

---

## CHANGING ROLES AND FINDING STABILITY: WOMEN IN BOBBIE ANN MASON'S *SHILOH AND OTHER STORIES*

Tina Bucher  
 University of Tennessee

---

Bobbie Ann Mason writes about people beset and befuddled by change -- change most often brought on by modern technology and modern civilization. Often we see her rural or blue-collar protagonists struggling to make sense of shopping malls, housing developments, and the latest topic on the Phil Donahue Show. But above all, I think, we see the men and women of her stories struggling to make sense of themselves and one another. Albert E. Wilhelm remarks that Mason is primarily interested in explaining the crises in individual lives that are provoked or intensified by radical changes in social relationships" (272-273). Certainly one of her foremost concerns in *Shiloh and Other Stories* is the change in social relationships between men and women; how evolving and rapidly shifting gender roles affect the lives of simple, everyday people is the theme of many of the stories in this collection. First is how some of her women try to forge new identities in the wake of shifting gender roles and how their efforts often include a blatant shrinking of traditionally feminine behaviors or characteristics; sometimes they seem almost completely to be trading roles with the men in their lives. And since change often causes uncertainty and instability, another aspect is the way these women find some solid ground through connections with other women.

Norma Jean, the main female character in the title story, is an example of what G.O. Morphew defines as a "downhome feminist" -- a woman who simply wants "more breathing space in [her] relationship with [her] man" (41), some way to gain independence and selfhood apart from marriage or heterosexual love relationships. Norma Jean works at the Rexall drug store and has returned to school, but Mason's portrayal of Norma Jean's quest for independence also includes some very direct rebellion against typically feminine roles. She is introduced in the first paragraph of the story when we are bluntly told: "Leroy Moffitt's wife, Norma Jean, is working on her pectorals. She lifts three-pound dumbbells to warm up, then progresses to a twenty-pound barbell. Standing with her legs apart, she reminds Leroy of Wonder Woman" (1). While more and more women are participating in weightlifting and bodybuilding, it still remains largely a male-dominated activity and carries with it images of extreme strength and power. Mason continues to use the image significantly throughout the story. Norma Jean's interest in bodybuilding was kindled after Leroy hurt his leg in the truck-driving accident and needed some physical therapy that involved weightlifting. Now, "building herself up" (1) has become a regular part of Norma Jean's life. When Leroy, who has just found out that his name means "the king," asks his wife if he's "still king around here," we are told, "Norma Jean flexes her biceps and feels them for hardness," while evasively replying, "I'm not fooling around with anybody, if that's what you mean" (13). Interestingly, the story both begins and ends with this image of muscles and strength. After Norma Jean has told Leroy at Shiloh that she wants to leave him, she walks away from him to the bluff overlooking the Tennessee River. Mason writes: "Now she turns toward Leroy and waves her arms. Is she beckoning to him? She seems to be doing an exercise for her chest muscles" (16). This very marked emphasis on strength -- a kind of strength typically associated with masculinity -- is one way Mason allows us to see the change in gender roles and its relation to woman's independence.

Norma Jean seems to be shedding traditional feminine roles in other small, but significant ways. It is she who leaves her dirty cereal bowl on the table when she leaves for work, and when the couple finally makes the trip to Shiloh, Norma Jean drives, with Leroy sitting beside her. Anyone who has driven down the road passing carfuls of couples, with the men in the front and women in the back, knows that it is still considered appropriate for the man to drive -- to assume the position of control. In this story, it is clearly Norma Jean who is taking control, and her shedding of feminine behaviors is made even more striking by Leroy's loss of traditionally masculine ones. The two are virtually trading places. It is Leroy who is at home all the time; he is now the one who wakes up to the cool place in the bed and the dirty dishes. Moreover, we are told that he has begun making things from craft kits -- popsicle stick-building, string art, macramé, and needlepoint, the last of which causes Mabel, Norma Jean's mother, to have a hissy-fit. She sputters, "Great day in the morning! -- That's what a woman would do" (6). Even Leroy's rig, the symbol of his breadwinning abilities, is now described in domestic terms. We are told that "it sits in the backyard, like a gigantic bird that has flown home to roost" (1). Later it is described as "a huge piece of furniture gathering dust in the backyard" (10). And it is Leroy who frantically tries to save the marriage, even giving in to Norma Jean's assumption of new roles. He pleads with her to help him build their log cabin: "You and me together could lift those logs. It's just like lifting weights" (7).

The story is not without uncertainty over these changing roles. While Leroy seems comfortable with needlepoint and staying home, both Mabel and Norma Jean are having some trouble with it. At one point Norma Jean laments that "in some ways, a woman prefers a man who wanders" (15). There is also some evidence that she is unsure over her own breaking of traditions. Her name itself is an indication of ambivalence. Norma Jean announces to Leroy that her name was the real name of Marilyn Monroe, perhaps the ultimate popular symbol of femininity. But Norma also is derived from "the Normans. They were invaders" (13) -- a curiously warlike, macho image. In some ways, then, Norma Jean seems caught between two worlds, two roles, and the changes in roles also result in problems for the marriage. At the beginning of the story, Leroy tells us that there is one connection between him and Norma Jean. When she explains to him her duties at the Rexall drugstore where she works at the cosmetics counter, she recounts "the three stages of complexion care, involving creams, toners, and moisturizers" (2). He in turn thinks "happily of other petroleum products -- axle grease, diesel fuel" (2). It is only when they revert to things associated with their old, traditional roles that they can make any kind of connection.

Norma Jean is typical of many women characters in the collection. They are women plagued by unsatisfactory marriages, often made more so because of the sweeping changes in the way women and men are "supposed" to be. Certainly positive male/female relationships seem few and far between. The women, seeking their independence and breaking from tradition, often find themselves cast adrift in a no-woman's land -- they aren't quite sure what to do with their new selves, or those selves are no longer compatible with the men in their lives. Some divorce. Some remain in unhappy, unfulfilling marriages. All seem to experience instability. In some of the stories, however, Mason provides connections with other women as a means of gaining some stability in the midst of fluctuating role changes.

In "The Rookers," Mary Lou Skaggs seems, like Norma Jean, to be swapping roles with her husband, only in this case it doesn't seem quite so voluntary. She finds herself hauling lumber, delivering bookshelves, and making special trips "to town to exchange flathead screws" (17) for her carpenter husband, Mack, who basically has become agoraphobic. We're told the "highway makes him nervous. Increasingly, he stays at home, working in his shop in the basement" (17). Mary Lou is not really straining to break out of tradition so much as she desires to do some living for herself now that her children are grown. She would like Mack to be a part of that, but he has no interest. When she suggests "bowling, camping, and a trip to Opryland" (21), he says he'd rather stay home and improve his mind by reading *Shogun*. When Mary Lou's long-lost brother calls from California and invites her and Mack out for a visit, she cautiously broaches the subject to him and gets the expected response -- a flimsy excuse.

We're told that Mary Lou has tried to be patient with Mack; we're also told that she doesn't know what to think anymore, and the story ends with an argument over Judy, their college-aged daughter who has left in the midst of the spat. Mack seems to blame Mary Lou for Judy's exit, and Mary Lou lashes out with a telling statement reflecting her own unhappiness and resentment: "She's gone. Furthermore, she's *grown* and she can go out in the middle of the night if she wants to. She can go to *South America* if she wants to" (33).

The one thing that seems to keep Mary Lou sane and solid in the increasing turmoil of her marriage is the women of the title -- the "Rookers." Thelma Crandall, Clausie Dowdy, and Edda Griffin are all widows, much older than Mary Lou, who meet at one another's homes each week to play Rook. Mack tells Mary Lou that "it is unhealthy for her to socialize with senior citizens" (19), but the older women seem a godsend to her. She thinks it "does her good to have some friends," and "she feels exhilarated when she is playing cards" with them (19). She especially admires their willingness to "get out and go" (20); she tells Mack that Edda "goes to Paducah driving that little Bobcat like she owned the road" (20). "They don't hide under a bushel. Like some people I know," she berates him. These Rookers seem to be fulfilling the need for companionship she desires; her suggestions to Mack about bowling and Opryland came *before* she began playing regularly with the Rookers. They also seem truly interested in her and what she has to say; when Mary Lou tells them of her brother Ed's phone call from California, they are "elated" over her news, while Mack is only worried about coming up with an excuse to get out of going to visit.

The ending of this story is not positive. Mary Lou and Mack argue, and as her husband mindlessly dials the time and temperature number again and again, Mary Lou comes to the realization that her husband is afraid of people--especially women. She feels "so sick and heavy with her power over him that she wants to cry" (33). Again, we see an unresolved and unhappy relationship, made even more so by the changing relationships between men and women, but this time we have also seen some means of seeking alternative support.

Connections between women also provide sustenance in other stories in the collection. In "Nancy Culpepper," the title character, a "new" woman, is still struggling to find identity and selfhood despite her non-traditional status. She is a woman who has sought education, "culture," and independence by moving to the Northeast. She married a "cool" photographer husband, and at the wedding the stereo played *St. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band* instead of the wedding march. Time has passed; she is still married to her photographer and they have a son, but despite her position as a modern woman with an egalitarian marriage, she still has questions and doubts. We even get the sense she has a longing for a time when things were simpler -- including roles. Nancy finds some solace and solidity with a long-dead great-great aunt who shared her name. When she returns to Kentucky to help move her grandmother to a nursing home, Nancy goes partly to search for a photograph of this woman who serves as her link to the past. When she finally does find the photograph, she stares at it a long time and realizes that the young woman in the ancient photograph would be "glad to dance to 'Lucy in the Sky with Diamonds' on her wedding day" (195), giving Nancy some assurance in her world of uncertainty.

In "Offerings," a final example, the importance of women's relationships with one another is evident from the first paragraph when we are told the childbirth stories of Sandra's maternal grandmother and mother. Sandra, yet another woman struggling in a marriage that is failing, lives on a farm by herself and is awaiting a visit from her mother and Grandmother Stamper, her father's mother. Sandra's husband, Jerry, is living in Louisville where he works in a K-Mart and goes to see go-go girls in smoky bars on weekends. Sandra has given up on her marriage and tells her mother that Jerry "better not waltz back in here. I'm through waiting on him" (57). She seems quite happy with her life on the farm, and she is completely self-sufficient, taking care of chores and duties usually thought of as requiring a man. She chops wood, insulates the attic, and fixes the leak in the basement. In fact, she seems one of the most content and settled of all the women in the collection. She also seems to gain strength from

her mother and her grandmother. Their relationships are not without problems. Sandra is keeping her separation from her grandmother, and Sandra's mother has never told her mother-in-law about her hysterectomy and still won't smoke in front of her. However, the solidarity among the women is unmistakable. Sandra presses her grandmother for stories from the past, to tell about the farm *she* lived on and managed. And the story ends, standing "side by side by the edge of the pond" (59), watching Sandra's ducks:

The night is peaceful, and Sandra thinks of the thousands of large golden garden spiders hidden in the field. In the early morning the dew shines on their trampolines, and she can imagine bouncing with an excited spring from web to web, all the way up the hill to the woods. (57)

That the story begins and ends with these images of connections between women, and indeed ends positively, is significant. It illustrates the power of relationships between women to sustain in times of change.

It would be mistaken to say that such relationships solve all the problems of all the women in *Shiloh and Other Stories*. Some of the relationships between women are as flawed and problematic as those between men and women; Norma Jean, for example, has a very difficult relationship with her mother, one which serves to keep her as oppressed as her marriage to Leroy. But in a collection of stories which depicts the stormy changes between the sexes resulting from social changes, we are given an opportunity to see women like Mary Lou, Nancy, and Sandra gaining some stability through bonds with other women.

In "Shiloh," Leroy thinks to himself that "Nobody knows anything. The answers are always changing" (5). The answers *are* always changing as are the questions. Bobbie Ann Mason effectively explores both in her fiction, especially how the changing questions and answers about gender affect the average women and men of our society.

## WORKS CITED

Mason, Bobbie Ann. *Shiloh and Other Stories*. New York: Harper, 1982.

Morphew, G.O. "Downhome Feminists in *Shiloh and Other Stories*." *Southern Literary Journal* 21.2 (1989): 41-49.

Wilhelm, Albert E. "Private Rituals: Coping with Change in the Fiction of Bobbie Ann Mason." *Midwest Quarterly* 28 (1987): 271-282.

---

Copyright © 1991, 2000, Middle Tennessee State University.

Border States On-Line is hosted by [Georgetown College](#).

This page was last updated on 3/14/00. | [Border States On-Line](#) | [Site Map](#)

This web page is maintained by  
Dr. Harold D. Tallant, Department of History, Georgetown College  
400 East College Street, Georgetown, KY 40324, (502) 863-8075  
E-mail: [htallant@georgetowncollege.edu](mailto:htallant@georgetowncollege.edu)