby's occupation, Georgeann's mother does not regard those qualities whatsoever, at least initially. In fact, only many years after their marriage and the production of their two children does Georgeann's mother begin to support the marriage; however, after realizing that her mother was right in the first place, Georgeann's own unhappiness dilutes any optimism that comes from her mother.

Georgeann's initial attraction to Shelby and his demeanor when they first became a couple are significant, particularly when his past is juxtaposed with his present. His occupation in the present as a preacher requires an increased degree of morality, decision-making abilities, and constructive societal attitudes. However, Shelby did not always possess these qualities, and it is the personality of his secular youth that most attracted Georgeann and that she still longs for. The narrator explains that "when Georgeann first knew him, he was on probation for stealing four cases of Sun-Drop Cola and a ham from Kroger's. There was something charismatic about him even then" (128-129). Later in the story, she remembers this version of Shelby and appears to wish he still behaved as he did in the past. On the first day of the retreat, she looks at Shelby in his perfectly pressed black suit as he excitedly discusses new ideas for sermons. Although she still considers him to be "handsome," even in light of his happiness over his preaching, all she can concentrate on are the off-putting qualities that she sees in him such as self-righteousness, dominance, and patronization. She "has begun to see him as remote, like a meter reader. Georgeann thinks: He is not the same man who once stole a ham" (138).

Georgeann's disillusionment with the church also is manifest toward the beginning of the story through her anxious handling of a communion ceremony: "When

she gets to the church, she is so nervous that she sloshes the grape juice while pouring it into the tiny tray of communion glasses. Two of the glasses are missing because she broke them last time.” Her anxiety here is significant for two major reasons. First, her nervousness in general represents her as uncomfortable within the church, and secondly, her anxiety becomes even more magnified because not only is she an active member of the church, but she is also the wife of its pastor. Also, concerning the broken glasses, the narrator further reveals that she “has forgotten to order replacements. Shelby will notice, but she will say that it doesn't matter, because there won't be that many people at church, anyway” (131). Her interpretation of her failure to replace the glasses shows an unconsciously rebellious attitude toward her duties as a pastor's wife and reveals the community's failure regularly to attend church.

Apart from the breakdown of the marriage between Shelby and Georgeann and the attitude toward traditional religious ideals expressed by Georgeann's questioning of her husband's prescriptive behavior, this story, probably more than any other in the collection, relates most directly to the societal and physical breakdown of the church in the Southern community. In addition to Georgeann's individual nontraditional outlook, we also witness situational details that reflect the community and society as a whole. In setting up the story, the narrator informs us that “the small country churches in Western Kentucky are dying, as people move to town or simply lose interest in the church. The membership at the Grace United Methodist Church is seventy-five, but attendance varies between thirty and seventy” (130). This description of Shelby's church here, while is reminiscent of the decline of the church in “The Rookers” from which Mack obtains the church pews that he refurbishes and obviously indicative of the general lack of interest in church that seems prevalent among Southern society as a whole. It also serves as a

symptom of the disintegration of the marriage between Shelby and Georgeann; it is significant that Shelby's congregation and marriage are crumbling at the same time. One of the most central conflicts in "The Retreat" is the uncertainty and subsequent fear felt by both Shelby and Georgeann that Shelby will again have to be reassigned to a position at a different church. Although this new job would present their fourth relocation in a mere ten years of marriage and, presumably, neither Shelby and Georgeann should have much in the way of anxieties about moving simply because they have done it so often over the last decade, this reassignment could possibly mean a readjustment in their family situation as Georgeann becomes increasingly over the course of the story not to accompany her husband should he be required to move to a new job.

Other than her general unhappiness with Shelby and her dwindling attention to her role as his wife, Shelby's precarious financial situation and his management of it may also contribute to the demise of their once-strong relationship. As devoted as her husband is to his occupation in the clergy, it is not his singular means of income because in order to maintain their household, Shelby is forced to work a second job. In a conversation with Georgeann, her hen-pecking, overbearing mother reveals that in order to supplement what is likely a meager income as the pastor of a small church in such disarray, Shelby also works part-time as an electrician. Likely unaware of Georgeann's frustration in her marriage, her mother says, "I never gave him much credit at first, but Lord knows he's ambitious...And practical. He knew he had to learn a trade so he could support himself in his dedication to the church" (133). This revelation about Shelby is important because it reveals the difficulty in making a solid career out of the clergy in modern society. In order to provide for himself and his wife, Shelby has taken on a more secular occupation on top of his full-time commitment to the church that he serves. Shelby's additional work

may contribute to Georgeann's indifferent attitude toward his position as a preacher. Perhaps she does not take his clergy work as seriously because it is not his singular source of income; if it were, it would be insufficient to support the family. Through this situation, Georgeann may see the insufficiency of relying on the church in general and may contribute to her obvious loss of faith in Shelby and in traditional religion. Shelby's extra work also signifies the church's integration into modern secular society. What was once a strong, monolithic entity entirely capable of financially supporting itself has now become insufficient at doing so, enough, in fact, that its lead position still does not provide enough income for a solid living.

Also significant is the response that Georgeann gives to her mother's more affirmative reevaluation of Shelby in this instance. When she replies, "You make him sound like a junkie supporting a habit," (133) we can infer another sardonic verbal jab directed at religion, echoing the conversation about hypocrisy between Mack and Mary Lou in "The Rookers." By comparing religion to a kind of drug and Shelby to a junkie, Georgeann laces her husband's occupation with an image of societal marginalization, likening one of the most traditionally desirable and righteous occupations to a criminal enterprise. Important too is that for all of Shelby's good qualities and his obvious care and concern for the congregation which he serves, he ironically has little talent for interacting with his congregation and ministering to them on an individual level as would be expected in the traditional sense of his position. Fine observes:

When Georgeann types...a sermon he writes on sex education in the schools, she challenges a word, "pucelage." To [Shelby's]...explanation that it means "virginity" she retorts, "...Nobody will know what it means" (Shiloh 138). And...after he has heard that a church member has been drinking, Shelby delivers a sermon on alcohol abuse to a congregation of three (134). The vital

role the church once played in southern...communities is here...diminished (89).

Shelby's lack of connection with the community here as Fine points out renders him nearly useless. These examples imply that although some undesirable situations are happening their society, Shelby's congregation does not look to the church for spiritual guidance or advice and may not recognize drinking and sex education as major issues.

Apart from the severe unhappiness in the marriage between Georgeann and Shelby is the anxiety brought forth by the church's sagging attendance numbers. Shelby says to Georgeann, "You know what's going to happen, don't you? This little church is falling off so bad they're probably going to close it down and reassign me to Deep Springs" (137). This impending move magnifies the already strained relationship between him and Georgeann.

Shelby's concerns over the church's impending closure also reveals significant information about the general mindset of the congregation. During a conversation with Georgeann, he says, "It's awful...These people depend on this church. They don't want to travel all the way to Deep Springs. Besides, everybody wants their own home church" (137). Shelby's observation of the congregation's dependence upon their specific church and their subsequent unwillingness to travel to another suggests that although they are active members of the church physically closest to them, they may not necessarily be active out of any commitment to church in general. A recurring theme here seems to be the idea of forced mobility. The impending closure of Shelby's church and the ensuing conflicts engendered by this event within their community helps Mason register a trace of rural religious life that has changed with the movement of the population away from the sparsely populated areas to more urban environments within the region and to places outside it, namely the suburbs. If so, they might be more open to commuting to Shelby's

new church, especially if, as the story reveals, they will have no choice otherwise. Also, his statement that everyone wants a church in their hometown highlights another degree of Martyn Bone's idea of "placelessness": if people had churches near them, they might feel more confident in their sense of place, but as quickly as the churches are disappearing from the landscape, so too is a more concrete identification with place. Although the church's mere presence in the landscape might solidify a sense of place, that security does not necessarily mean that people will feel inclined to attend church. This diminishes the idea that people are refusing church because of a rejection of their society, but because they do not find the answers to subjective search in religious practices. This may further explain the failure of Shelby's sex ed and alcohol-themed sermons.

Georgeann herself exhibits some anxiety over identity. One aspect of Georgeann's aversion to church may have something to do with what she views as a lack of individuality, self-assertion, or possibly privacy that exists within organized religion. On one morning during the retreat, she again balks at her duties to her husband by refusing to attend one of the meetings with him. According the narrator, she instead "skips silent prayer...and stays in the room watching Phil Donahue. Donahue is interviewing parents of murdered children; the parents have organized to support each other in their grief. There is an organization for everything, Georgeann realizes" (138). Her reaction to Donahue here reflects what Vincent J. Miller calls "commodification" of religion in a consumer-driven society. By extending the idea of organization from the church to other groups, Georgeann breaks up "elements of religious traditions...into...free-floating signifiers abstracted from their interconnections with other...practices. This abstraction...weakens their ability to impact the concrete practice

of daily life. Deprived of their coherence with a broader network of beliefs, they are more readily available to other uses as shallow signifiers of whatever religious sentiment we desire” (Miller 3). From Donahue’s television program, Georgeann gains exactly the emotion that attending church is theoretically—or, for those who regularly attend, hopefully—supposed to provide: inspiration. The realization to which Georgeann comes, while arguably not entirely constructive for her, does strike her in such a way that she decides to become more participatory in the retreat, attending the marriage session. She asks Shelby to attend that session with her, but he cannot go because he has to attend another session at a coinciding time. Instead of going to his session with him, however, Georgeann goes to the marriage session alone.

The marriage session scene, while brief in both its action and description, provides a wealth of significant imagery for analysis. When Georgeann first arrives at the session, she is surrounded entirely by women who are also wives of preachers. Significant, however, is the fact that, for undiscovered reasons, none of their husbands have attended the session with them, either. The husbands’ absence here alludes to what could be a lack of strength in all of their marriages, not just Georgeann and Shelby’s. The next significant detail appears in a concentration on odd numbers, particularly the number seven. The narrator describes Georgeann’s initial impression of the workshop: "A woman leading the workshop describes seven kinds of intimacy, and eleven women volunteer their opinions. Seven of the women are ministers' wives. Georgeann isn't counting herself. The women talk about marriage enhancement, a term that is used five times" (138). The attention to odd numbers in general, such as five, eleven, and particularly seven, adds to the general mood of Georgeann’s discomfort in this session. Among women who act as though they are strong and resolute in their respective marriages,

although their husbands are ironically not in the session with them, Georgeann feels excluded and, of course, odd because she can see nothing in her marriage but unhappiness and failure. However, this portion of the retreat could also be construed as beneficial in that women are gaining some freedom from men. Finally, the repeated use of the number seven illustrates an intriguing juxtaposition of concepts related to traditional Christianity. The seven kinds of intimacy could be an allusion to the seven deadly sins, and this relationship between the number seven may serve to link the aspects of marriage to sin. On the other hand, the kinds of intimacy could also represent the seven cardinal virtues and therefore give marriage a positive connotation. The dichotomy between these connotations represent the conflicting, ambivalent idea of good and evil that laces the connection between Jesus and vampires in "The Climber." Because of this ambivalence, marriages may no longer serve as an absolute route to satisfaction, which helps explain why Georgeann grows weary of her relationship with Shelby. Also contributing to this allusion is the fact that of the eleven attendees, seven of them, like Georgeann, are married to preachers. The fact that Georgeann does not count herself among these women alludes, finally, to her probable feeling that her marriage to Shelby has disintegrated to the point that she can no longer feels a strong emotional bond with him.

Georgeann's disinterest in the various sessions offered at the retreat, as well as the failing bond between her and her husband is magnified by Shelby's devotion to attending them and the fact that they both refuse to attend any of the sessions together. While Shelby, of course, does not go to the marriage session because he has already obligated himself to attend another session and truly cannot go, Georgeann willfully refuses to accompany her husband at all. The narrator says:

“Shelby stays busy with the workshops and lectures, and Georgeann wanders in and out of them, as though she is visiting someone else's dreams. She and Shelby pass each other casually on the path, hurrying along between the lodge and the conference building. They wave hello like friendly acquaintances” (138). Much in the same way that the impending closure of Shelby's church hints toward the idea of mobility, this scene presents Georgeann and Shelby as both literally and figuratively on separate paths going in opposite directions. Themes of mobility, displacement, and a general lack of rootedness seem to define their relationship and could possibly determine Shelby's professional future as a pastor as well as both of their personal futures as husband and wife.

Georgeann finally reaches an emotional breaking point and decides to make her escape. Under the pretense of running an errand to a nearby gas station to restock on groceries and other supplies, taking the church's reserve cash bag with her, she instead never buys the food. She plows through the church's cash by spending the bulk of it on an arcade game spree. In the gas station is a quarter-operated machine on which she plays the game Ms. Pacman. Although she initially meant to play only once or twice just for fun, she becomes so caught up in the game that she loses track of hours of time. As she plays the game, she is eventually approached by a burly trucker who has stopped in on his journey. The trucker flirts with Georgeann, and, although she does not reciprocate the playfulness very much, his initial assessment of her reveals how obvious it is even to others that she does not fit within the traditional parameters of a devout Christian. The trucker makes conversation even though Georgeann is completely consumed with the video game:

“Are you with them church people?”

“Unh-hnh.”

“You don't look like a church lady.” (141)

The trucker here, who eventually proves both harmless to Georgeann and nearly irrelevant to the progression of events for her and Shelby following the argument in the car and after their return from the retreat, is symbolic. Not only does he represent a threat to further complicate relations between Shelby and Georgeann, but he also stands in diametric opposition to Shelby's current persona. In fact, he more closely resembles the rebellious qualities about Shelby that she initially fell for when she was in high school. Although the flirtation between Georgeann and the trucker comes to no fruition, we do sense that Georgeann's happiness here comes from escaping the dead "dream" of religion. Also, along with the impending closure of Shelby's church and the image of Shelby and Georgeann on divergent paths earlier in the story, the trucker serves as yet another example of Mason's exploration of mobility throughout this story. His mere occupation alone paints him as a nomadic figure that is constantly in motion and experiencing rootlessness and displacement. Additionally, the trucker's role in Georgeann's experience is equally transitory. Their flirtation proves fleeting as it ends nearly as quickly as it begins.

Of course, Shelby finally notices how long she has been gone when she does not return with the groceries and is livid when he finds out exactly how she has spent her time. Much like Mary Lou in "The Rookers," Georgeann finds alternatives to marital intimacy and religious faith in games. Later, when she and Shelby are in the car on the way back home and Shelby chastises her for what she did with the reserve money, Georgeann regretfully reveals to Shelby that she "...was happy when [she] was playing that game." (142). What Georgeann could possibly mean by this statement is that by engaging so deeply in that video game, she was able to take on a completely different identity and work toward a new and different goal. Also, the addictive glee that she

attains from playing the video game against the backdrop of a rural church retreat reveals that her interests lie in more modern conventions than tradition has to offer. In addition, significantly, the game Ms. Pacman requires skilled negotiating abilities from its players in order to navigate through its labyrinth-like structure and win the game. Culturally, Ms. Pacman also represents the image of female equality and empowerment as it was released to offset its masculine counterpart game, Pacman. The use of "Ms." is significant as well, hinting at the women's liberation movement's attempt to break the cultural practice of defining women by marital status while not making the distinction with regard to men. Georgeann's act of rebellion by playing this game in the gas station proves to be the most aggressive move that Georgeann takes toward breaking from her current situation. Although Shelby appears oblivious to Georgeann's frustration throughout the story and even slightly so in this scene, he begins to sense here that Georgeann's problems may run much deeper than just general disillusionment with church.

The final scenes of the story find Georgeann and Shelby at the precipice of the move to a new church that they have both dreaded to this point. Shelby's physical position in this scene signifies his figurative position in Georgeann's life. Georgeann, who has spent most of the story passively rebelling against her husband, verbally expressing her boredom and frustration toward church instead of in her marriage, finally confronts Shelby, telling him that she absolutely refuses to move with him now that he has been reassigned. As he stands before a window, his figure prevents the natural daylight from coming through the blinds: "Shelby stands, blocking the light from the window. 'I don't want to move either,' he says. 'But it's too awful far to commute'" (142). Shelby's blockage of the natural light here exhibits him not only as an obstacle to Georgeann but also as an obstacle against naturally occurring events. Shelby's anxiety

about another move reveals him as much less open to change than his wife, and therefore suggests that members of the clergy represent a refusal to adhere to modern societal progress. However, even he recognizes that not to move would be impossible, and with this recognition comes the realization of Georgeann's abject unhappiness and disappointment in their marriage.

At this moment, Shelby's oblivion to his wife's desperate unhappiness finally ceases. However, instead of reacting angrily or lashing out with any serious emotion, he remains calm:

"We are going to have to pray over this," he says quietly.

"Later," says Georgeann. "I have to go pick up the kids."
(142)

This final conversation solidifies Georgeann's refusal to participate in traditional religious practices. She ignores her husband's wishes, putting them off in the interest of other daily travails. Although Georgeann never does actually leave Shelby, she has put some significant distance between herself and traditional spirituality—a distance that Mason measures within the parameters of marriage in "The Rookers" and "The Retreat."

Both marriages and their stagnant spiritual life exist in a postsouthern landscape in a minimally functional manner. The ending of the "The Retreat," although open-ended, arguably suggests that despite Georgeann's unhappiness, and even in light of Shelby's delayed realization of her feelings, their marriage will sustain itself. As Georgeann goes about the normal activity of picking up her children from school, she will likely maintain her role as a wife and mother. Mack and Mary Lou in "The Rookers" seem to be in no serious threat of losing their marriage either. Mason appears to hint toward a subversion of Thomas Nelson Page's idea, which prevailed for subsequent generations, that strong

religious conviction is paramount to functioning well within Southern society. Although on a personal level struggles with religion may present some uncertainties, in the larger social landscape, they go basically unnoticed. Mason's characters thereby prove that fit easily into the greater social fabric.

CHAPTER IV

CONCLUSION

Bone's approach to studying literature of the contemporary South and how it has moved away from the characteristics that so stringently defined its predecessor, the work of the Southern Renaissance, can be applied not only to representations of an increasingly capitalistic economy on a formerly agrarian physical landscape, but also to representations of waning religious ideals and practices that accompany this shift. If Bone's hypothesis that Postsouthern literature signifies a break from traditional economic standards through its illustrations of the physical territory, certainly this argument would open the door for other scholarly research on how Postsouthern literature has deconstructed the numerous other shibboleths of the Renaissance that informed monolithic constructions of a sense of place. Apart from a concentration on a strongly agrarian lifestyle and an anxiety toward a more modern, industrial economy as studied by Bone, other factors construe Southern Renaissance literature such as strong familial bonds, insular interconnectedness within communities, and a clear devotion to Christian religious faith. My thesis research has applied the basis of Bone's theory of the Postsouthern exploration of agrarian versus capitalist economies to a study on how, like Bone's argument for Postsouthern ideas of capitalism, representations of religion in Mason's collection point toward a restructuring of the traditions of Southern literature. Mason's attention to her characters' lack of attention to religion strongly detracts from

the devout practices of past generations of characters represented in Southern literature.

Fine concludes that:

No matter their failings, splendid and amazing in their scope, the institutions and traditions of southern culture, though justly maligned, established a framework for behavior and attitudes. In Mason's stories, the traditions of religion, the conventions of white heterosexual family life, of masculine and feminine roles, are no longer in any way sustaining....[No] higher power orders the South Mason depicts, and no clear rules or mores remain for governing human social behavior (Fine 88).

As they throw sardonic, sarcastic witticisms toward others in their communities who participate in traditional religious practices, grow disillusioned with organized religion because of its ignorance of individuality, attend church for reasons having little or nothing to do with any serious devotion to faith, or simply ignore going to church at all without actually acknowledging their failure attend, they all show a marked break from the traditional attitudes toward religion as previously highlighted in the literature of the Southern Renaissance. Furthermore, the attitudes toward religion represented in Mason's *Shiloh and Other Stories*, as my analysis of selected stories reveals, are also represented in her other works, most notably the novel *In Country*. Mason's treatment of religion in her other works has been discussed by critics, albeit sparingly so.

However, on the whole, little scholarship exists on the topic of religion as it is represented in postsouthern literature, and virtually none exists that focuses very exhaustively on Mason's work. This gap in scholarship on contemporary literature's treatment of Southern literature seems perplexing to even the most naïve students of postsouthern literature in comparison to the Southern Renaissance. I propose that more critical attention to representations of religion in postsouthern literature would further shape the postsouthern canon toward becoming a more reliable, significant area of

literature. More expansive critical discussion could arguably help to solidify postsouthernism as a much more tangible, relatable area of American letters and less of just merely an “enabling word” as it was previously referred to by Michael Kreyling describes. A dissenter here might suggest that Southern literature as it stands today is arguably still deeply entrenched within the postsouthern era and that more production is needed in order to critically demarcate the end of postsouthernism. However, certainly the thirty years that have passed since the publication of works such as Barry Hannah’s short story collection *Airships*, a clear example of the parodic, reflexive take on Southern Renaissance literary characteristics as studied by Kreyling, enough common themes have developed that could more strongly define postsouthernism as an important, independent area of American literature.

Further scholarship not only on contemporary representations of religion but also on the family, the community, and the interpersonal relationships and hierarchies that exist within both family and community, would also serve to contextualize postsouthernism as its own significant generation of literature. Bone’s exploration of the changing elements of Southern culture as expressed by the literature can be further applied to discussions of defining qualities of the South other than the economic, such as those mentioned by Jack Butler. While Mason’s *Shiloh* or even the remainder of her body of work cannot fully provide enough basis for postsouthern criticism, numerous works by other postsouthern authors exhibit marked parodies, interrogations, and questioning not only of Southern ideals of religion but also of community, family, and race relations. These authors include but certainly are not limited to James Wilcox, most notably in his novel *Modern Baptists*, and Barry Hannah, particularly in his short novel, *Ray*.

Finally, a more developed critical body on the works of postsouthern literature and how they deconstruct the numerous preconceived traditional notions of the South, or how they dismiss the idea of the South as a distinct, singular region and attempt to expand and incorporate with the rest of the country and the world would help shape readers' future understanding of the status of contemporary Southern literature. Perhaps this attention would not only assist readers in interpreting the history of postsouthernism, but how its tendencies and goals may influence the next generation of literature to emerge from the South—that is, if the South as we know it still exists.

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