
MASON'S CHARACTERS GET SOME COLLEGE

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When surveying the fiction of Bobbie Ann Mason, it becomes evident to most readers that her characters have a marked tendency to stay close to home. Farmstead, neighborhood, country church, family kitchen and TV/living room-these are typical settings for stories in which Mason creates characters that have little contact with what in this context would be ironically called the "greater world." By focusing so exclusively on these locales, she gives the region a priority that suggests thematic implications. In Mason's stories, there is no world greater than that of western Kentucky-or rather, western Kentucky doesn't place much value on places far away.

The dominant stereotypic image of the Kentuckian, today as in the past, is that of the "hillbilly." The derivation of this term and its referent is debatable-some attribute the type to lands to the north and east of Kentucky, and the Hatfield versus McCoy legend is woven into the image. No matter what the true point of origin may be, nor its biased misrepresentation of a people, the term is commonly applied to Kentuckians, and it is a perception about which the residents are quite self-consciously aware. The "hillbilly" is uncouth, agrarian, short-tempered, loyal to kith and kin, and most emphatically uneducated. The compassion we may note in Mason's nearly exclusive treatment of characters who live in Kentucky provides a challenge to the hillbilly stereotype. She deftly shows their human natures, and in doing so argues against the denigration provided by a high-culture elitism. But on the question of education she is curiously ambivalent. In fact, in the world Mason creates, educational attainment is divisive at best, generally irrelevant, and often harmful to the positive values found in family, place, and self-image.

This preference for the indigenous folk of the region of western Kentucky is a salient characteristic that Barbara Kingsolver, a contemporary and expatriate Kentuckian, has found especially appealing in Mason's work:

It must have been in 1981 I read *Shiloh and Other Stories*, Bobbie Ann Mason's first collection, and that was a life-changing moment for me, because I suddenly understood that what moved me about those stories was not so much the style or the execution: it was the respect that she has for her people-her characters who are her people-and the simple fact that she deemed them worthy of serious literature. My jaw sort of dropped open . . . What moves me most about Bobbie Ann Mason's work is that when her characters speak, I hear them exactly. I'm hearing exact inflections, and it makes me homesick. (["Barbara Kingsolver" 157-158](#))

Kingsolver goes on to explain that, in contrast to Mason, the impetus behind her own fiction involves articulating truths for those, regardless of place, who have been marginalized by society. Whereas Kingsolver will treat racial or cultural or economic differences, Mason relies on region to establish her characters' isolation. What is particularly noteworthy here is that the gritty reality of lower middle class rural society is a particular choice Mason finds compelling. The question we are asked to ask is "Why?" Does Mason ask us to develop a respect for

her characters similar to that evoked in Kingsolver's reaction? Should we accept these characters, warts and all?

It is tempting to ascribe provincialism to Mason because it is so embedded in her characters, but it is abundantly clear that she has been out in the greater world-it is her characters who tend to stay home. Mason left her home in western Kentucky to attend undergraduate school at the University of Kentucky. She next worked as a journalist in New York, and attained a Ph.D. in modern literature from the University of Connecticut, eventually establishing her scholarly credentials with critical works on [Nabokov's *Ada*](#), and on girls' juvenile detective fiction. After marrying, she and her husband taught college English in Pennsylvania before moving back to Kentucky (["Bobbie Ann Mason" CLC 232-233](#)). While seeking her education and living in the northeast, she wrote exclusively about under-educated Kentuckians who rarely venture out of county, let alone out of state. Her most frequently mentioned place-name is the small community of Hopewell-the name symbolic of the western Kentucky ethos.

College students might first meet Mason's work in the contemporary short story section of a Norton or similar anthology, while more worldly readers might have encountered her fiction in *The New Yorker*, *Atlantic Monthly*, *Mother Jones*, *Harper's*, or *Paris Review*. She has achieved a stature in the realm of serious literature that many writers would envy, notably a success that has been fostered by the eastern literary establishment-a cultural context that is completely alien to Mason's characters. Despite this obvious success, little critical work exists. Her fiction is typically considered along with other contemporary women writers, such as Ann Tyler, in doctoral dissertations that rarely see print, or as review articles in the aforementioned journals. Critics may be put off by such overtly low-brow and unapologetically "popular" materials. Her characters don't achieve the kind of depth we find in Faulkner or Flannery O'Connor, and perhaps that is part of their essential personalities.

By her regular use of the western Kentucky locale, Mason runs the risk of being labeled a regional writer, and yet there is something transcendent in her use of this setting, something that intimates universal truths without creating improbable actions and false heroes and heroines. I suspect this clear intention to write about lower-class characters, and her sympathetic yet unsentimental treatments, strike non-Kentuckian readers as heartwarming and starkly human, while comfortably confirming many of the regional stereotypes of a people who are culturally inferior, bereft of the finer and predominantly east or west coast urbanities. It may also be due to Mason's artistic agenda of minimalism that the characters seem to live primarily on their surface motivations. Certainly spare in the descriptions and development Mason crafts for them, the characters tend to match their outward facades, which is to say that they really are not factitious beyond the most limited divisions between self and society. They generally *are how they behave*.

Though New Yorkers may find the characters appealing because of the flaws they perceive in them, Kentucky readers are more ambivalent. They don't enjoy being categorized as constituting "K-Mart realism," a term that Mason rejects as the snobbery of people who exclusively shop at Sak's Fifth Avenue ([Signature](#)).

Certainly, a strong concern over the value of place runs through nearly all of her fiction. By the narrative focus or regional point of view she adopts, Mason establishes a world as seen through the eyes of the isolated and often unsophisticated western Kentuckian. This emphasis produces a tension between home and the outer world, and this is most evident in how she treats higher education. It isn't a meaningful part of this home-world, and thus when her characters confront higher education, we are left to consider an ironic disjunction between ourselves as educated readers and the uneducated subjects in the fiction. Gremore describes this as a matter of objectification of working-class structures-so that the characters "seem to confirm for us the personhood we have won by making the transition from 'their' culture to 'ours'" ([Gremore 8](#)), a kind of smug, self-satisfied attitude of "there but for the grace of God go I." Gremore adds that our canonical acceptance of Mason's work may be due in part to an

affective component wherein we may attach a greater importance to these working-class fictions because of our own sense of having been close to those concerns. This presumes that the academy has been flooded with scholars from the middle class, an assumption that seems in keeping with the increased availability of higher education.

["Shiloh,"](#) the title story in the collection that Kingsolver so admired, offers immediate relevance to western Kentucky readers. The characters can be found at the local mall or during any county fair. The women in her stories tend to marry young, and the men gladly engage in manual labor. They pervade the landscape-both that of her creation and that of the actual culture of the region. If these residents become students and read Mason's works, they experience a poignant moment of self-recognition. Suddenly, literature is not some distant, attenuated study. Some Kentucky readers are bothered by the frank and unsentimental depiction of lower class people-a culture that is full of grimy coal industry work, popular music, farming, beer-drinking, television, big trucks; the favored activities of the characters involve going to the mall, renting movies on videotape, deer-hunting, church socials, and adulterous sex. Norma Jean, the main character of "Shiloh," with a name clearly meant to raise the busty specter of Marilyn Monroe, begins taking classes at Paducah Community College including English classes, where she writes a good "B"-grade essay on baking a cream soup casserole-standard fare in this region. Her husband, Leroy, has a bum leg. He's an ironic "king," like so many men in the region who have been disabled in mining accidents. A truck driver in the past, he is out of work. He smokes locally-grown marijuana, watches television, and makes popsicle-stick models of log cabins he would like to build. He is not fond of his wife's new direction and lurks in the background while she attends class.

Norma Jean's attempt at higher education is not the wedge that ultimately separates the couple, but it obviously represents a tension that exists when people move away from their early life choices. We might hope that her college-inspired intellectual capabilities would allow her to better know herself and her husband, and would serve to strengthen their marriage. Instead of improving the lives of the populace in Mason's world, education erodes their communal values, separates them from their families, and introduces them to newfangled ideas that only confuse and frustrate. Mason's characters gain little personal enrichment from any higher studies they pursue. Norma Jean learns to be dissatisfied with the limits she and her society have conspired to set for her. By story's end, she intends to divorce Leroy.

"The Rookers," second in the [Shiloh](#) collection, is more emphatic about the immiscibility of western Kentucky and higher education. Mary Lou and Mack Skaggs have sent their daughter, Judy, to Murray State University for her freshman year. Judy is absorbing a great deal of education, including the theories of sub-atomic particle physics. She is fascinated by matter that only exists within groups, explaining this to her mother and father who cannot comprehend what their daughter has been learning at the university. Later, Mary Lou realizes that her husband is similarly in danger of losing his existence, for he is unable to deal with his daughter's absence, and reveals his latent agoraphobia and the degree to which he is powerless among women. Though Judy seems to be gaining something vaguely positive from her academic pursuits, this growth is subverted when Mason has her gladly join in the communal card game, Rook. Mason's particular choice of game is sure to suggest the rookery from which Judy derives her lineage. Education has little effect on her basic life pattern, for she metaphorically returns to the nest. In contrast, her roommate withdraws from school in mid-semester, rather like the self-destructive Marita of a later story. In at least eight of the sixteen stories that comprise the *Shiloh and Other Stories* collection, education is a thematic element associated with loss or exile.

Mason thus offers us a challenge in depicting this culture as one in which educational effort is more likely to be destructive to essential communal values than a positive force for individual success. And this may be due to her own experience, for when she left a teaching position in Pennsylvania to return to Kentucky, it was partly because of having been made to feel inferior for her southern accent. In one interview, she intimates her dislike of teaching,

her anxiety over holding class and dealing with student writers ([Signature](#)). When she left Pennsylvania, she fled from higher education and found refuge in a full-time writing career. Toward the end of another interview, when asked, "What haven't we discussed that you think might be important for people to know about you?" Mason says of herself: "I'm not very sophisticated or I don't live in a very literary world, and I don't talk literature and I don't talk on a university level with adults" (["Bobbie Ann Mason," *Conversations* 200](#)). So it is not just from a particular college post that she defected, but from the whole university context. Her life since then has been a conscious avoidance of higher education.

In addition to this repudiation or disgust with higher education, it is fair to say that Mason accurately depicts the popular notions held by the citizenry of this region. Education in western Kentucky is perceived as an obligation, not an aspiration. None of Mason's characters catch fire from what D. H. Lawrence ironically termed "the eternal flame of the high ideal." Instead, Mason writes about the real world of Kentucky in which higher education is primarily a mark of class distinction, a relatively meaningless label attached to wealth and power-goals her characters do not valorize and have little chance of attaining. Though Morpheus suggests a trend in Mason's depiction of characters, so that the more educated the woman, the more refined and introspective she is ([47, 49](#)), this does not indicate Mason's preference for those characters, nor do we see her depicting them with increasing frequency. These few educated women are emotional and spiritual wrecks. They are just as benighted as the less-educated, and the dubious advantage that education grants them is that they may more fully apprehend their limitations.

Such, we may suppose, is the case with Mason herself. The irony is forceful. A university-trained Ph.D. who closely studies matters as esoteric as Nabokov's fiction chooses to write her own fictions about modest, homespun characters and their bourgeois aspirations. It is as if Mason and her characters have faced the overwhelming impact of modern society and admitted defeat in retreat. This is reminiscent of Levine's recountings of country folk who say, in response to seeing stage melodramas and visiting the 1890s Columbia Exposition: "I have had as much as I can hold Take me home, I can't stand any more of it." Levine infers from this distancing effect that we are looking at "cultural worlds moving farther and farther apart; worlds with less and less tolerance for or understanding of each other" ([212-213](#)). Mason's stories imply this same condition of division across the American scene.

In Mason's fiction, educational attainment is a divisive activity, and is regularly related to the reasons people move away. Residents think of those who emigrate from the Paducah flatlands of western Kentucky as people in exile; they describe the expatriates as lost or irrelevant. Mason excludes these exiles from priority in the plot-lines of her fiction. Instead, she focuses on those who stay or those who return. The emigres' absences are noted as sad flaws: whatever happiness they may find in their foreign existence is insufficient to balance the wrong of leaving the area. The locals tend to condescend regarding these unfortunate outcasts.

Such is true in Mason's most widely distributed story, the novel [In Country](#), produced as a film in 1989. The protagonist, a teen-age woman named "Sam," faces the usual post high school indecision. Like Dean, in "Piano Fingers," she "feels suspended somewhere between childhood and old age, not knowing which direction [s]he is facing" ([Love Life 84](#)). Her mother, who has remarried and moved to Lexington where she is a student, encourages Sam to go to college. In at least six instances, Sam questions the value of pursuing a degree. Higher education is not sufficient motivation in and of itself-at best it offers a dimly perceived opportunity in which Sam is flatly not interested. She first needs to work out some problems involving her own identity, and especially her grief for her father who had died as a soldier in Vietnam. She resists leaving her home in Hopewell, partly because that would mean leaving her war-syndrome distressed uncle. Even with the positive conclusion to their quest, there is no

reason to believe Sam will take advantage of the educational opportunity her mother offers her. Her first duty is to family, not to an educated self. Like soldiers who might "get some" action during a tour of duty, Sam may choose to "get some" college. (This is in fact how many college students would phrase their enrollment activity today.)

This family ethic makes the mother's defection even more painful. The mother's new life is focused on a suburban subdivision reminiscent of the '50s-a kind of Ozzie and Harriet world of small yards, unremarkable houses, bland people. Tied down to her home and new baby, Sam's mother isn't able to go with Sam, Emmett, and their aunt, on their journey to Washington D.C. to visit the Vietnam Veterans Memorial. Her big-city affiliations-tied to higher education-prevent her from participating in the other characters' quest for resolution. Though a student, there is little mention of a point or direction or goal in her studies. She gives Sam a credit card to help them if they get in a jam, but this is the most she can offer after having sold out to the world outside their ancestral Hopewell home. In terms of the quest structure, Sam's mother is reduced to the status of a helper.

And what would idealized education offer these or any of Mason's characters? They only want job-training and wealth sufficient to purchase a home entertainment system and cable television. Knowledge of other facts, other fields of study, is only distraction to those bent on vocations instead of educations. As Brinkmeyer points out, Mason's characters have no historical sense, and thus every event is radically new, as if they are the first people to have ever encountered such events [\(22\)](#). For example, Leroy and Norma Jean have little concept of what the Shiloh battlefield commemorated, no way to contextualize the world outside their localized present. They don't recognize that their imminent separation is in some ways similar to the Civil War that the battlefield represents. They haven't learned from history. Even in the few cases when the characters do become interested in their historical connections, the insight gained is fleeting and not important in their psychological development.

In a more recent story, "[Thunder Snow](#)" ([March, 1997](#)), Mason chooses a setting farther from home-the Lexington area-and only the husband, Boogie, has direct ties to western Kentucky. Despite these minor changes, the value of education has not improved. Boogie regrets not having gone to college for the sole reason that he is therefore unable to be a helicopter pilot in the reserves. Loftier educational attainment is beyond his interest. It is tempting to see this as a correlation between flight and learning, but the story doesn't support it. Boogie doesn't need higher education to fly; he needs training.

Mason offers the reader several women characters who do appreciate book learning. In her lengthiest novel so far, [Feather Crowns](#), the main character, Christie Wheeler, is described as a child who enjoyed school so much that she even stayed on after graduating and took extra tutorial help from the teacher. The family's reaction to this unusual interest in education is typical of the world Mason evokes:

Papa shook his head. "Wash Simmons down at the sawmill told me I needed to marry ye off to get ye out of that schoolhouse. Wash says he never seed a girl to keep on after the twelfth grade, when it's done over with." [\(42\)](#)

Of course, in the turn-of-the-century period in which the novel is set, women who sought higher education were unusual, and marriage was the expectation. At best Christie could have hoped to become a schoolteacher, a role she enacts with her soon-to-be husband in a simple moment of their courting. Later, when they wed, she notices a grasshopper caught by a spider over the head of the minister performing the ceremony. Presumably this mirrors her own situation, which she happily contemplates. There is no resentment in this character for loss of what she might have become. She has no inclination to resist the reproductive fate awaiting her.

College or university offers nothing of value to the Hopewell residents. In "Marita," fourth of the stories collected in [Love Life](#), going away to school has been an annoying complication for the title character. She returns home after half of her first semester, disgusted by a slovenly roommate and her own contact with interchangeable binge-drinking fraternity boys, one of whom has gotten her pregnant. There are no high ideals or benefits from intellectual attainment suggested in her abortive experience of life at the university. She contemplates beauty school as an equally valid choice. Mason implies in this leveling of educational options that the Hopewell resident places other desires at the heart of her existence, and these are more often tied to family and region than to what the larger world calls success.

Place is more than a convenience, instead functioning as a powerful aspect of Mason's characters. They are tied to their land as surely as Antaeus derived his strength from his contact with the earth. When they move away, they are estranged, cut loose, disenfranchised from the residents, as well as themselves. In her stories, the perspective taken is always that of the resident or returnee, the story told from this vantage looking outward.

The value Mason attributes to place is most clearly defined in her short novel, [Spence + Lila](#). Lila is in the hospital, recovering from a modified radical mastectomy. She faces an even more dangerous operation to remove blockage from the carotid arteries leading to her brain. Her husband, Spence, stewing in anxiety, has returned to their farm to do the usual chores. When left alone, he conjures up vivid images of his wife performing simple tasks around the farmstead. Then he walks across his land:

He follows the creek line down toward the back fields. In the center of one of the middle fields is a rise with a large, brooding old oak tree surrounded by a thicket of blackberry briars. From the rise, he looks out over his place. This is it. This is all there is in the world-it contains everything there is to know or possess, yet everywhere people are knocking their brains out trying to find something different, something better. His kids all scattered, looking for it. Everyone always wants a way out of something like this, but what he has here is the main thing there is-just the way things grow and die, the way the sun comes up and goes down every day. These are the facts of life. They are so simple they are almost impossible to grasp. It's like looking up at the stars at night, seeing them strung out like seed corn, sprinkled randomly across the sky. Stars seem simple, even monotonous, because there's no way to understand them. The ocean was like that too, blank and deep and easy. [\(132-133\)](#)

Though this seems to be much of Spence's internal monologue, it is also a kind of authorial commentary, and one that is consistent with the bulk of Mason's fictions. Mason admits as much in an interview when she agrees that this passage captures her sense of her homeland's power over her imagination [\(Lyons and Oliver, 257-258\)](#).

Spence's moment of reflection shows him the essential value of his home as it relates to universal greatness. This land transcends its particular limitations, and becomes a cosmos unto itself. The simile Mason uses to equate the stars to seed corn subsumes the greater universe into a Kentucky agricultural paradigm. As noted by Gerrard, when Spence later flies over his land as a guest of a neighbor crop-duster pilot, he notices how the land suggests the shape of a woman: tree-covered area as hair, two creeks as legs, house and barn as nipples [\(34\)](#). He has returned to the sacred tree, the world navel, the archetypal well-spring of all life, and drawing on its proximate strength, he re-interprets the world around him. The descriptions suggest the land as a type of the Great Mother archetype, the tree a female image of growth and rebirth: "the creative principle of the spirit, as of consciousness . . . was viewed genealogically as derived from the chaos or primeval ocean of the unconscious, as a son-principle, born of the Feminine The goddess as the tree that confers nourishment on souls" [\(Neumann 241\)](#).

Clearly there is a great division between this world and the world that is other than this, the world that is away, the world where people restlessly struggle to become successful in their lives. Though Mason crafts it as the focal point, the region is hardly a *locus amoenus*, is certainly a flawed land full of flawed people. In other words, Mason doesn't glamorize life in western Kentucky. Giannone offers, "Her rural characters are caught between an incomprehensible other-worldly force and the actual loss sustained by their this-worldly anguish" (554). Where is there room for New York in this context? These characters have enough to deal with in facing the terrors of bad harvests, unpredictable weather, declining health, unplanned pregnancy, death. They don't seek complication through book learning. Higher education and foreign travel serve no purpose in their lives. Perhaps it is this simplicity that is so attractive to those who live in more sophisticated, more complicated, more confusing, less hillbilly parts of the world.

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Though New Yorkers may find the characters appealing because of the flaws they perceive in them, Kentucky readers are more ambivalent. They don't enjoy being categorized as constituting "K-Mart realism," a term that Mason rejects as the snobbery of people who exclusively shop at Sak's Fifth Avenue ([Signature](#)).

Certainly, a strong concern over the value of place runs through nearly all of her fiction. By the narrative focus or regional point of view she adopts, Mason establishes a world as seen through the eyes of the isolated and often unsophisticated western Kentuckian. This emphasis produces a tension between home and the outer world, and this is most evident in how she treats higher education. It isn't a meaningful part of this home-world, and thus when her characters confront higher education, we are left to consider an ironic disjunction between ourselves as educated readers and the uneducated subjects in the fiction. Gremore describes this as a matter of objectification of working-class structures—so that the characters "seem to confirm for us the personhood we have won by making the transition from 'their' culture to 'ours'" ([Gremore 8](#)), a kind of smug, self-satisfied attitude of "there but for the grace of God go I." Gremore adds that our canonical acceptance of Mason's work may be due in part to an affective component wherein we may attach a greater importance to these working-class fictions because of our own sense of having been close to those concerns. This presumes that the academy has been flooded with scholars from the middle class, an assumption that seems in keeping with the increased availability of higher education.

["Shiloh,"](#) the title story in the collection that Kingsolver so admired, offers immediate relevance to western Kentucky readers. The characters can be found at the local mall or during any county fair. The women in her stories tend to marry young, and the men gladly engage in manual labor. They pervade the landscape—both that of her creation and that of the actual culture of the region. If these residents become students and read Mason's works, they experience a poignant moment of self-recognition. Suddenly, literature is not some distant, attenuated study. Some Kentucky readers are bothered by the frank and unsentimental depiction of lower class people—a culture that is full of grimy coal industry work, popular music, farming, beer-drinking, television, big trucks; the favored activities of the characters involve going to the mall, renting movies on videotape, deer-hunting, church socials, and adulterous sex. Norma Jean, the main character of "Shiloh," with a name clearly meant to raise the busty specter of Marilyn Monroe, begins taking classes at Paducah Community College including English classes, where

she writes a good "B"-grade essay on baking a cream soup casserole-standard fare in this region. Her husband, Leroy, has a bum leg. He's an ironic "king," like so many men in the region who have been disabled in mining accidents. A truck driver in the past, he is out of work. He smokes locally-grown marijuana, watches television, and makes popsicle-stick models of log cabins he would like to build. He is not fond of his wife's new direction and lurks in the background while she attends class.

Norma Jean's attempt at higher education is not the wedge that ultimately separates the couple, but it obviously represents a tension that exists when people move away from their early life choices. We might hope that her college-inspired intellectual capabilities would allow her to better know herself and her husband, and would serve to strengthen their marriage. Instead of improving the lives of the populace in Mason's world, education erodes their communal values, separates them from their families, and introduces them to newfangled ideas that only confuse and frustrate. Mason's characters gain little personal enrichment from any higher studies they pursue. Norma Jean learns to be dissatisfied with the limits she and her society have conspired to set for her. By story's end, she intends to divorce Leroy.

"The Rookers," second in the [Shiloh](#) collection, is more emphatic about the immiscibility of western Kentucky and higher education. Mary Lou and Mack Skaggs have sent their daughter, Judy, to Murray State University for her freshman year. Judy is absorbing a great deal of education, including the theories of sub-atomic particle physics. She is fascinated by matter that only exists within groups, explaining this to her mother and father who cannot comprehend what their daughter has been learning at the university. Later, Mary Lou realizes that her husband is similarly in danger of losing his existence, for he is unable to deal with his daughter's absence, and reveals his latent agoraphobia and the degree to which he is powerless among women. Though Judy seems to be gaining something vaguely positive from her academic pursuits, this growth is subverted when Mason has her gladly join in the communal card game, Rook. Mason's particular choice of game is sure to suggest the rookery from which Judy derives her lineage. Education has little effect on her basic life pattern, for she metaphorically returns to the nest. In contrast, her roommate withdraws from school in mid-semester, rather like the self-destructive Marita of a later story. In at least eight of the sixteen stories that comprise the *Shiloh and Other Stories* collection, education is a thematic element associated with loss or exile.

Mason thus offers us a challenge in depicting this culture as one in which educational effort is more likely to be destructive to essential communal values than a positive force for individual success. And this may be due to her own experience, for when she left a teaching position in Pennsylvania to return to Kentucky, it was partly because of having been made to feel inferior for her southern accent. In one interview, she intimates her dislike of teaching, her anxiety over holding class and dealing with student writers ([Signature](#)). When she left Pennsylvania, she fled from higher education and found refuge in a full-time writing career. Toward the end of another interview, when asked, "What haven't we discussed that you think might be important for people to know about you?" Mason says of herself: "I'm not very sophisticated or I don't live in a very literary world, and I don't talk literature and I don't talk on a university level with adults" (["Bobbie Ann Mason," Conversations 200](#)). So it is not just from a particular college post that she defected, but from the whole university context. Her life since then has been a conscious avoidance of higher education.

In addition to this repudiation or disgust with higher education, it is fair to say that Mason accurately depicts the popular notions held by the citizenry of this region. Education in western Kentucky is perceived as an obligation, not an aspiration. None of Mason's characters catch fire from what D. H. Lawrence ironically termed "the eternal flame of the high ideal." Instead, Mason writes about the real world of Kentucky in which higher education is primarily a mark of class distinction, a relatively meaningless label attached to wealth and power-goals her

characters do not valorize and have little chance of attaining. Though Morphey suggests a trend in Mason's depiction of characters, so that the more educated the woman, the more refined and introspective she is ([47, 49](#)), this does not indicate Mason's preference for those characters, nor do we see her depicting them with increasing frequency. These few educated women are emotional and spiritual wrecks. They are just as benighted as the less-educated, and the dubious advantage that education grants them is that they may more fully apprehend their limitations.

Such, we may suppose, is the case with Mason herself. The irony is forceful. A university-trained Ph.D. who closely studies matters as esoteric as Nabokov's fiction chooses to write her own fictions about modest, homespun characters and their bourgeois aspirations. It is as if Mason and her characters have faced the overwhelming impact of modern society and admitted defeat in retreat. This is reminiscent of Levine's recountings of country folk who say, in response to seeing stage melodramas and visiting the 1890s Columbia Exposition: "I have had as much as I can hold . . . Take me home, I can't stand any more of it." Levine infers from this distancing effect that we are looking at "cultural worlds moving farther and farther apart; worlds with less and less tolerance for or understanding of each other" ([212-213](#)). Mason's stories imply this same condition of division across the American scene.

In Mason's fiction, educational attainment is a divisive activity, and is regularly related to the reasons people move away. Residents think of those who emigrate from the Paducah flatlands of western Kentucky as people in exile; they describe the expatriates as lost or irrelevant. Mason excludes these exiles from priority in the plot-lines of her fiction. Instead, she focuses on those who stay or those who return. The emigres' absences are noted as sad flaws: whatever happiness they may find in their foreign existence is insufficient to balance the wrong of leaving the area. The locals tend to condescend regarding these unfortunate outcasts.

Such is true in Mason's most widely distributed story, the novel [In Country](#), produced as a film in 1989. The protagonist, a teen-age woman named "Sam," faces the usual post high school indecision. Like Dean, in "Piano Fingers," she "feels suspended somewhere between childhood and old age, not knowing which direction [s]he is facing" ([Love Life 84](#)). Her mother, who has remarried and moved to Lexington where she is a student, encourages Sam to go to college. In at least six instances, Sam questions the value of pursuing a degree. Higher education is not sufficient motivation in and of itself-at best it offers a dimly perceived opportunity in which Sam is flatly not interested. She first needs to work out some problems involving her own identity, and especially her grief for her father who had died as a soldier in Vietnam. She resists leaving her home in Hopewell, partly because that would mean leaving her war-syndrome distressed uncle. Even with the positive conclusion to their quest, there is no reason to believe Sam will take advantage of the educational opportunity her mother offers her. Her first duty is to family, not to an educated self. Like soldiers who might "get some" action during a tour of duty, Sam may choose to "get some" college. (This is in fact how many college students would phrase their enrollment activity today.)

This family ethic makes the mother's defection even more painful. The mother's new life is focused on a suburban subdivision reminiscent of the '50s-a kind of Ozzie and Harriet world of small yards, unremarkable houses, bland people. Tied down to her home and new baby, Sam's mother isn't able to go with Sam, Emmett, and their aunt, on their journey to Washington D.C. to visit the Vietnam Veterans Memorial. Her big-city affiliations-tied to higher education-prevent her from participating in the other characters' quest for resolution. Though a student, there is little mention of a point or direction or goal in her studies. She gives Sam a credit card to help them if they get in a jam, but this is the most she can offer after having sold out to the world outside their ancestral Hopewell home. In terms of the quest structure, Sam's mother is reduced to the status of a helper.

And what would idealized education offer these or any of Mason's characters? They only want job-training and wealth sufficient to purchase a home entertainment system and cable television. Knowledge of other facts, other fields of study, is only distraction to those bent on vocations instead of educations. As Brinkmeyer points out, Mason's characters have no historical sense, and thus every event is radically new, as if they are the first people to have ever encountered such events ([22](#)). For example, Leroy and Norma Jean have little concept of what the Shiloh battlefield commemorated, no way to contextualize the world outside their localized present. They don't recognize that their imminent separation is in some ways similar to the Civil War that the battlefield represents. They haven't learned from history. Even in the few cases when the characters do become interested in their historical connections, the insight gained is fleeting and not important in their psychological development.

In a more recent story, "[Thunder Snow](#)" ([March, 1997](#)), Mason chooses a setting farther from home-the Lexington area-and only the husband, Boogie, has direct ties to western Kentucky. Despite these minor changes, the value of education has not improved. Boogie regrets not having gone to college for the sole reason that he is therefore unable to be a helicopter pilot in the reserves. Loftier educational attainment is beyond his interest. It is tempting to see this as a correlation between flight and learning, but the story doesn't support it. Boogie doesn't need higher education to fly; he needs training.

Mason offers the reader several women characters who do appreciate book learning. In her lengthiest novel so far, [Feather Crowns](#), the main character, Christie Wheeler, is described as a child who enjoyed school so much that she even stayed on after graduating and took extra tutorial help from the teacher. The family's reaction to this unusual interest in education is typical of the world Mason evokes:

Papa shook his head. "Wash Simmons down at the sawmill told me I needed to marry ye off to get ye out of that schoolhouse. Wash says he never seed a girl to keep on after the twelfth grade, when it's done over with." ([42](#))

Of course, in the turn-of-the-century period in which the novel is set, women who sought higher education were unusual, and marriage was the expectation. At best Christie could have hoped to become a schoolteacher, a role she enacts with her soon-to-be husband in a simple moment of their courting. Later, when they wed, she notices a grasshopper caught by a spider over the head of the minister performing the ceremony. Presumably this mirrors her own situation, which she happily contemplates. There is no resentment in this character for loss of what she might have become. She has no inclination to resist the reproductive fate awaiting her.

College or university offers nothing of value to the Hopewell residents. In "Marita," fourth of the stories collected in [Love Life](#), going away to school has been an annoying complication for the title character. She returns home after half of her first semester, disgusted by a slovenly roommate and her own contact with interchangeable binge-drinking fraternity boys, one of whom has gotten her pregnant. There are no high ideals or benefits from intellectual attainment suggested in her abortive experience of life at the university. She contemplates beauty school as an equally valid choice. Mason implies in this leveling of educational options that the Hopewell resident places other desires at the heart of her existence, and these are more often tied to family and region than to what the larger world calls success.

Place is more than a convenience, instead functioning as a powerful aspect of Mason's characters. They are tied to their land as surely as Antaeus derived his strength from his contact with the earth. When they move away, they are estranged, cut loose, disenfranchised from the residents, as well as themselves. In her stories, the perspective taken is always that of the resident or returnee, the story told from this vantage looking outward.

The value Mason attributes to place is most clearly defined in her short novel, [Spence + Lila](#). Lila is in the hospital, recovering from a modified radical mastectomy. She faces an even more dangerous operation to remove blockage from the carotid arteries leading to her brain. Her husband, Spence, stewing in anxiety, has returned to their farm to do the usual chores. When left alone, he conjures up vivid images of his wife performing simple tasks around the farmstead. Then he walks across his land:

He follows the creek line down toward the back fields. In the center of one of the middle fields is a rise with a large, brooding old oak tree surrounded by a thicket of blackberry briars. From the rise, he looks out over his place. This is it. This is all there is in the world-it contains everything there is to know or possess, yet everywhere people are knocking their brains out trying to find something different, something better. His kids all scattered, looking for it. Everyone always wants a way out of something like this, but what he has here is the main thing there is-just the way things grow and die, the way the sun comes up and goes down every day. These are the facts of life. They are so simple they are almost impossible to grasp. It's like looking up at the stars at night, seeing them strung out like seed corn, sprinkled randomly across the sky. Stars seem simple, even monotonous, because there's no way to understand them. The ocean was like that too, blank and deep and easy. [\(132-133\)](#)

Though this seems to be much of Spence's internal monologue, it is also a kind of authorial commentary, and one that is consistent with the bulk of Mason's fictions. Mason admits as much in an interview when she agrees that this passage captures her sense of her homeland's power over her imagination [\(Lyons and Oliver, 257-258\)](#).

Spence's moment of reflection shows him the essential value of his home as it relates to universal greatness. This land transcends its particular limitations, and becomes a cosmos unto itself. The simile Mason uses to equate the stars to seed corn subsumes the greater universe into a Kentucky agricultural paradigm. As noted by Gerrard, when Spence later flies over his land as a guest of a neighbor crop-duster pilot, he notices how the land suggests the shape of a woman: tree-covered area as hair, two creeks as legs, house and barn as nipples [\(34\)](#). He has returned to the sacred tree, the world navel, the archetypal well-spring of all life, and drawing on its proximate strength, he re-interprets the world around him. The descriptions suggest the land as a type of the Great Mother archetype, the tree a female image of growth and rebirth: "the creative principle of the spirit, as of consciousness . . . was viewed genealogically as derived from the chaos or primeval ocean of the unconscious, as a son-principle, born of the Feminine The goddess as the tree that confers nourishment on souls" [\(Neumann 241\)](#).

Clearly there is a great division between this world and the world that is other than this, the world that is away, the world where people restlessly struggle to become successful in their lives. Though Mason crafts it as the focal point, the region is hardly a *locus amoenus*, is certainly a flawed land full of flawed people. In other words, Mason doesn't glamorize life in western Kentucky. Giannone offers, "Her rural characters are caught between an incomprehensible other-worldly force and the actual loss sustained by their this-worldly anguish" [\(554\)](#). Where is there room for New York in this context? These characters have enough to deal with in facing the terrors of bad harvests, unpredictable weather, declining health, unplanned pregnancy, death. They don't seek complication through book learning. Higher education and foreign travel serve no purpose in their lives. Perhaps it is this simplicity that is so attractive to those who live in more sophisticated, more complicated, more confusing, less hillbilly parts of the world.

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