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# A Folkloristic Literary Analysis of Cultural Collision in the Work of Bobbie Ann Mason

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A FOLKLORISTIC LITERARY ANALYSIS OF CULTURAL COLLISION IN THE  
WORK OF BOBBIE ANN MASON

by

SALLY JOY NEWMAN

Under the Direction of John Burrison

ABSTRACT

The clash of folk and popular cultures is central to the work of contemporary Southeastern American author Bobbie Ann Mason. Though Mason is often classified as a Kmart realist because of her style's emphasis on the minutia of mass-produced culture, a more nuanced understanding of her work can be reached via a focus on the way she explores the complex, evolving relationship between folklore and popular culture. This thesis is a folkloristic literary analysis of selected Mason fiction and memoir. It examines the interplay between homogenized American popular culture, region-specific rural Southeastern American folk culture, gender roles, subregional history, and twentieth-century economics in order to explore and articulate the cultural collision of folk traditions and popular culture defining Mason's rural/small-town Western Kentucky landscape. I highlight Mason's portrayal of intangible folklore (folk speech and behavioral customs) and material folklore (foodways and quilting) in *Nancy Culpepper Stories*, "Love Life," and *Clear Springs*.

INDEX WORDS: Bobbie Ann Mason, Folkloristic literary analysis, Southern (southeastern) American folklore, Kentucky, "Love Life," *Nancy Culpepper Stories*, "Spence + Lila," *Clear Springs*, Quilts, Mourning traditions, Lye soap, Pokeweed (poke salad salet sallet)

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by

SALLY JOY NEWMAN

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts

in the College of Arts and Sciences

Georgia State University

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WORK OF BOBBIE ANN MASON

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May 2013

**DEDICATION**

I would like to dedicate this work to my grandmother, Isabel Triplitt, and my mother, Gail Newman. Thank you both for all your love and support.

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

Many thanks to Ms. Cathy Fussell (for introducing me to the wonderful craft/art of quilting), to Dr. John Burrison (for introducing me to the exciting field of folklore studies), and to Bobbie Ann Mason (for, in addition to composing amazingly enjoyable literature, also taking the time to write gracious and informative answers to this fan's emails.)

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## 1 INTRODUCTION

Contemporary American author Bobbie Ann Mason is known for the emphasis she places in her writing on such pop culture references as brand names, television shows, and music lyrics. This close attention to the consumer backdrop of American life prompted early 1980s literary critics to categorize her style as Kmart realism, a categorization still associated with her today. However, pop culture consumption is only part of the Mason equation. Rural Kentucky folk culture – including various generations’ retention, rejection, and reinterpretation of their native folklore – is crucial to this author’s themes and storylines. Mason’s work contains a heady blend of homogenized American popular culture and region-specific rural folk culture that results in a whirlwind of cultural collisions and cultural transition.

In her 1989 review of the short story collection *Love Life Stories*, Judith Freedman compares a typical story by Mason to “a meal of collard greens and Big Macs” (1). Albert Wilhelm uses Freedman’s “perceptive” comparison to introduce his 1998 characterization of Mason’s short fiction as a mixture of “the old-fashioned with the newfangled, the down-home country with the increasingly urban, the distinctively regional with the blandly regionless” (*Bobbie* 3). Noting that this mixture contains jarring juxtapositions, Wilhelm emphasizes that the resulting tension is “central” to Mason’s writing (*Bobbie* 3). Freedman and Wilhelm are describing Mason’s depictions of the accelerated social and economic change affecting the rural American Southeast during the twentieth century. Over the course of this era, Southern regional culture was irrevocably altered by the encroaching spread of homogenized American mass culture. Once locked in regional traditions for generations, formally isolated rural Southerners gained access to new products, ideas, and options. This cultural change – involving both the process of cultural

collision and the consequent process of cultural transition in rural twentieth-century Western Kentucky – provides both the setting and the driving force of the first twenty-four years of Mason’s work.

Though the vast majority of critics take time in their analyses to acknowledge the influential presence of cultural shift in Mason’s writing, they lack adequate terminology to explore this key concept fully. By relying solely on phrases such as “old-fashioned” and “newfangled” to describe the competing forces inherent to Mason’s settings, critics gloss over an important explanatory paradigm that could shed new light on this author’s use of, and attitude towards, cultural change.

Within folkloristics (the study of folklore) are the concepts, terms, and method that would provide a clear and informative description of the cultural shift taking place in Mason’s depictions of twentieth-century rural/small-town Western Kentucky. Folkloristics improves upon such vague cultural descriptions as “old-fashioned” and “newfangled” by distinguishing between three types of culture: academic, popular, and folk. Each of these three categorical definitions rests on its means of transmission of knowledge. Academic culture involves the formal study of subjects through such literate institutions as the Church and the University. Popular culture’s means of production is mechanical, and its means of knowledge transmission is through such mass media as print, television, and radio. Folk culture is passed from mentor to mentee in an informal, face-to-face transmission of knowledge. Folk knowledge is disseminated from mouth-to-ear and hand-to-eye in personal relationships such as families, tight-knit communities, and apprenticeships. Folk culture’s material products are individually hand-crafted, and both its material and intangible products display individual variation within a chain of constancy that is tradition. The “old-fashioned” in a Mason work tends to be of folk origin; the “newfangled” is usually a product of popular culture.

Mason's depictions of what happens when "newfangled" popular practices compete with, and often override, "old-fashioned" folk practices can be read as an example of academic cultural output. Though Mason's writing is creative as opposed to analytical, she performs three distinctively academic roles in the course of her creative enterprise. She acts as a folklore collector, accurately recording and reproducing region-specific folklore drawn from her own life experience growing up on a farm in rural Western Kentucky as well as from her observation and research of the experiences, traditional beliefs, and folk practices of rural Western Kentucky residents such as her mother and paternal grandmother. She also acts as an anthropologist, closely detailing the minutia of pop culture's material and non-material products, such as brand names and chart-topping rock lyrics. Finally, she acts as a historian, using extensive archival, historical, and oral interview research to build backgrounds for such works as the Vietnam-themed *In Country*, the turn-of-the-twentieth-century novel *Feather Crowns*, the set-in-rural-Western-Kentucky majority of her short fiction, and her folklore-infused memoir *Clear Springs*. The competence and skill Mason wields in these interlocking roles of folklorist, anthropologist, and historian are due in part to the author's academic background. Mason earned a PhD in Literature from the University of Connecticut in 1972 (Mason, *Bobbie Ann Mason* website). This academic foundation informs her work, not merely because it shaped her formal study of writing, but because her fiction and memoir owe their final products to the research and analytical skills she gained in academia.

Thus, the bulk of Mason's writing is an academic exploration of the collision of folk and popular cultures in twentieth-century rural Western Kentucky packaged in a creative writing format. My examination of what happens when these distinctively different cultural categories of folk, popular, and academic meet and interact in Mason's writing contributes to the critical canon

by uniting literary analysis with this key explanatory folkloristic framework. To better illustrate my approach, I return to my opening quote in which Freedman compares Mason's writing to "a meal of collard greens and Big Macs."

The terms and concepts of folkloristics permit a reading of Freedman's combination of "collards and Big Macs" that explains the cultural tension illustrated by her metaphorical meal. This aberrant cuisine combination, consisting of both traditional rural Southeastern fare and a well-known mass-market product of American popular culture, depicts the unsettling effect produced when folk culture and popular culture collide. The collards and the Big Mac compete on the dinner plate, each representative of a different method of production, a different transference of knowledge, and a different worldview. Mason demonstrates in her writing an intense interest in the bewilderment, anxiety, and enthusiasm experienced by characters in the midst of such cultural collision.

Wilhelm is in agreement with the large majority of literary critics when he states that Mason portrays her characters as "confront[ing] the disturbing consequences of rapid social change in their life passages" (*Bobbie* 3-4). Analyzers of Mason's work have always been quick to point out that these "disturbing consequences" prompt some characters to mourn the passing of traditional attitudes and practices. More recently however, critics have balanced this emphasis on mourning with acknowledgement of the possibilities and opportunities produced by the spread of American popular culture. These possibilities and opportunities erode the certainties and limitations inherent to folk behavioral expectations. The traditional way is no longer the sole correct way. Instead, the traditional way is now merely one of many available, permissible options. This new critical perception is due in part to Mason's insistence, stated in various

interviews, that she views much of these cultural developments in a positive light. In an interview for *BOMB Magazine*, Mason explains:

There is a lot of nostalgia abroad for a simpler time. And I think that simpler time was full of hardship. [...] [In] the phenomenal swirl of change going on in this world [...] it's very confusing and scary and hard for the center to hold, and hard to know where you belong and what's going to last. But, on the other hand, these characters are facing change and what they think of as progress, and they're getting a lot of advantages out of it, opportunities their parents' generation didn't have. There's a lot of optimism and positive value coming out of this. (Gholson)

Although she acknowledges that cultural change is bewildering and frightening, Mason's attitude toward this change is hopeful. She sees possibility and opportunity in the collision of folk and popular cultures.

One of the ways Mason represents folk culture in her depiction of cultural collision is through the presence of quilts in her writing. A quilt in a Mason work typically functions in one of two ways. This handcrafted folk artifact can act as a background prop or as a narrative engine. Usually, a quilt in a Mason work is one folk background prop among many. The collective role of such folk artifacts is to highlight the presence of Southeastern rural folk culture in the small town/rural Western Kentucky setting. The quilt in the short story "Nancy Culpepper" plays this role. Occasionally, a quilt acts as the narrative engine driving a Mason piece, as does the quilt in the short story "Love Life." Whether a quilt plays a minor or major role in its Mason work, it is always a hand-produced (as opposed to mass-produced) product: a product of folk craft within a long-standing regional tradition.

At first glance, Mason's work may seem to exhibit only a tangential relationship with the material folk practice of quilting. Although Wilhelm includes an examination of the feminist significance of the burial quilt in his 1998 close reading of "Love Life," no other critic has attempted an in-depth exploration of Mason's literary use of quilts, and very few critics have touched on other examples of folklore in her work. The prevailing attitude in Mason criticism values the author's depiction of her characters' anxious and enthusiastic responses to products of popular culture, not products of folk culture. Critics seem either to not recognize the existence of the quilt motif in Mason's writing, or simply to feel the motif does not warrant their attention.

However, I read Mason's use of quilts as speaking directly of the clash of folk and popular cultures that is central to her work. Across her work from 1982 through 2006, Mason's characters experience culture shock, the dissolution of strict gender-based behavioral prescriptions, individual freedom, and alarming confusion. Mason incorporated this quilt motif into every novel and collection of stories she published during this time. Quilts are not just symbols of rural Southern folk culture in Mason's writings; they are also examples of a specifically female craft within a culture permeated by stringent limits on female autonomy. The presence of quilts in her work's twentieth-century settings indicates the ongoing cultural conflict experienced by her characters. A Mason quilt can be a quiet acknowledgement of fading rural Kentucky traditions, or it can act as a vehicle for the conflicting emotions and attitudes of those characters caught in the passing of the known old and the inundation of the confusing new. When a character dislikes, appreciates, contemplates, and/or interacts with a quilt, this action contributes to the conversation running throughout Mason's oeuvre about how rural regional folk culture and American popular culture clash in twentieth-century Southeastern America.

A Mason quilt may indicate not only the presence of cultural collision, but also the attempt of a character to create and negotiate a liminal space in the midst of cultural confusion. As they attempt to forge their lives in an environment of culture shock, Mason characters must decide what of the new to accept, what of the old to retain, and what of both new and old should be rejected. In each of the short stories "Love Life" and "Nancy Culpepper," a quilt becomes a gateway through which the reader can examine a character's acceptance or rejection of a variety of folk cultural elements. Part of her literary documentation of this time of cultural transition involves noting the rural folk cultural elements that remain present, if sometimes transmuted, in the lives of her characters. These traditional elements fall into the categories of both intangible folklore, such as folk speech and behavioral customs, and material folklore, such as foodways and quilting. In her writing, Mason consistently places quilts alongside an array of brand-name mass-produced products. By doing so, she goes beyond using quilts to represent traditional folk expectations in a world of popular culture. Her juxtaposition also emphasizes the effects that the twentieth century's accelerated cultural change has had on its rural/small-town Kentucky residents' practices and attitudes. As they struggle to make elements of their folk heritage and their modern lifestyles coexist, each of Mason's characters strives for an individually-tailored balance between traditions and popular culture.

### **1.1 Literature Review**

A significant portion of Mason scholarship engages in two intertwined conversations as it examines the author's portrayal of cultural change in rural/small-town Kentucky and extends this portrayal to represent the majority of the rural, agriculturally based American Southeast. The main conversation acknowledges Mason's depiction of the process in which American popular culture has overtaken Southeastern folk culture in the twentieth century. In this first



conversation, critics place emphasis on characters' experiences of culture shock, individual freedom, and anxious confusion. Characters have so many new options, and are inundated with so many ideas, that they feel overwhelmed, even lost – unmoored from the seemingly comparative safety and dependability formally provided by the limiting structure of their pioneer/farmer ancestors' folk culture. In the related secondary conversation, critics read Mason as proposing methods to help combat the sense of personal isolation and rootless confusion caused by this cultural transition. Some Mason characters attempt to create a balance of folk and popular cultural elements in the midst of cultural confusion, a pattern which strongly suggests that Mason believes life can be rich and rewarding because of, as opposed to in spite of, cultural collision.

I have organized my brief Literature Review into two sections. Section 1 is my description of the first critical conversation about Mason's depiction of cultural collision. Section 2 is my description of the second critical conversation. For clarity's sake, I have included the folkloristic concepts of "folk" and "popular" to explain critical concepts in my descriptions of these two conversations, despite the fact that Mason critics do not themselves use these terms.

### ***1.1.1 Perception of Cultural Collision***

The primary critical conversation about Mason's writing focuses on the immediate results of cultural collision in twentieth-century rural/small-town Kentucky. As they describe and discuss the effects of American popular culture's rapidly intensifying presence in a rural landscape previously dominated by subregional traditions, critics debate whether to read these effects as positive or negative. Some critics, especially those writing during the 1980s, place more emphasis on the anxiety and confusion created by cultural collision than on the potential benefits created by cultural transition. However, even as they stress the bewilderment that characters face,

most critics also perceive potential positives being ushered into characters' lives by the inundating influx of American popular culture.

Critics recognize that Mason's anxious and confused characters feel they can no longer rely on tradition in the midst of cultural change. In his 1987 essay, Robert Brinkmeyer argues that characters feel their traditional heritage is no longer relevant to their pop-culture-infused lives (22). Albert Wilhelm, in his 1987 critique "Private Rituals," joins Brinkmeyer in noting the decline of ritual in Mason characters' lives (271). This is a result, he argues, of the rapid social change in which popular culture has swept away traditional culture's expectations and practices (Wilhelm "Private" 271). Yet while popular culture's comparative lack of behavioral restrictions is baffling and even distressing to many of Mason characters, it also provides a new and exciting freedom in place of folk culture's rigid behavioral constraints. In his critically significant 1989 review of *Love Life Stories* for the *New York Times Book Review*, Nick Ravo writes: "Though [Mason's] stories can be bleak, she sees her characters growing out of an oppressive old-fashionedness that's often over-romanticized" (7). Ravo emphasizes that the chaotic freedom brought on by cultural change can be just as rewarding as it is confusing (7). Folk culture's behavioral proscriptions are being replaced by pop culture's array of behavioral options, explains Darlene Reimers Hill in her 1992 essay. In Mason's works, the strongest traditional behavioral proscriptions are gender-coded. Popular culture offers her characters, especially her female characters, newfound power and options – as G. O Morphey and Harriet Pollack explain in their respective 1989 and 1996 essays.

A shift in critical focus from mourning the loss of traditions to celebrating the possibilities created by cultural transition occurs in Mason scholarship in the early 1990s. This shift is evident in such critical pieces as Richard Giannone's 1990 essay and the 1991 interview/essay conducted

and composed by the critic team Bonnie Lyons and Bill Oliver. This new focus owes a great deal to Mason's repeated emphasis in interviews, from the late 1980s onwards, about the newfound positives her characters encounter. In the 1989 interview conducted by Craig Gholson for *BOMB Magazine*, Mason acknowledges the confusion and anxiety her characters face in this disorienting time. Yet, she also takes great pains to stress that "optimism" and "positive values" accompany the negatives of cultural transition (Gholson). The author's 1999 memoir *Clear Springs* – in which she details her own experience of, and positive attitude towards, negotiating cultural collision – further cemented the critical trend of accentuating optimism in the face of confusion when analyzing Mason's work.

### *1.1.2 Negotiating Cultural Transition*

The process of successfully negotiating times of cultural transition requires the devising of a method of action to complement one's optimistic attitude – which is where the secondary critical conversation about Mason works comes into play. This secondary critical conversation grows out of the first conversation's description of the confusions faced by Mason's characters. Critics naturally progress from detailing and evaluating the effects of cultural collision to searching for clues as to how to best negotiate this time of transition.

Critics and author alike caution against wholesale rejection of rural southern folk culture in favor of American popular culture while negotiating cultural change. Mason's novel *An Atomic Romance* (2005), a critique of nuclear power, and her collaboration on *Missing Mountains* (2005), a collection of essays addressing mountaintop-removal mining in the Cumberland Mountains, provide clear evidence that this author is well aware of the existence of downsides to mass-produced culture. The combination of mass media (newspapers) and mass transport (trains) draw the crowds of sensation-seeking tourists whose germs eventually kill the quintuplet babies

in *Feather Crowns* (1993). Mason's fictional characters Sam Hughes and Emmett Smith are concerned with the menacing dangers of two products of American popular culture prominent in the news during the setting of the novel *In Country* (1985): Agent Orange and microwave ovens. Yet Mason's explorations of even these obviously controversial topics involve the nuanced examinations of the past's attitudes, available knowledge, and cultural environment that she demonstrates on a smaller scale in her depictions of the daily interplay between homogenized American popular culture and rural Western Kentucky's folk culture. Brinkmeyer reads Mason's work as proclaiming that "understanding the past is crucial to achieving perspective and growth" (31), and Mason combines her pursuance of understanding the past with repeated evaluations of longstanding ritual. She does so not to sweepingly reject traditions, but rather to select among the past's components those practices she sees as having worth in order to combine them with equally worthy aspects of present-day popular culture. Her characters engage in this practice on a regular basis. Wilhelm describes in his 1987 critique how Mason's characters both utilize selected past rituals and invent new ones.

Such selection, invention, and combination of ritual require an understanding of both past and present cultural offerings. This understanding can only be reached through evaluation of both individual popular cultural elements and individual folk cultural elements. In her 1998 article, Kathryn B. McKee reads *Feather Crowns* as stressing the dangers inherent to uncritical acceptance of popular culture. In their respective book-length studies of Mason's writing, Albert Wilhelm (1998) and Joanna Price (2000) join McKee and Pollack in asserting that Mason's argument is that one should not remain passive in the face of cultural change. Instead, one should attempt to determine the value of what is being offered and the value of what is being replaced.

In this process of evaluation, one should pay special attention to each cultural element's resulting effect on one's self as an individual and one's relationship with the surrounding community.

I view this careful analytical evaluation of individual cultural elements as linked not only to Mason's life experience as a person straddling regional folk culture and national popular culture, but to her academic background as well. The isolation and evaluation of the merits, and the interconnectedness, of the parts of a larger whole suggest a deliberately scientific approach to this cultural dilemma.

## **1.2 Methodology**

I examine Bobbie Ann Mason's symbolic use of quilts in her short stories "Love Life" and "Nancy Culpepper" through the lens of folkloristic literary analysis. Such folkloristic literary analysis involves the identification and close examination of the folk practices and folk material artifacts depicted in a work of literature. This type of literary analysis combines the investigation of a work's folklore with such critical literary practices as close reading, new historicism, and gender studies. The point of this investigation is to better understand what the depicted folk practice or artifact reveals about its work's setting, characters, and/or themes. Author biography may also play a part in folkloristic literary analysis, as knowing whether the writer acquired this folk information from personal experience, through personal interviews with folk practitioners, or via mass media may provide a key to understanding the significance of his/her depiction of folklore.

In the following two chapters, I demonstrate how the practice of quilting and the presence of quilts in Mason's work signal the ongoing conflict between region-specific rural folk culture and homogenized American popular culture that informs the rural/small town Western Kentucky setting of her stories and novels published between 1982 and 2006. I draw on the close reading,

new historicism, and gender studies components of folkloristic literary analysis in order to delineate the traditional social mindset the quilts represent while probing how that social mindset is affected by the incoming wave of popular culture. My scrutiny of Mason's literary use of quilts takes into account the fact that the author learned to quilt from her grandmother in the face-to-face, informal transmission of knowledge required to define an acquired practice as folk. Of even greater importance than Mason's familiarity with this single folk craft is Mason's upbringing immersed in an environment saturated with familial and rural subregional folk culture. Her memoir, *Clear Springs*, contains extensive evidence that Mason can be classified as both an observer of and a participant in the Western Kentucky society she so often represents in her fiction. Therefore, I read instances in which her characters create new ways of obtaining satisfaction in the collision of folk and popular cultures as being influenced by her own experience of balancing retained folklore against the incoming tide of mass-produced and mass-disseminated American popular culture.

My method of folkloristic literary analysis requires a foundation in both Southeastern American folklore and Southeastern American history. Folklorists Henry Glassie (1968), Jan Brunvand (1998), and John Burrison (2007) provide much of the needed background information about regional folklore practices. I draw the majority of my historical understanding of the economic, social, and cultural factors affecting Mason's rural Southern settings from historians James Cobb (1999) and John Shelton Reed (1986).

My folkloristic literary analysis of Mason's use of quilts joins a larger body of significant critical studies of folklore in literature. Literary critics recognize other authors' inclusion of material folk culture in depictions of cultural collision, such as Alice Walker's use of material folk products as a focal point for conflict in her well-known short story "Everyday Use." In their

study of folklore in literature, *Re-Situating Folklore*, Frank de Caro and Rosan Augusta Jordan demonstrate with examples from a variety of fictional works that an examination of the role material folk culture plays in an author's depiction of a character, family, society, or region can lead to enhanced understanding of a work's setting, characterization, plot, and/or theme.

Prominent folklorists such as Jan Brunvand regularly mine published literature for its folkloric content with the goal of analyzing the resulting oral, customary, and material traditions for clues about a society's practices and beliefs.

### **1.3 Relevance**

By using folkloristic literary analysis to explain and explore the juxtaposition of traditional ways and modern mass culture in Mason's writing so often noted by critics, I provide a new paradigm for understanding her depiction of the divisions and interactions of traditional rural Southern regional culture and modern American popular culture. In my folkloristic approach, I examine how Mason's use of material, oral, and customary folklore relates to her major themes of cultural conflict and the anxiety produced by that conflict. This approach allows me to pinpoint the ways in which Mason's characters grapple with cultural change as they attempt to understand what their behavior should be in a world in which the old patterns of tradition no longer apply. The family farm has given way to industry and corporate agribusiness, material folk culture has been for the most part abandoned in favor of mass-produced goods, and the strict traditional gender-based behavioral expectations associated with folk culture are being eroded by the shift towards feminism-influenced egalitarian gender politics associated with the academic and popular cultures of Western civilization. The Mason critical canon could greatly benefit from a folkloristic literary analysis of these cultural shifts that form the backbone of her work.

The following two chapters are respective examinations of cultural collision and transition within two components of the collection *Nancy Culpepper Stories* (the title story “Nancy Culpepper,” first published in 1980, with supplementary information from the novella “Spence + Lila,” first published in 1988) and the short story “Love Life” (first published in 1984). In both chapters, I have highlighted the presence of a quilt (a folk artifact associated with female craft production and traditional attitudes concerning gender) in these works in order to analyze Mason’s explorations of the social and economic changes taking place in rural Western Kentucky during the latter half of the twentieth century. My examination of “Nancy Culpepper” portrays this story’s quilt as a symbolic gateway through which the reader can examine a character’s acceptance and rejection of various folk practices in behavioral customs, foodways, and speech. My examination of “Love Life” demonstrates how Mason uses its quilt to portray rural Southern culture in transition while also enunciating Mason’s implied method of negotiating such cultural change.



## 2 “NANCY CULPEPPER”: PARTICIPANT/OBSERVER OF FAMILY FOKLORE

In the second half of the twentieth century, cultural collision played a significant role in the lives of those Americans living in the rural Southeast. Bobbie Ann Mason’s generation of rural Southerners – made up of those children born during and directly after World War II – found themselves residents of two distinctively different cultures in the latter half of the twentieth century: rural subregional folk culture and homogenized American popular culture. The inundating wave of mass media and mass-produced goods that flooded isolated rural areas swept many of this generation far away from the mindset and traditions of their parents, grandparents, and pioneer ancestors. This flood of options, objects, and new outlooks eroded the past’s established truths and practices. Mason often explores the feelings of bewilderment, disconnect, and excitement experienced by both the elder generations and her own as cultures collide. Her literary documentation of cultural collision often involves the noting of folk cultural elements that remain present, if sometimes transmuted, in the lives of her characters. These traditional elements fall into the categories of both intangible folklore, such as folk speech and behavioral customs, and material folklore, such as foodways and quilting.

A quilt’s folk presence in the midst of artifacts and behaviors associated with popular culture is one way in which Bobbie Ann Mason signals cultural collision. Usually, a quilt in a Mason work is one folk artifact among an array of both folk and popular artifacts, all of which act as background props. The collective role of the background-prop quilt and its associated folk artifacts is to signal the presence and history of Southeastern rural folk culture amid the American popular cultural elements in a work’s setting. This combination of two types of cultural artifacts – representing region-specific folk culture and homogenized American mass-

produced culture – is Mason’s way of subtly indicating cultural interaction and change in her characters’ world.

In this chapter, I examine and elucidate how the brief presentation of a quilt in Mason’s short story “Nancy Culpepper” acts as a metaphor for the jarring juxtaposition of folk culture and popular culture which occurs in both the protagonist’s personal life and across much of the post-World War II rural Southeast. After first briefly summarizing the story’s plot, I open with an explanation of the quilt metaphor that reads the physical placement of this quilt as representing a collision of cultures. I then explore the rural Western Kentucky setting as a region of long-lived tradition retention, drawing supporting evidence from both the story and the author’s memoir concerning the homemade production of the folk product lye soap. Next, I segue into the topic of economic shift in the post-World War II South, explaining how this shift produced a wave of popular culture that affected the region’s relationship to its folk culture. Linking this historic shift to the Culpeppers’ lives, I explore Nancy’s attempts to negotiate between her rural Southern folk heritage and her pop-culture dominated life in the North. Along the way, I discuss folk foodways (poke salet), folk marital customs (wedding breakfast), and a component of folk speech, the proverbial phrase (“dress tail on a bedpost”). Finally, I close with an alternative interpretation of the story’s quilt metaphor that reads the quilt as representing the durability of folklore.

## **2.1 Folk Quilt + Pop Map = Cultural Collision**

In “Nancy Culpepper,” a quilt’s relationship to an artifact of popular culture highlights the cultural interaction key to the work’s plot. This short story, set in 1980 with flashbacks to 1967, is the first of six stories and one novella about the Culpepper family. In 1980, the title character leaves her husband and son at their home in Pennsylvania and travels south to the Kentucky farm

where she was raised. Nancy's goal for this visit is twofold. She hopes to prevent her grandmother's collection of family photographs, including a yet-unseen photograph of a distant ancestor also named Nancy Culpepper, from being thrown away while she helps her parents with the stressful task of preparing to move her ninety-three-year-old grandmother off the family farm and into a nursing home. In her childhood, Nancy absorbed the folklore and traditional behavioral strictures of her parents and grandparents. When she went off to graduate school in the North during the 1960s and then chose to remain after she met and married her Northerner husband, she entered a society dominated by the options and technology of American popular culture. Though she chose to live in and embrace this comparative state of cultural permissiveness, she is also acutely aware that her life occupies a liminal space between folk and popular cultures. Nancy feels torn between her traditional heritage and the new life, heavily influenced by the academic and popular cultures of 1960s-1980s America, that she has forged with her husband and son. Throughout the story, evidence of the region-specific rural Kentucky folk culture that permeated Nancy's upbringing emerges in the form of foodways, folk speech, marital customs, and two products of craft traditionally linked to feminine provenance: lye soap and a quilt.

Nancy encounters the quilt on the bed of her ailing, bedridden grandmother. The narrator does not describe the quilt, nor do Nancy and her grandmother discuss its presence. The quilt comes into play when Nancy places an artifact of popular culture on top of this folk artifact: "Later, Nancy spreads a Texaco map of the United States out on Granny's quilt. 'I want to show you where I live,' she says. 'Philadelphia's nearly a thousand miles from here'" ("Nancy" 13). Note that this map of the United States has a brand name. It is a *Texaco* map – a map specifically mass-produced in order to be distributed to the mobile American public at Texaco gas stations.

The quilt covering Granny as she sits propped up in her bed is handcrafted, probably (as I will explain later) pieced and quilted by Granny herself. This moment of popular brand name and folk craft juxtaposition is significant and worth unpacking.

Mason is known for her extensive use of pop cultural elements, such as brand names, in her writing. Critics in the 1980s described her as a “Kmart realist” in part, Joanna Price explains, because of her frequent use of brand names (6). Mason’s inclusion of brand names is a component of “the distinctively economic but detailed representation of moments in everyday life of mainly working-class characters in Kentucky” that characterizes her work (Price 5). The brand name of map that Nancy spreads over her grandmother’s quilt signals its mass-produced, mass-marketed origins in popular culture.

Because of its superior position on the bed, the brand-name map dominates the handcrafted quilt. The setting’s state of cultural transition, in which the incoming flood of American popular culture encroaches on a rural society formally dominated by folk culture, is reenacted in miniature on Granny’s bed. Like the quilt, many aspects of the folk culture specific to this agriculture-based sub-region’s past are being buried, or even lost, under the latter half of the twentieth century’s inundating wave of homogenized American popular culture (represented here by the brand-name map of the United States.) The social and economic circumstances that permitted the formation and rich growth of the area’s folk culture are changing, affecting the current generation’s evaluation of ancestors’ oral, customary, and material traditions.

Rural society in this corner of Western Kentucky was once much more culturally isolated from the rest of the nation. During much of Granny’s life and the childhood of Nancy’s parents, this sub-region was dominated geographically and economically by small, single-family farms. John Burrison notes that such self-contained or solitary farms are a part of a southeastern

American pattern established in frontier days (29). Family farms such as the Culpeppers' were "often separated from each other by miles, forming loosely knit settlements" (Burrison 29). Because of their isolation from both manufacturing centers and their fellow farmers, family members on a small southeastern farm tended to rely on folk knowledge handed down through generations as the source for the methods and goods necessary to daily survival. Burrison explains: "The resulting limited contact with neighbors and the outside world [...] fostered reliance on folklore as an inherited knowledge base for both livelihood and recreation, while heightening the importance of the family as the chief mechanism for passing on these traditions" (29). In this rural part of Western Kentucky, "limited contact" was not just social, but economic. Families on small farms had to be both self-sufficient and frugal to survive, depending on their own land, sweat, and knowledge to fulfill most of their daily needs. "The independent holding where the nuclear family raises, hunts, and makes what it needs while maintaining a cash crop only large enough to get them the necessities which cannot be produced at home," Henry Glassie explains, "almost obviously" fosters "folk culture." (196). The practice of near-subsistence farming produced food, but little cash. This limited amount of cash, coupled with the distance from farm to town store, dictated a cap on the number of manufactured products a farming family could purchase. Most essential home goods had to be crafted out of what was on hand at the farm, using tried-and-true methods passed down from previous generations.

## **2.2 Lye Soap and Thrift**

Evidence of the strong role such folk knowledge played in Granny's life can be found in the short phrase: "Granny used only lye soap on dishes" ("Nancy" 4). Before she became bedridden, Nancy's grandmother combined inherited knowledge, her own skills, and the farm's resources to make the soap that kept the family's dishes clean. Mason based her fictional character's practice

on that of her own grandmother, as is suggested by this description in her memoir, *Clear Springs*, of her paternal grandmother, Ethel Mason: “She washed her dishes in hot water in a pan, using soap and water very sparingly. She [...] made her soap from hog fat and lye in a kettle over a fire outside” (27). Note both the frugality in Ethel’s sparing use of soap and water as well as the self-sufficient folk method by which she home-produced her lye soap. Mason explains that Ethel was very precise in the way she performed household chores: “She was particular about her meat-grease can and the leavings that went into her step-pedal slop-bucket for the hogs” (CS 27). Although Ethel’s strict adherence to precise repetition was an idiosyncratic trait – her sister-in-law, Mason’s great-aunt Rosie, worked in a variety of creative ways while utilizing folk knowledge to execute household tasks (CS 27) – her focus on frugality and her refusal to waste neither grease nor leavings are folk survival skills, part of the traditional knowledge of the rural region.

In *Clear Springs*, Mason describes and depicts her first-hand experience with, and her family’s participation in, folk culture. Many of these folk elements reappear in, or are suggested by, the actions and memories of her fictional characters. For instance, the author describes a practice she recalls from her childhood on the family farm, in which the porcine ingredient of her grandmother’s lye soap was continuously recycled in an effort to get the utmost out of the farm’s limited resources. Mason explains: “The hogs ate kitchen slop, seasoned with the dishwashing water that had lye soap in it. Hogs found lye soap larruping good” (CS 95). Contained within this one sentence are not just the inspiration for Nancy’s grandmother’s preference for lye soap, but also references to a product of material folk craft (lye soap), a frugal folk method for making do with the limited resources on hand (using soapy dishwater, combined with kitchen waste, as hog feed), and an example of the subregion’s distinctive folk speech: “larruping.” This word, whose

meaning in Mason's writing seems to be "deliciously desirable," can be applied to either something edible or an intensely attractive person (*CS* 95, 237). In her memoir, Mason reports her mother's teenaged opinion of the handsome Mason boy she would one day marry. Christy Lee, soon to be Christy Mason, thought the dark-haired, high-cheekboned Wilber Mason was "larruping" (237).

"Larruping" is part of the vocabulary of the rural Western Kentucky social folk group Mason documents in both *Clear Springs* and "Nancy Culpepper." The *Dictionary of American Regional English* confirms that "larruping" can be used as an adjective ("Esp. of food: delicious, excellent) or as an adverb meaning "extremely," usually in combination with 'good': "larruping good." The *DARE* distribution map and quotations associated with "larruping" suggest that the word may have originated along the Mississippi River, as the earliest written example comes from northwestern Arkansas in 1905. The word seems to have spread via river trade up the Mississippi and was brought west along the southern route to California ("larruping"). Once this word gained a foothold in the informal vocabulary of rural Western Kentucky, the isolated social and economic nature of its farming community preserved it, passing it along to future generations. Christy Mason would have picked up this term through her exposure to casual conversation among family members and neighbors (through the informal, face-to-face transmissions that characterize folk speech), as opposed to encountering it in her school books (academic culture) or on the radio (popular culture).

Unlike the river-directed, south-to-north spread of the folk word "larruping," the folk craft of lye soap-making would have traveled west to reach both the fictional Culpeppers and their true-life inspiration, the Masons. Brought by easterners migrating into frontier Kentucky, this practice would have been maintained in isolated rural areas out of necessity long after Kentucky

was considered a settled state. Glassie explains: “The continuum of pioneer conditions on the small, nearly self-sufficient holding left a man standing up against the folk end of the non-folk continuum, economically and physically isolated from progress and reliant upon tradition” (195). Manufactured soap, though widely available, would have been considered an extravagance that a cash-strapped farming family could not afford.

Mason’s paternal grandmother, Ethel Arnett Mason, and by extension her fictional counterpart, Nancy’s Granny, would have likely learned to make lye soap not from a book or a class, but from the informal, face-to-face transmission of knowledge essential to folklore. Perhaps, as a small child, Ethel Arnett watched her mother, aunts, and/or grandmother carefully combine the correct ratio of lye and hog fat in the big iron kettle to produce a soap that would provide cleansing lather without chemically burning human skin. As she grew older, Ethel would have stopped being a mere observer and instead become a participant, learning the folk craft of soap-making by assisting her elders in the process.

With her experienced adult relatives supervising the proceedings, the young Ethel Arnett would have learned how to “drip lye,” to pour water over wood ash in an ash hopper and collect the resulting dark and watery percolated mixture (lye) which dripped from the hopper’s spout (“Soapmaking” 156-7). Her next task would have been to boil the lye and then stir grease into the boiling liquid (156). The grease may have included the leftover lard she had thriftily collected in the process of meal preparation (152). When the mixture reached a jelly-like consistency, she may have poured some of it into small, shallow molds so that it could be extracted in the form of individual cakes of soap once it had hardened overnight (154, 156). The remainder of the mixture she would have poured into a wooden container, knowing that the soap would cause a metal container to rust (156). Lye soap stored in a bulk wooden container does not



harden; Ethel and her family would have dipped portions of the slimy soap from its central location as needed for washing dishes, clothes, and themselves (154, 156, 158).

Ethel would have learned about the useful, recyclable quality of used dishwater in the same personal, informal transmission of knowledge as she did the process of soap-making itself. Perhaps it was her job as a growing girl to carry the slops bucket, sloshing with soapy dishwater, to the hungry hogs in the evening. Watching the hogs eat the day's kitchen waste "seasoned" with the fat of their departed brethren, she may have occasionally given thought to the upcoming butchering process that would result in, among many other pork products, hog fat for future lye soap. This cycle of hogs and lye dish soap references an American Southeastern folk practice of using "everything but the squeal" of the pig (Burrison 43). In fact, the thrifty members of a farming family who fed lye soap dishwater to their hogs were using pig fat not just once, but twice.

The fact that Mason, who was born in 1940, remembers her family's practice of feeding homemade lye soap to hogs emphasizes the presence of such self-sufficient folk practices in this particular area of rural Western Kentucky even half-way through the twentieth century. The author's childhood on the Mason farm and surrounding community involved daily examples of material, oral, and customary folklore little changed from her grandmother's childhood. After World War II, however, the strength of this region-specific folk culture began to dwindle in the face of American popular culture's enveloping reach.

James Cobb describes the tide of popular culture washing over the Southeast as being driven by the increased mechanization of agriculture (40). This increased mechanization of southern agriculture led to a "growing surplus of labor," and industrial developers flocked to the rural South to take advantage of this extra manpower (Cobb 191). The spread of subdivisions and

chain groceries and drug stores followed the money paid by industry to its new workers (Cobb 40). Cobb states: “By 1969, nearly 40 percent of the South’s manufacturing plants were in rural or small-town areas” – such as the area surrounding the Mason family farm (191). “Southern farmers made their move to the factory” as the small family farm became less and less viable in the face of agribusiness (Cobb 191). Mason explains in her memoir how these changes in Southern economics affected her own family: “By the time my brother – the youngest of us four, born too late – came of age, a family farm seemed to require more land and machinery than it once had in order to prosper” (CS 11). Mason’s father, like his fictional counterpart, Spence Culpepper, continued to earn his living on the family’s farm even as he recognized that because the small family farm “was dying out as a way of life,” his son would not follow in his footsteps (CS 101). Mason’s brother did indeed go into lucrative factory work instead of farming (CS 212). Reflecting both her familial history and regional history in the Culpepper novella set in 1985, Mason has Lee, Nancy’s younger brother, choose factory work for the American popular culture icon Coca-Cola over joining his father on the Culpepper farm (“Spence + Lila” 57, 129).

In the era between World War II and the 1980 setting of “Nancy Culpepper,” this new economic environment offered a wider variety of mass-produced goods at affordable prices through chain department stores such as Kmart and, from the mid-’80s onward, Wal-Mart. The economic shift from farming to manufacturing work negated the need for such folk crafts as lye soap making. With laborers earning hourly wages at manufacturing plants, time was now equated with money. The final product of lye soap was no longer considered worth the valuable time and effort required to produce it – especially when one could purchase soap of a much higher quality for an affordable price at the chain discount supermarket in town. The benefits of homemade lye soap rest in the self-sufficient, frugal use of one’s limited resources. However,

this product of material folk culture does not perform at the same level as many of today's manufactured dish soaps. In the novella "Spence + Lila," Lila Culpepper (Nancy's mother) distastefully recalls her years of experience using lye soap in the kitchen: "The scum of the slippery lye soap never really washed off the dishes" (60). Like many rural Southerners, Lila was once forced by economic and geographic isolation to rely almost exclusively on folk craft methods in order to meet daily needs. The changing economic environment of the second half of the twentieth century brought these formally isolated residents of the rural South new options rooted in mass-production.

Faced with this widening variety of options from which to choose, rural Southerners were becoming less likely to participate in many of the traditions that made their region (and sub-regions) distinct from the rest of the country. When Glassie states that "economics, with its social and educational dependents, can help maintain regional distinctions," he implies that two culturally disparate regions may increase their shared cultural similarities as they increase their economic similarities (188). In 1986, only a few years after the setting of "Nancy Culpepper," John Shelton Reed found that the "cultural differences" between the North and the South "that were largely due to Southerners' lower incomes," lower "educational levels," and "concentration in agricultural [...] occupations" were "diminishing in the 1960s" and "were smaller still in the 1980s" (91). Part of this growing cultural similarity was due to the South's diminishing participation in folk craft practices such as lye soap making and their associated folk values such as the intense emphasis on frontier frugality.

The mindset of frontier frugality is behind such folk practices as the craft of pieced quilting and the Southern foodways tradition of using every part "except the squeal" of the butchered hog. Faced with limited access to manufactured goods, residents of the American frontier had to

rely on their ability to recognize potential worth in what urban dwellers might designate as useless. Mason explains that her family's "habit of making do with what was on hand arose from the demands of pioneering and hardscrabble farming" (CS 244). Even after their region of residence was no longer considered frontier, those rural southerners who lacked cash continued their inherited traditions of saving and utilizing material leftovers. In *Clear Springs*, Mason describes how her grandmother helped her "decorate one of Granddaddy's cigar boxes to hold toiletries. We papered it inside and out with scraps of wallpaper" (97). Mason calls decorating a cigar box for a practical purpose "a traditional thing to do," explaining that it was an activity her grandmother had done herself as a child (CS 98). Mason's grandmother quilted, and the author remembers her grandmother teaching her how to piece quilts. Their first project was a star quilt: "I helped her, learning to piece diamonds to make stars. [...] She cut the diamonds from flour sack dresses my sister and I had outgrown" (CS 49). Note that Ethel Mason cut her quilt pieces not from a bolt of cloth, but from material too small for any other purpose – outgrown children's dresses, themselves sewn from the repurposed cloth encasing the family's monthly supply of store-bought flour. This frugal mindset is even more prominent in Ethel Mason's yo-yo quilt: "She made a yo-yo quilt out of satin ribbons she collected from the floral arrangements left at the cemetery on her homeplace" (CS 51). Compelled by the frontier frugality coloring her worldview, Mason's grandmother deplored the waste of these scraps of valuable satin cloth and recognized within her repertoire of quilt patterns a way to put them to good use.

This frugal frontier mindset categorized wastefulness as dangerous, a threat to one's very life. When describing her family's pronounced tendency to horde a variety of practical and non-practical items against the possibility that they would one day be needed, Mason reports that her grandfather often exhorted his family, "Always be saving" (CS 244). This phrase encapsulates a

traditional practice stretching back into Western Kentucky's frontier era, when pioneers could not rely on access to mass-produced products. The ability to make do with the limited, carefully hoarded materials on hand could be the only thing standing between the pioneers and death.

This mindset and practice still held relevance for the residents of the subregion's isolated family farms. Within frontier-inspired folklore were tried and true methods of surviving in a precarious, agriculturally based environment that left little room for error. Mason explains: "Our lives were haunted by the fear of crop failure. [...] Working with food was fraught with anxiety and desperation. [...] We were at the mercy of nature, and it wasn't to be trusted. [...] Our livelihood – even our lives – depended on forces outside our control" (CS 83). Dependent on the whims of nature and reliant on conservative traditions, "[f]armers didn't take initiative" (CS 83). Rural Southerners in farming communities like Mason's corner of Western Kentucky were not likely to attempt new, unproved methods or readily embrace the unknown. Only within the safety of tradition and frugality lay the hope of survival and well-being.

Mason demonstrates the fact that the economic shift of the post-World War II growth of manufacturing in the rural South diminished the intensity, but did not do away with, this frontier frugality and associated conservative mindset in the practices of the Culpepper family. Facing a new array of material options, the Culpeppers choose to replace some of their folk crafts with products of popular culture. In 1975, five years before the story opens, Nancy's mother finally gathered up the courage to defy her mother-in-law and incorporate mass-produced dishwashing liquid in the family's kitchen ("Nancy" 4). Granny would have loudly deplored the waste represented by spending money on soap when a homemade product would suffice – which is likely why Lila Culpepper waited until after Granny was bedridden with arthritis before she

“bought some Joy” (4). Lila must have felt as if she were indeed buying literal joy after a lifetime of fruitless attempts to get the scum of lye soap off dishes!

### 2.3 Poke Salet and Premarital Sex

Despite the fact that all of the present-day members of the Culpepper family are exposed to the late twentieth century’s tidal wave of access to mass media and mass-produced products, the family’s departure from tradition is strongest in the character of Nancy Culpepper. Having left the South entirely, Nancy no longer interacts daily with the ebbing presence of folk society in her family and rural subregion. As she attends graduate school in Massachusetts during the late 1960s, her daily activities bear little relation to the folk practices of her grandmother. While in graduate school, Nancy meets Jack Cleveland, a middle-class Northerner and fellow student. The two fall in love and form a relationship. When Nancy and Jack stop for a visit to the Culpepper farm on a road trip to Denver, the natural nervousness a daughter would feel during her parents’ first meeting of her significant other is enhanced by the discrepancy between her family’s participation in, and Jack’s ignorance of, two specific elements of folk culture.

The couple eats supper, a meal prepared by Nancy’s mother, with Nancy’s parents at the Culpepper home. On the menu are vegetables Jack recognizes (though they are soaked in bacon grease), a green he has never heard of called “poke,” and, for dessert, fried pies (“Nancy” 6-8). Nancy’s mother opens the conversation by highlighting Jack’s outsider status to the region’s folk culture: “I bet you don’t eat poke salet up there,” she tells him (6). By “up there,” she means “up North.” Coded in this statement is an apologetic tone for serving such a country dish to a supposedly sophisticated, urbane Northerner. Poke is not cultivated in a garden. It is a wild-growing weed that must be gathered and prepared correctly so as not to poison the eater. The narrator announces that “Mom had gathered poke, because it was spring,” conveying that poke is

a staple at the Culpepper household when this green is in season (6). Lila Culpepper may have included poke on the menu automatically and now feels embarrassed at its presence. Country people eat poke; city dwellers do not. Nancy tries to come to Jack's rescue with an explanation of both what her mother means by "poke salet," and why her mother is acting embarrassed: "It's weeds," she says (6). Jack's response, "I've never heard of it," indicates that he is unfamiliar with both pokeweed and the cultural undercurrents of the conversation (7). After a brief hesitation, he takes a small helping (7). This is Jack's first encounter with a traditional Southern food.

Lila Culpepper's "poke salet" is made from the pokeweed plant. Burrison states that pokeweed is a "native plant [to the American Southeast] probably introduced to settlers by Indians," and "is used both for food and medicine in southern folk culture. The leaves are cooked," and the resulting dish is called "poke sallet" (89). Though they employ slightly different spellings, Mason and Burrison are writing about the same rural Southern folk food item. Mason drew the Culpeppers' practice of gathering and eating poke from her own family's tradition: "Mama picked tender, young pokeweed in the woods in the spring, before it turned poison, and cooked it a long time to get the bitterness out. We liked it with vinegar and minced boiled eggs" (CS 84). Knowing when to pick pokeweed, what parts are edible, and how to prepare it all fall into the category of folk knowledge. Mason's mother would have learned this information from her aunts and cousins in an informal, face-to-face transmission of knowledge as she helped with the family's food preparation as a child.

Perhaps in response to the tension brought to the table by Jack's foreign presence, Nancy's father begins to joke about pokeweed's potentially poisonous nature:

“It’s poison if it gets too big,” Daddy said. He turned to Nancy’s mother. “I think you picked this too big. You’re going to poison us all.”

“He’s teasing,” Nancy said.

“The berries is what’s poison,” said Mom, laughing. “Wouldn’t that be something? They’ll say up there I tried to poison your boyfriend the minute I met him!”

Everyone laughed. Jack’s face was red. (“Nancy” 7)

Jack’s red face indicates the stress he is feeling as a stranger in the midst of an unfamiliar culture.

Nancy also experiences stress during this visit, though of a different kind. She is trying to balance her love and respect for her family alongside her desire to participate in activities outside of, and even against, her family’s traditions. One such activity is premarital sex. Nancy’s parents would be hurt by an indication that their daughter and Jack have been having sex despite the fact that the young couple are not married. In the course of describing to her parents her in-progress road trip to Denver with Jack, Nancy concocts several “elaborate lies about their sleeping arrangements” (“Nancy” 6). After supper, the couple sleeps overnight at the Culpepper home. Jack sleeps in Nancy’s old room, while Nancy sleeps on the living room couch (11). The next day, as they continue on their drive to Denver, Jack accuses Nancy “of being dishonest, foolishly trying to protect her parents” (11). Jack reads the situation as Nancy wanting her parents to think she is a “goody-goody,” but I interpret Nancy’s actions as based in her understanding of her parents’ folk values (11).

Jack is cognizant of the stigma against premarital sex in 1960s American popular culture, but he does not understand how much stronger is the proscription against premarital sex in the Culpeppers’ folk culture. Agricultural-based society tends to be more conservative in public



morals than urban society for the same reason that it retains so many more ancestral folk traditions than its urban counterpart. Farmers, with a small margin between crop failure and crop success, stick with tried-and-true approaches to life, putting what Burrison calls “a premium on the ways of ancestors” (19). Beliefs that have stood the test of time are valued much more highly than newly introduced concepts. This is not to say that other members of the Culpeppers’ community never engaged in premarital sex nor to discount the possibility that some participated in even more nefarious activities. Rather, Nancy understands that her parents view premarital sex as an extremely taboo activity. Her mother and father would be intensely saddened and deeply ashamed of both Nancy and themselves if she were to announce the truth of the actual sleeping arrangements of the Denver trip. Her parents would read such an announcement as proof that they had failed to raise her correctly, and that she was publicly parading their abject failure all across the United States.

While Nancy lacks the words to explain to Jack that her prevarication is rooted in her respect for her parents and her insider’s understanding of their folk beliefs, she understands that her prevarication is symptomatic of her psyche’s state of cultural collision. Nancy feels torn between the new cultural practices and beliefs she has embraced and the traditions of her beloved family. This cross-cultural tension reaches a new level of intensity on her wedding night.

A few months after the Culpeppers meet Jack at the poke salet dinner in Kentucky, Nancy and Jack marry. Nancy urges her parents to refrain from making the long trip for the ten-minute ceremony, and they respect her wishes. That evening, the newly wedded couple hosts a party at their home to celebrate the nuptials. The partygoers drink wine-and-7Up punch, search the cloudy sky for Northern Lights, and dance to the Beatles’ *Sgt. Pepper’s Lonely Hearts Club Band* (“Nancy” 5-6). Instead of focusing on the party, Nancy keeps getting lost in thoughts about

her family. While looking at the sky for a sign of the Northern Lights, she thinks of her parents, at that moment watching their ritual TV program. Pondering the variety of wedding gifts displayed on a table Jack has fashioned from a door – “hand-dipped candles, a silver roach clip, *Joy of Cooking*, signed pottery in non-functional shapes” (6) – Nancy balances this list against a potential menu for her parents’ supper that evening: “fried steak, two kinds of peas, biscuits, blackberry pie” (6). Dancing without stopping in a two-step with her new husband to the continuous music of the Beatles’ album, Nancy pictures “the blackberry bushes at the farm in Kentucky, which spread so wildly that they had to be burned down every few years. They grew on the banks of the creek, which in summer shrank to still, small occasional pools” (6). These last two images, one of the uncontrolled growth of blackberry bushes and the other of the shrinking, evaporating pools of the summertime creek, could signal Nancy’s interpretation of the cultural collision shaping her life.

Nancy sees her life as two cultures in opposition: Southern versus Northern, rural versus urban, folk versus popular. In the midst of a celebration whose components seem totally divorced from the world in which she grew up, she sees her heritage as being threatened by her immersion in popular culture. The traditions of her family and birth region seem to be evaporating from her life like a creek’s water in the heat of summer. In contrast, the influence of popular culture in her daily existence seems to be spreading at an overwhelming pace akin to that of the rampant growth of blackberry bushes, blanketing even the parts of her identity rooted in the folk culture of her childhood.

Nancy stands on a bridge over the gap between her chosen present and the traditions of her past. She tries to convey this sensation to Jack by sharing with him a cultural-collision incident involving a marital custom from her grandmother’s day. In a telephone conversation the day of

the wedding, Granny asks Nancy, “What are you going to cook for your wedding breakfast?” (“Nancy” 13). Nancy has no intention of celebrating the first morning of her marriage by preparing a special breakfast for her husband. However, because she understands so well the folk culture out of which this tradition comes, she enjoys the humor of the discrepancy between her grandmother’s expectations and her own actions. Relaying the story to Jack, she jokes about her response to Granny’s inquiry: “I almost said to her, ‘We usually don’t eat breakfast, we sleep so late!’” (13). Granny would have found this statement extremely shocking and distressing, and not merely because Nancy is declaring that she will not be participating in a tradition Granny cherishes. This flippant comment reveals Nancy’s rejection of values deeply rooted in her family’s folk culture. By divulging the fact that the newlyweds have a long-established pre-nuptial practice of sleeping in during the morning, Nancy would be telling her grandmother that not only are she and Jack slothful (they are not early risers), but also that they have been routinely sleeping together in the same bed – ie., engaging in premarital sex. Granny would read these revelations as a triple dose of immorality, evidence that Nancy had turned her back on her upbringing by rejecting a marital tradition (the special wedding breakfast), abandoning the respectable practice common among farming families of rising with the sun, and, worst of all, participating in sexual intercourse outside of the sanctity of marriage.

Nancy would never, of course, be so disrespectful and unkind as to actually make this statement to her grandmother. Yet, although she loves her grandmother and understands the customs and culture that prompted Granny’s question, Nancy values and enjoys her newfound urban-influenced, pop-culture-dominated lifestyle. This complex balance between folk and popular cultures is central to her self.

By telling Jack about this conversation, Nancy attempts to share with him a key facet of her identity: her sensation of having a foothold in two very different cultures. However, the joke she makes and hilarity she sees in the difference between her own situation as a new bride and that of her grandmother's rural Southern folk expectations do not carry over into Jack's mono-culture world:

When he didn't laugh, Nancy said "Isn't that hilarious? She's really out of the nineteenth century."

"You don't have to make me breakfast," said Jack.

"In her time, it really meant something big," Nancy said helplessly. "Don't you see?" ("Nancy" 13).

Realizing that Jack cannot get the joke because he does not have her cross-cultural life experience, Nancy feels alone. She cannot communicate the dichotomy defining her self to the man she has married. Jack comes from an urban, Northern, popular-culture-dominated world. Nancy loves Jack and values the options and permissiveness of popular culture. Does this mean she must resign herself to watching helplessly as her immersion in popular culture obliterates the traditions of her family and home region?

Throughout the majority of this story, Nancy's actions suggest her determination to prevent this loss of heritage in her life. Approaching the problem in a manner reminiscent of the way in which her family deals with the Culpepper farm's out-of-control blackberry bushes, she performs periodic metaphorical burnings of her life up North. This particular 1980 visit to the farm, sans husband and son, is a burning, as was her earlier choice to go by her maiden name after learning of the ancestor who was also named Nancy Culpepper ("Nancy" 4). In trying to burn back the homogenizing forces of popular culture in her life, Nancy unintentionally hurts Jack and their

son, Robert. “We’re your family, too,” Jack reminds her in a telephone conversation during her solo trip to Kentucky. “I didn’t mean to abandon you,” Nancy replies (15). The story opens with the slight possibility of an even more drastic burning: “Nancy has been vaguely wanting to move to Kentucky, and she has persuaded Jack to think about relocating his photography business” (3). Nancy’s vagueness about her desire for relocation probably stems from the fact that she feels torn between two distinct cultures of familial ties. Nancy’s son and husband have raised objections to the idea of relocating to Kentucky: Robert pleads to remain in Pennsylvania, and Jack is concerned that the move would create business difficulties. These nuclear family constraints compete with her desire for this potential move and its associated attack against the encroaching force of American popular culture which threatens to smother her Culpepper regional folk heritage.

These metaphorical burnings are not the act of a neutral party trying to blend two distinct cultures, but instead are intermittent declarations of war against a force she knows will gradually regain its former overpowering strength after every battle. Like the blackberry bushes, the influences of popular and academic culture that separate Nancy’s life from the traditions of her family, region, and ancestors will inevitably grow back. Treating her Northern dislocation from her Southern roots as she would an out-of-control blackberry bush does not provide Nancy with the long-term satisfaction she craves.

#### **2.4 Recording Folklore and Continuing Traditions**

During this 1980 story-framing visit to the Culpepper farm, Nancy seems to be attempting a different, more nuanced approach to her cross-cultural dilemma. Instead of merely participating in the blend of regional popular and folk cultures that make her Southern homeland so different from the Northern residence of her adult life, Nancy takes on the role of a folklorist and family

historian in an effort to investigate her familial heritage. In addition to her quest to save the ancestral photographs, she tries to interview Granny about the family's history. Granny's combination of feebleness and reticence makes the interview only marginally successful; however, by expanding her field research to include the practices of her parent's generation, Nancy finds an additional source of information in her mother's folk speech.

As Nancy and her parents move boxes from Granny's house to the house Nancy grew up in next door, her father mentions the remote possibility of one day moving off the farm, away from the Southeast to the exotic land of Arizona. Nancy's mother responds using a proverbial phrase she inherited from previous generations of rural Western Kentuckians: "We'll never go anywhere. We've got our dress tail on a bedpost."

"What does that mean?" asks Nancy, in surprise.

"Use to, if a storm was coming, people would put a bedpost on a child's dress tail, to keep him from blowing away. In other words, we're tied down."

"That's funny. I never heard of that."

"I guess you think we're just ignorant," Mom says. "The way we talk."

"No, I don't." ("Nancy" 11)

Contained within this proverbial phrase are a reflection of the rural Southern folk conservative outlook, a metaphor for the confining safety of folk culture, and an example of Nancy's developing role as folklorist.

This proverbial phrase is an example of folk speech: a saying, passed around a community from one speaker to another across space and time, which reflects elements of that community's experiences and values. Unlike true proverbs, which are always complete sentences usually expressing "some general truth or wisdom," proverbial phrases "are never complete sentences

[...] and seldom express any generalized wisdom; nearly all of them are metaphorical (Brunvand 93-4). Despite their differences, true proverbs and proverbial phrases both function as “statements of moral and social attitudes and positions” (de Caro and Jordan 96). Mrs. Culpepper’s statement “We’ve got our dress tail on a bedpost” is not just a handy folk phrase describing her and her spouse’s current situation, but also a metaphor referencing her local subregional society’s attitudes and experiences within a few words.

The image this expression paints – that of a child whose sartorial anchorage to a heavy piece of furniture keeps him from blowing away in a storm while simultaneously confining him to a severely restricted range of movement – is telling of both the conservative outlook inherent to this agriculturally-dominated folk society and the limitation of options available in such a society. If a child’s dress tail is positioned firmly under a bedpost, that child is safe and secure against the unpredictable dangers of nature but unable to explore the wider world. In this agricultural folk culture, safety rests with the proven methods of ancestors. Options are limited to the practices of tradition. Behavior codes are strict to prevent community members from straying into untested activities that might endanger themselves and the community as a whole.

The changing economy of the post-World War II rural South loosened the metaphorical dress tail of many of the region’s children out from under the bedpost of traditional behavior restrictions. Nancy Culpepper is an extreme example of a Southern rural child who is blown by the stormy winds of economic change far from the known security of folk methods, behavior, and outlook. Yet though she partakes of the myriad of risky, convenient, and exciting options she encounters in popular and academic culture, she still perceives value in the methods and mindset of her folk heritage. She reads each of these folklore elements as a clue to her family’s and region’s history. In her unanchored state, she sees each individual element of her rural Southern

folklore as one option among many in her life. In this attitude, she differs significantly from her grandmother, who viewed many such traditions not as options, but as moral law.

Mason illustrates this telling generational difference in her description of an exchange between her grandmother, herself, and her own Northerner husband. Like the fictional Nancy and Jack, Mason and her husband met while attending college in New England. Living together in an old farmhouse near their university, they combined Mason's rural folk knowledge, their respective academic research, information from popular culture sources, and even advice from their neighbors in their efforts at planting and maintaining a garden on the property (CS 157, 160). On a visit to Kentucky, the couple chatted with Mason's grandmother about their homemade experiments in horticulture. She, however, was not interested in newfound methods of gardening. Mason states: "Alternate ways were of no interest to her. There was only one way to hill up beans, to set a hen, to make damson pie" (CS 161). Ethel Mason was particularly rigid in her approach to household tasks, but this idiosyncratic trait can be read as representing the dominant role that conservative rural folk attitude played in her personality. She saw safety and security as resting only in her traditions, and she had no desire to deviate from these proven methods.

Nancy Culpepper, valuing new knowledge, experiences, and options over safety, chose the risk of the unknown over the security of traditions. In the conversation sparked by her act of spreading the Texaco map over Granny's quilt, she and Granny demonstrate how their differing approaches to risk have influenced their respective life experiences. Nancy uses the map to demonstrate the route she took from her Pennsylvania home to the Kentucky farm, and then points out California, the state where she gave birth to her son/Granny's great-grandson ("Nancy" 13). Granny responds by marveling, "I haven't seen a geography since I was twenty



years old,” and then expresses her surprise at the location of Florida: “Law, I didn’t know *where* Floridy was. It’s way down there” (13). Nancy highlights the immensity of the gap in culture and experience separating herself and her grandmother when she announces that she has actually made the journey to this mysterious foreign land: “‘I’ve been to Florida,’ Nancy says” (14). In this moment, the quilt of Nancy’s folk-infused childhood seems smothered beneath the map of her adulthood’s pop culture-facilitated options and opportunities.

Nancy’s preference for these newfound, risk-filled options over the known certainties of folk culture does not threaten her physical safety, but rather her connection to her familial and subregional heritage. She fears that the part of her identity with its roots in the traditions of her family is dissolving under the weight of her pursuance of goals outside of her folk culture and homeland. Her new approach to resolving this dilemma seems to be drawn from her experience in academia as a history major. Researching her family’s past, she attempts to use such primary sources as personal interviews, photographs, and historical sites (the Culpepper houses and family graveyard) to record, investigate, and understand the folk side of herself that she perceives as threatened by her self-exile from her homeland.

The narrative engine of “Nancy Culpepper” is not the juxtaposition of the handcrafted quilt and the Texaco map; rather, it is an ancestor’s photograph that Nancy eventually recovers from Granny’s closet. Granny claims that the woman in the photograph was the family’s first Nancy Culpepper, describing this person as “curious. Plumb curious” (“Nancy” 17-18). Nancy feels an emotional connection to the face in the photograph and reads her own personality traits in the woman’s expression. Linking the first Nancy Culpepper’s outlook and emotions to her own, the present-day Nancy observes that the figure in the photograph “has her eyes fixed on something far away” and muses, “[t]his young woman would be glad to dance to ‘Lucy in the Sky with

Diamonds' on her wedding day" (18). This moment of connection across time is similar to her experience in a previous visit home during which she first learned of the existence of this nineteenth-century relative who shares her name. Describing the experience of discovering a headstone in the Culpepper graveyard reading "NANCY CULPEPPER, 1833-1905," Nancy compares it to "time-lapse photography. [...] I was standing there looking into the past and the future at the same time" (10). Nancy is intrigued by the idea that she can see both her past and her future in the presence of her name on the gravestone. Examining these two artifacts (grave marker and photograph) belonging to the ancestor who shares her name allows Nancy to view her own place within her familial and regional history from a new perspective. Instead of seeing herself as someone who has abandoned her heritage for the lures proffered by a heady blend of popular and academic cultures, Nancy now reads herself as the rightful heir of a "plumb curious" woman's personality. Nancy's connection to her family's past did not end with her defection to the North, after all – she will be linked with her history even after she herself lies under a gravestone marked "Nancy Culpepper."

A folklorist, however, understands that this single ancestor is not the only connection linking Nancy's heritage to her present and future. Elements of Nancy's Southern rural heritage have traveled through generations to reach Nancy, and are making their way towards the future in her son, Robert. Nancy, growing up in a region of retention, participated in much of the same material and intangible folklore as her ancestors. Even though Nancy feels her Southern rural traditions are not present in her current-day Northern environment, she is mistaken in this belief. Readers observe at least one childhood activity she now shares with her son and husband at their home in rural Pennsylvania. The family has a small flock of chickens whose care must be informed, at least partially, by the same knowledge Nancy learned from her parents on the

Culpepper farm (“Nancy” 3). Robert is attached to the chickens and worries about how the family would transport the fowls from Pennsylvania to Kentucky in the potential move. Nancy tries to reassure him: “They have chickens in Kentucky” (3). Given the right circumstance, this same comfort could be reversed to reassure Nancy: “You have Culpepper folklore in the North,” a folklorist might inform her, watching her use Granny’s method for setting a hen. If Nancy were to transmit the knowledge she learned from Granny to Robert in the same informal, face-to-face process through which she absorbed it on her family’s Kentucky farm, the resulting chain of folklore would stretch from the past and reach towards the future.

In light of this possibility, coupled with Nancy’s determination to be a participant/observer of her family’s folklore, the juxtaposition of the handcrafted quilt and Texaco map presents a new folkloristic metaphor. Instead of being obliterated by the emblem of popular culture, perhaps the quilt’s position under the map represents the folklore that sits just below the daily surface of Nancy’s pop-culture-infused life. This folk knowledge waits patiently for the correct moments in which to reemerge through Nancy’s actions, linking the past to the present and, possibly, to the future.

### 3 EXPLORING THE OVERLAP OF FOLK CRAFT, FAMILY TRADITION, AND CULTURAL TRANSITION IN “LOVE LIFE”

Cultural transition defines the late-twentieth-century landscape of rural/small-town Western Kentucky in Bobbie Ann Mason’s fiction and memoir. Over the course of the twentieth century, American popular culture gained significant influence in the rural Southeast, a former stronghold of Southern and subregional rural folk culture. When writing about her region of origin, Mason emphasizes the effects that the twentieth century’s accelerated cultural change has had on its residents’ practices and attitudes. One of her methods for highlighting cultural transition is to have a folk artifact act as a short story’s narrative engine.

The 1984 story “Love Life” is a prime example of a Mason work in which characters’ reactions to a quilt (and the folk culture it represents) advance the development of the plot. The majority of Mason’s writing involves some exploration of the effects of cultural transition caused by the growing influence of American popular culture and the transmuted survival of rural Southeastern folk culture. In “Love Life,” these cultural changes first cancel the necessity of, and then make a new space for, the folk craft of quilting.

In her short story “Love Life,” Bobbie Ann Mason explores two differing views of the folk craft of quilting. These two views differ in their evaluations of an heirloom quilt, the act of quilting, and the folk culture that valued and required this skill. The story’s older character, Opal Freeman, rejects totally the artifacts and gender-based restrictions of the traditional culture she suffered under as a child and working adult. She cannot look at her collection of handcrafted quilts without also seeing the confining burdens and expectations placed on women by the culture that produced these works of folk art. Her young niece Jenny, a beneficiary of American popular culture’s stride towards gender equality in the second half of the twentieth century, lacks

Opal's cultural baggage. Jenny has not suffered under the same gender-based social restrictions as Opal has, nor does she associate needlecraft with those negative social restrictions. She is thus much more ready to value the craftsmanship and family traditions represented in Opal's quilts. Jenny's contemporary freedoms grant her the ability to evaluate and interact with the past's traditions on her own terms. She can reject the cramping restrictions placed on women by the prescribed gender roles of the past while embracing the skills and emotional satisfaction offered by the folk craft of the past.

In this chapter, I will explore how cultural transition influences Opal's and Jenny's differing responses to a specific folk artifact: their family's burial quilt. I will first investigate the gender-based strictures associated with the burial quilt by exploring the overlap of traditional folk culture and Victorian-era popular culture represented in this artifact. Next, I will determine the source of Opal's negative responses to, and associations with, the traditional folk craft of quilting. Finally, I will examine Jenny's approach to the craft of quilting in the context of the influences and intentions that drive Mason to explore the results of cultural change.

### **3.1 Burial Quilt**

"Love Life" centers on the reactions of two women — spinster schoolteacher Opal Freeman (now retired) and her foot-loose niece Jenny — to a family heirloom that Opal calls a "burial quilt." Opal hates the quilt; Jenny admires it. An exploration of why these reactions differ so intensely requires the unpacking of the blended traditional and popular cultures surrounding this artifact's origin, maintenance, and future.

The burial quilt, started in 1900 by a grieving daughter mourning the loss of her mother, Eulalee Freeman, is "dark and somber," backed with "heavy gray gabardine" tied to a top

composed of nine-inch-square blocks (“Love Life” 14). Each block is “pieced of smaller blocks of varying shades of gray and brown and black” and contains an appliqué of an off-white tombstone, bearing the name, birth, and death dates of a dead family member (14-15). Mason’s description of the quilt suggests that its primary design might be either nine patch or log cabin (both are traditional quilt patterns). This burial quilt is part of a family tradition with roots in rural Western Kentucky folk culture and in American Victorian-era popular culture. Both types of culture influenced the gender restrictions under which Opal suffered throughout most of her life. Opal’s condemnation of these gender-based behavioral proscriptions are present throughout the story. Thus, a better understanding of Opal’s character requires a close examination of this fictional quilt’s complex cultural background.

Freeman family tradition, folk quilt customs, and the mourning practices of nineteenth-century popular culture inform the burial quilt in “Love Life.” The family tradition associated with this particular quilt requires that each death in the family be marked by a quilt square, complete with name, birth date, and death date, created by the surviving female Freemans (“Love Life” 15).

Below is my interpretation of the Freeman burial quilt in a log cabin pattern. Mason specifies only four of the many names of the deceased embroidered on the quilt and gives only the birth and death dates that belong to Eulalee. Because I chose to limit myself to the information contained in “Love Life” while making my version of the quilt, three of the tombstones in my recreation lack the dates that are an integral part of the fictional quilt’s content. These omissions are, though veraciously necessary, artistically unfortunate. Despite its drawbacks, my recreation of the fictional quilt can still provide readers with an informative illustration of the Freeman quilt’s blend of tombstone motif and pieced quilting.



**Figure 1: My log cabin interpretation of the Freeman burial quilt in Mason's "Love Life"**

Traditions linking death and quilting were common in 19th century America, especially in frontier and rural areas such as Western Kentucky. In "Mourning Quilts in America," Gail Trechsel explains that quilts were often put to use as shrouds, temporary covering for the body, decorative palls, coffin liners, and/or memorials (Trechsel 143, 145). Some frontier conditions (such as treeless prairies or time/safety constraints) forced mourning inhabitants to utilize a quilt as both shroud and coffin for their deceased (145). The Freeman quilt's designation as a "burial quilt" (despite the fact that its tradition involved no body being buried in it) suggests that it may owe its secondary design origins to the "mourning quilt" of nineteenth-century popular culture. A mourning quilt, which could be a quilted counterpane, coverlet, or decorative throw, was made specifically to memorialize the dead (139). Trechsel states that the main function of these quilts was to "[provide] the maker with a tangible memorial to the departed" (139). The creation of a

mourning quilt, typically “in black and white and shades of gray, usually with a black border” could be a way for a mourner to process her grief at the death of a loved one (Trechsel 142). Trechsel describes mourning quilts as having the abilities “to bring people and memories together” and “to offer comfort to the makers” (154). Mourning quilts, like the Freeman burial quilt, functioned as memorials to the departed while providing an emotional outlet for their creators. Eulalee Freeman’s daughter likely started her ambitious project of uniting all deceased Freeman family members in one quilt in order to gain a sense of closure after her mother’s death.

Intriguingly, this daughter-quilter chose to mark her mother’s passing by making an inclusive family-tree memorial quilt, as opposed to a Memory Quilt dedicated solely to the memory of her mother. Memory Quilts are mourning quilts made to memorialize a single individual and created from fabric taken from the deceased’s clothing (Trechsel 143). The creator of the Freeman burial quilt did not compose her work using her mother’s wardrobe, but instead utilized wool fabric “from men’s winter suits” (“Love Life” 15). Her choice was possibly influenced by the somber colors of these “gray, brown, and black” garments (“Love Life” 15). Thus, although the quilt was created and continued solely by Freeman women, men dominate its fabric – echoing in cloth the social structures of both rural Western Kentucky folk culture and nineteenth-century popular culture.

Male-dominated, gender-based behavioral proscriptions in nineteenth-century popular American culture were a significant component of the weave of society’s fabric. The threads of limiting, prescribed behavioral expectations for women ran through all facets of life and death; even the practice of mourning was gender-coded. The popularity of the mourning quilt, which peaked in America during the second half of the nineteenth century, derived from Victorian-era popular culture’s sentimentalizing of death, domestication of heaven, and Cult of True



Womanhood (Trechsel 138-40, 142). Influenced by the Romantics' emphasis on the expression of emotion, nineteenth-century society blended a sentimentalized view of death with a domestic concept of heaven, referring to the afterlife as a "home beyond the skies": "Heaven was no longer a place to fear one's judgment; it became another home, offering a place for a reunion with the dear departed (Trechsel 140). Trechsel explains that this heavenly domestic world was considered "particularly suited to Victorian women" by a society that limited these same women to the confines of the earthly domestic home (140): "Compatible with the time period's sentimental and domestic view of heaven was the ideology, prevalent by the 1830s, of the Cult of True Womanhood, or the Cult of Domesticity. As [nineteenth-century popular] culture romanticized death, [it] also defined separate spheres for men and women" (140). The concept of women and their associated domestic sphere took on a heavenly, unearthly glow.

No longer was woman simply considered man's helpmeet as she had been in the eighteenth century. She was instead now removed from the world of trade and commerce and encouraged to pursue "indoor pursuits [which] would harmonize with her natural love of home and its duties." Her role was to care for the home and rear the children; she was the preserver of home and hearth. (Trechsel 140)

A true woman was defined as naturally loving (and limited strictly to) her home and its duties, both flavored with a heavenly odor. Thus, a true woman was much more a family's housebound ministering angel than an actual human being. Readers may be interested in the fact that the source of the inner quotation above is the July 1853 issue of that very popular and influential product of mass media, *Godey's Lady Book* (Trechsel 156).

The ideal of true womanhood not only removed women from the world of trade and commerce, but also dictated (through elaborate social customs) just how they were to go about

preserving their domain of hearth and home. Because women were supposed to be “more pious, sensitive, and generally closer to heaven than men,” social expectations dictated that women should fulfill the role of “primary mourners” (Trechsel 140). The true woman’s responsibilities in popular nineteenth-century culture included removing herself from the public sphere to mark the death of her, or her husband’s, family members (140). This ideal true woman upheld her family’s domestic honor and demonstrated her feminine sensitivity by properly retiring from social interaction during a prescribed period of mourning (140). Society permitted her husband, however, to continue to engage in both business and social interactions despite a familial death (140). Socially accepted gender-imbalanced behavioral code dictated that a husband could attend a party during a time of mourning, while his wife could not – even if the dead relative in question was related to him by blood and to her only through marriage (140).

How does a housebound nineteenth-century-era mourner occupy her time? One socially approved occupation during the prescribed time of mourning was the ritual creation of a mourning quilt (Trechsel 139, 142). The wide popularity of the mourning quilt in the second half of the nineteenth century means that examples of mourning quilt patterns would have been readily available through such mass-media outlets as magazines and newspapers.

Did Eulalee’s grieving daughter create the Freeman burial quilt from a mourning quilt pattern she found in a newspaper or magazine? Or, did she independently originate the design? Opal, the last link in the chain of the Freeman burial quilt tradition, does not provide such information. In fact, Opal is not disposed to discuss the burial quilt or her large collection of quilts and other examples of needlework of which it is a part.

### 3.2 Opal

Opal views this collection with distaste. She has stored the quilts on the top shelf of her hall closet, burying the burial quilt under layers of double-wedding-ring and star quilts (“Love Life” 5, 14). She keeps her entire collection of quilts and other needlecrafts hidden away, out of sight. Only because Jenny repeatedly asks her aunt to show her the quilt collection does Opal pull the quilts out of the closet: “Jenny was asking to see those old quilts again. ‘Why do you hide away your nice things, Aunt Opal?’ she said. Opal doesn’t think they’re that nice, and she doesn’t want to have to look at them all the time” (2). Jenny wonders at the fact that her Aunt Opal does not seem to assign the quilts the worth that she herself does: “My aunt doesn’t think they’re worth anything. She hides all her nice stuff, like she’s ashamed of it. She’s got beautiful dresser scarves and starched doilies she made years ago” (5). Repeatedly, Jenny refers to Opal’s collection of quilts and other needlecrafts as “nice,” prompting the reader to ponder just why Opal “*doesn’t* think they’re that nice” (italics mine).

Jenny suggests that by hiding away all of her “nice stuff,” Opal acts “like she’s ashamed” of her collection. Marybeth Stalp describes some post-Depression and post-WWII owners of handcrafted quilts throwing their traditionally-made bedding away in favor of mass-manufactured blankets, and quotes one of her interviewees as stating “my aunt told me that when they were able to buy blankets that they threw the quilts away because they were moving up, they didn’t have to have that handmade stuff anymore” (Stalp 9). Handmade goods (folk crafts) could be associated with “economic suffering” and a limited access to manufactured products – and therefore were at risk of being devalued and discarded in the “post-war economic upswing” of the 1950s, when more Americans had access to manufactured items than ever before (Stalp 9). Yet unlike the poor opinion of handcrafted goods described by Stalp, Opal’s distaste for her

needlecraft collection does not stem from a sense of economic shame about the fact that its artifacts were produced by hand instead of by mass manufacturing. Instead, Opal rejects her collection because of her anger towards the culture in which these handicrafts were produced and their associated skills were transmitted.

Opal's extensive collection involves handmade products based on folk designs (her double-wedding-ring quilt and star quilt), combinations of folk and popular designs (her family tradition/late-nineteenth-century popular culture burial quilt), and mass-produced patterns (her dresser scarves). But no matter what the design origin of a particular handicraft in Opal's collection, the skills to make that handicraft were passed down to Opal by her female relatives in the traditional manner of informal, face-to-face transmission so essential to the perpetuation of folk culture. Along with those needlework skills, Opal received clear instructions from her elders and contemporaries about the behavioral expectations and gender-based restrictions inherent to the culture of her small town and its rural surroundings in her isolated region of Western Kentucky. The environment that fostered handicraft skills also fostered rigid behavioral prescriptions and proscriptions.

Discussing how Opal associates her collection of handicrafts with the harsh confines of social dictates, Albert Wilhelm, in his analysis of "Love Life," states: "Instead of reaffirming traditional values, the quilts testify to past oppression of women," adding, "Opal reads the quilts in a decidedly negative way" (Wilhelm 97). Opal expresses her negative reading of the quilts, and her total rejection of both the artifacts and the culture in which they were crafted, in the following exchange with Jenny. Opal asks her niece, "Do you know what those quilts mean to me?"

"No, what?"

“A lot of desperate old women ruining their eyes. Do you know what I think I’ll do?”

“No, what?”

“I think I’ll take up aerobic dancing. Or maybe I’ll learn to ride a motorcycle. I try to be modern.” (“Love Life” 10)

Opal sees worth in modern pastimes such as aerobic dancing and masculine-coded activities such as riding a motorcycle. She dismisses the craft of quilting as not just worthless, but physically harmful: “A lot of desperate old women ruining their eyes.”

Opal's valuing of "try[ing] to be modern" reflects her admiration of the comparatively gender-neutral freedom offered by modern society, whereas her negative reading of the quilts reflects her resentment about the fact that she was forced to spend her childhood and the majority of her employed adulthood trapped within the confines of her rural/small-town culture's traditional gender-coded demands. “Opal has lived with the old ways and long resented their limitations” (Wilhelm 95). Though some of these “old ways” owed their existence to the prevailing attitudes in nineteenth-century popular culture concerning female purity (such as the ideas expressed in the Cult of True Womanhood), many of the “old ways” about which Opal expresses disgust have to do with the isolated nature of rural Western Kentucky during her ancestors' lives and part of her own life.

Mason set “Love Life,” as she does most of her fiction, in her homeland: “far-western Kentucky, that toe tip of the state shaped by the curve” of the Ohio and Mississippi Rivers on the west side, and the Tennessee and Cumberland Rivers to the east. (*Clear Springs* 4-5). The isolated nature of this rural area, before the advent of TV and highway travel, granted it elements of Henry Glassie's “folk society” – a “homogeneous [...] self-perpetuating, largely self-sufficient group isolated by [...] topography from the larger society with which it moderately interacts”

(Glassie 3). Largely cut off from the outside world, with an agrarian-centered economy, the culture that formed Opal's upbringing would be based on a conservative outlook, viewing change as potentially dangerous. Glassie explains, "[t]he continuation of pioneer conditions on the small nearly self-sufficient holding left a man standing up against the folk end of the non-folk continuum, economically and physically isolated from progress, and reliant upon tradition" (Glassie 195). With little access to mass-produced goods, an isolated farming family had to depend on what they themselves could make and do. The cultivation and continuation of traditionally proved practices of farming, folk craft, and daily customs provided a better chance of survival than risking the uncertain outcomes of unproven alternate methods. In farming, taking risks could result in crop failure, loss of the farm, starvation, even death. Adhering to tradition helped preserve and continue the existence of one's self and one's community in a precarious world.

Prescribed, strictly-enforced gender-coded behaviors, such as the traditionally feminine skill of quilting, would be one method of reducing risks and ensuring that the next generation would inherit the necessary skill set for survival. The conservative outlook of Opal's community would have maintained these gender-coded demands even after its members left the farm to live in town. A mindset maintained for generations and deeply rooted in survival instinct is slow to change. Though Opal lived and taught school in the town of Hopewell, and presumably earned her teaching certification in academia, she still dealt daily with an existence "constrained by provincial censoriousness about the behavior appropriate to a single woman" (Price 100). After living most of her life under such socially enforced restrictions, Opal deeply appreciates the freedoms available to women during the story's early 1980s' setting.

Opal views the folk craft of quilting within the larger context of a society whose harsh demands ensured survival while leaving a great deal to be desired in terms of personal satisfaction and fulfillment, especially for its female members. This association of quilting with a culture of restrictions, inequalities, disappointments, and frustrations devalues the quilts in Opal's eyes. She sums up her opinion of her family's burial quilt with disgust at the thought of "[a]ll those miserable, cranky women, straining their eyes, stitching on those dark scraps of material" ("Love Life" 15). Opal sees an entire culture summarized by the existence of the burial quilt.

In doing so, she echoes folklorist Simon Bronner's understanding of folk artifacts as reifying "the intangible, abstract human and spiritual relations of their surroundings" (Bronner 130). "Indeed, folk objects" Bronner states, "[...] are especially striking evidence of the hidden experiences, values, and mores of people" (130). The folk art of quilting comes from a need for bedclothes, whose warmth was necessary for survival, combined with a limited amount of resources. Opal's collection of quilts reflects the pioneer traditions and mindset of the rural Western Kentucky culture from which she, and her author, are descended. Mason explains in her memoir, *Clear Springs*, that "[t]he habit of making do with what was on hand arose from the demands of pioneering and hardscrabble farming, long before the Depression" (244).

In her memoir, Mason provides familial research suggesting that the male members of this culture regulated the female members to a life of harder work than was necessary due to a gender-coded lack of respect. Mason reports the following conversation between herself and her mother, Christy Mason (whose 1919 birth year makes her Opal's contemporary):

“Back when I was raised, in the winter or in dry spells, we’d have to pack water from the well up near McKendree Church. That was ‘women’s work.’ The men could have dug a well down there, but they didn’t care how hard the women had to work.”

“Water was right under the ground,” I say. “That’s why the place was called Clear Springs.”

“The men didn’t see any need in making life easier for the women,” Mama says bitterly. “I look back and see how women were treated and what we put up with, and I just wonder why we did it. I’m amazed.” (*Clear Springs* 213-4)

Mason’s mother experiences modern-day amazement and bitterness at the burdens the subregion’s rural traditional culture placed on women in the past. Opal’s emotions when contemplating her own past seem to concur with that of Christy Mason. Neither Opal nor Mason’s mother would be much surprised to read of Glassie’s description of the antebellum slaveholder, who “controlled so much manpower that there was little reason for him to adopt labor-saving devices” (Glassie 197). What kept the slave-owner from modernizing his worker’s equipment and farming practices with labor-saving technology (and thus sparing said workers a great deal of back-breaking labor) was not necessity but was instead a lack of respect for his workers’ humanity. Mason’s mother indicates that her own rural Western Kentucky background suggests a similar culturally sanctioned lack of respect, divided along gender lines instead of racial ones.

A primary theme of Mason’s fiction is culture shock; her characters are almost always caught up in changes wrought by modernity on a conservative culture. Some of Mason’s critics interpret this theme as expressing regret for the loss of traditional ways, folk crafts, and



distinctive regional culture. A representative passage of such critique comes from Joanna Price's analysis of the collection of stories of which "Love Life" is a part: "Mason explores the effect of the past on the present, as her characters attempt to reconcile them through the process of mourning, [...] grieving for cultural losses" (Price 100). What such critics often seem to miss is Mason's own repeated assertions that she does not see herself as "romanticizing the quaint old days" (Lyons and Oliver 451). In a 1989 interview with Craig Gholson, Mason explains that she attempts to approach the topic of cultural change without misguided nostalgia: "There is a lot of nostalgia abroad for a simpler time. And I think that simpler time was full of hardship" ("Bobbie Ann Mason" 41). Mason asserts in a 1991 interview conducted by Bonnie Lyons and Bill Oliver that her characters "know all about how hard the past could be" (Lyons and Oliver 451). In the Gholson interview, she sums up her writing philosophy as ultimately espousing a positive view of cultural change:

Basically, what I write about is how people are dealing with their relationships in the face of the phenomenal swirl of change going on in this world. [...]. And it's very confusing and scary and hard for the center to hold, and hard to know where you belong and what's going to last. But, on the other hand, these characters are facing change and what they think of as progress, and they're getting a lot of advantages out of it, opportunities that their parents' generation didn't have. There's a lot of optimism and positive value coming out of this. (41)

Opal would agree with Mason that the younger generation (particularly Opal's niece, Jenny) rejoices in many advantages and opportunities Opal's generation lacked. Repression, secrecy, shame, and resentment characterized much of Opal's upbringing and adulthood. Jenny's life, filled with travel and boyfriends, reflects the cultural changes of which Mason speaks.

Mason rephrases her take on cultural change in America in the 1991 Lyons and Oliver interview:

The past is very appealing to a lot of Americans. They see it as something to hold on to, something more cohesive than this fragmented, chaotic life we mostly live now. But I find the chaos very exciting. People are getting free of a lot of that baggage of the past and I think that's good. People aren't always capable of dealing with change, and yet the possibility of dealing with it is there. (451-2)

Mason understands that the uncertainty inherent to cultural transition is distressing for many Americans. However, the author views positively the chaos and options brought by the influx of American popular culture into the Western Kentucky society previously dominated by the restrictions of Southern rural folk culture.

Opal shares Mason's excitement about the chaos of modern life. Nowhere is this excitement about modern chaos more evident than in Opal's delight with MTV: "This is her favorite program. It is always on, night or day. It's the music channel. Opal never cared for stories – she detests those soap operas her friends watch – but these fascinate her. The colors and the costumes change and flow with the music, erratically, the way her mind does these days" ("Love Life" 1). MTV, a brand-new pop culture phenomenon geared towards teenagers and young adults, appeals to her sense of disconnect with the past and appreciation of the present moment.

Opal does not view the past as "something to hold on to, something more cohesive than this fragmented, chaotic life we mostly live now." Instead, she revels in the newfound freedom of the pop-culture dominated present and only revisits the past in order to compare it unfavorably with her current situation. Her remembrances of the past are tainted with fear, concealment, and anger. For example, as she listens to Jenny casually mention the names of various men she has

dated and lived with – “Opal can’t keep track of all the men Jenny has mentioned. They all have names like John and Skip and Michael” (2) – Opal muses about the changes in the social restrictions on non-marital sex that have taken place in her lifetime. The former schoolteacher recalls the fear of being seen at a Nashville motel with the man she was dating when she was “only forty” (11): “She had been so scared. If anyone from the school had seen her at that motel, she could have lost her job” (12). And although she still hides her daily supply of peppermint schnapps in “a cut-glass decanter of clear liquid that may or may not be just water for the plants,” Opal is clearly pleased with the fact that she no longer has to bow to the regional folk restrictions that severely frowned upon women consuming alcohol or school teachers taking the edge off a weary day of teaching algebra to high school students. “She feels happy. Now that she is retired, she doesn’t have to sneak into the teachers’ lounge for a little swig from the jar in her pocketbook” (1). Cultural transition has weakened rural Southern gender-based proscriptions against such taboo activities, and Opal does not regret this change.

Though Opal harbors resentments about her past, she seems to have no regrets about the present. Although she is frightened by her advancing age – “Old age could have a grandeur about it, she thinks now as the music surges through her, if only it weren’t so frightening” (“Love Life” 2) – Opal does not try to stop or reverse the clock with clothes the way her neighbor Velma does with “those little coordinated outfits she wears” (3). Resplendent in her muumuu, socks, and ribbon-bedecked ponytail, Opal jokes about the arthritis that visits her on damp days, calling the joint stiffness “Old Arthur” (3). Watching Michael Jackson’s “Thriller” video (her favorite of all the MTV fare), Opal links its reanimated dead dancers with senior citizens: “The ghouls are so old and ugly. That’s how kids see us, Opal thinks. She loves this story. [...] This is a story with meaning. It suggests all the feelings of terror and horror that must be hidden inside of young

people. And inside, deep down, there are really monsters. An old person waits, a nearly dead body that can still dance” (11). Opal does not waste time with regret, even when she ponders “frightening” old age. A teenager might consider her body a nearly dead one; Opal herself knows that body can still dance.

Nostalgic Americans yearn for the past in the midst of cultural transition; young teenagers fear inevitable physical change. Opal does neither. Having embraced the changes brought to her by the expanding influence of popular American culture in her hometown (as evidenced by her love of MTV), she also contemplates seeking out new changes beyond her current lifestyle (a desire expressed in her jokes about aerobic dancing and motorcycle riding).

As she takes advantage of the ever-growing wave of options provided by the sea of American popular culture flooding her life, Opal also uses this state of cultural transition to jettison some of the artifacts and customs representing the oppressive folk-infused restrictions of her earlier life. Opal’s behavior suggests she is freeing herself from what Mason terms “the baggage of the past” in increments — she puts the quilt collection out of sight (and its cultural “baggage” out of mind), she enjoys her retirement by drinking taboo peppermint schnapps as she watches her beloved MTV, and she rids herself of the burial quilt by giving it to Jenny (“Love Life” 1, 15).

Opal’s life trajectory reflects Mason’s view that optimism and positive values can come out of cultural change. Significantly, as optimistic Opal pursues these positives, she also rejects her collection of quilts and the folk culture they represent. Does this mean Mason sees no room for traditional folk crafts in the path of encroaching modern technology?

Actually, Mason sees cultural change as providing the next generation with the ability to sift through their traditional heritage, purging its damaging dross of gender confines and back-

breaking labor while preserving its wealth of knowledge and familial connections. In ‘Love Life,’ she indicates the new shifts in possibilities brought about by the freedoms emerging in Jenny’s generation by shifting back and forth between the two women’s third-person limited points of view: “It was a revelation to have hit upon the alternating points of view in ‘Love Life’ because I’d never tried such a thing before. It seemed to make a breakthrough, force some shift” (Lyons and Oliver 461). I posit that the “shift” Mason creates by placing Opal’s and Jenny’s alternating third-person viewpoints within this single story is similar to the “reality kaleidoscope” she describes in her interview with Albert Wilhelm: “Reality is like a kaleidoscope. Each facet has its own reality and how you see it depends on where you are standing” (“An Interview” 132). Mason first builds an image of the culture of constraints which created Opal’s quilts. She combines Opal’s memories of the past’s harsh, fatalistic attitudes and actions (“She has a little bump on one knuckle. In the old days, people would take the family Bible and bust a cyst like that with it. Just slam it hard” [“Love Life” 17]) with her perception of the quilt collection (“Do you know what those quilts mean to me? A lot of desperate old women ruining their eyes”) in order to build for the reader Opal’s perception of the folk craft of quilting as permanently tainted by the gender-based inhibitions and dictates of the past. Then, Mason gives her story’s kaleidoscope a twist and shows an alternate view of the same folk craft through the lens of the Jenny-centered third-person limited point-of-view.

### 3.3 Jenny

Jenny lives the life her aunt might have had, if Opal had been born later or gathered the courage to leave the subregional culture that confined her. Mason explains in her interview with Gholson: “The contest in that story is between Opal, who hadn’t been much of anywhere and

who hadn't broken out of that small world, but who had wanted to and had been too afraid to. And Jenny, who had broken out much more easily and then came back searching for her roots, as young people are wont to do at a certain age" ("Bobbie Ann Mason" 42). Because Jenny has experienced the freedoms and options offered by late twentieth-century American popular culture, she is willing to re-approach the agricultural and folk elements of her home culture in order to reevaluate their worth. "She was growing restless again, and the idea of going home seized her. Her old rebellion against small town life gave way to curiosity" ("Love Life" 3). Wilhelm argues that Jenny's desire to journey back to her hometown reflects her "yearn[ing] for the firm anchors of heritage and the stability of home" (Wilhelm 95). I, however, read Jenny's interests in the heritage and stability associated with rural Southern folk culture as having less to do with inherent yearnings and more to do with Jenny's senses of exploration and evaluation. Her "curiosity" drives her to explore the possibilities of this culture that earlier in her life she had rejected wholesale in favor of more promising opportunities. Her wide variety of experiences working, camping, and traveling around the United States – she has lived on both the east and west coasts, and has visited Denver, the Grand Canyon, and Yellowstone, places Opal has only heard about ("Love Life" 16) – has given her the tools she needs to evaluate what a study of her roots might offer. Jenny has a good idea of what is out there, and now she wants to investigate where she comes from.

Whatever Jenny finds as she digs at her roots, she will not adopt it wholesale, but will instead sift through and evaluate these found traditions. As she studies the artifacts, folk crafts, and associated intangible folklore of the past, she will discard their negative components and embrace the positive. For instance, Opal's generation and the generations of women before her were expected to marry, whereas Jenny is admittedly "not in a hurry to get married" – despite the

fact that she is over thirty and has received a marriage proposal from the successful town real-estate agent, Randy Newcomb ("Love Life" 2, 6). Her desires revolve around independence, autonomy, and connection to the land: "All Jenny wants is a remote place where she can have a dog and grow some tomatoes" ("Love Life" 5). These traits more closely resemble the traditional expectations and attitudes of her forefathers of this agriculture-centered community as opposed to the constrained existences of her foremothers.

Because Jenny operates in a cultural mindset free from the gender-based constraints of Opal's upbringing and schoolteacher's life, she can look at the folk artifact of the burial quilt and admire the skills, design, and familial ties it represents. "It's gorgeous," she murmurs when Opal finally shows her the quilt. "How beautiful" ("Love Life" 14). Opal scoffs: "Shoot! It's ugly as homemade sin" (14). Opal's telling folk phrase describes her own feelings about the cramped restrictions which kept the quilt's makers, including herself, homebound. Jenny, having escaped the cultural confines that tainted Opal's life thanks to such popular-culture influences as late twentieth-century feminism, a life of mass-produced convenience, and access to mind-broadening travel, is willing to reinterpret the quilts as valuable, containing both monetary and emotional worth.

Wilhelm sees Jenny and Opal's conflicting viewpoints of the burial quilt as symptomatic of the various stages within the feminist movement. He states that in its earliest stages, "the modern feminist movement pointed out how needlework has restricted women's choices, and it typically regarded quilting as just another emblem of women's inequality" (Wilhelm 98). The view Mason offers us through Opal's eyes strongly resembles this early feminist vision. Wilhelm asserts that in later stages, "as feminist discourse matured and the status of quilts rose in the art world (especially after the 1971 exhibition at the Whitney Museum 'Abstract Design in

American Quilts'), their value among feminists escalated" (Wilhelm 98). The combination of a new interpretation of quilts (quilts can be art works whose creators demonstrate impressive feats of color and design) and a new interpretation of feminism (female gender-specific practices once dismissed as oppressive can be embraced as examples of sisterhood) created the cultural environment that colors Jenny's receptive opinion of the burial quilt more than a decade later.

Jenny's reaction to the quilt, seeing beauty in what Opal describes as "ugly as homemade sin," seems to echo the aesthetic spirit of Jonathan Holstein and Gail van der Hoof, the creators of the long-running, world-traveling "Abstract Design in American Quilts" exhibit first staged in 1971. Among Holstein's and van der Hoof's specific purposes for their exhibit was to "establish new aesthetic criteria for quilt connoisseurship" (Holstein 13). The exhibit consisted of pieced quilts hanging on the walls as opposed to lying flat on beds. The resulting display emphasized the quilts' resemblance to abstract art, helping Holstein and van der Hoof to achieve their desired purpose. Exhibit patrons admired the color and design of the quilts, ignoring the two previously key components of quilts: stitching quality and warmth. Holstein writes that he and van der Hoof chose only those quilts having "something extraordinary visually to recommend [them]" and that some of these chosen quilts "might even be judged by traditional standards as 'ugly' or 'in bad taste'" (12). His choice of words finds an echo Opal's declaration that the Freeman burial quilt is "too ugly to put on a bed and too morbid to work on" ("Love Life" 15). Jenny, however, is not interested in evaluating the quilt according to traditional quilting standards; she does not care about the quality of its stitches or how it will look on her bed. Rather, she finds the quilt's extraordinary visuals "beautiful" and its associated familial history compelling.

Because of changing gender roles and changes in technology – the new ubiquity of mass-produced bedclothes voided the need of quilts for survival purposes – the nature of quilt-making,



and feminist perception of quilt-making, changed. "Quilts, no longer a necessity, no longer used to enforce standards of femininity, could now become a banner of feminism" (Behuniak-Long 156). Jenny is not necessarily looking for a banner of feminism around which to rally. However, the same factors of artistic value and expression which swayed Wilhelm's and Behuniak-Long's feminists influence Jenny's perception of the folk artifact of the burial quilt and the folk craft of quilting.

Opal's burial quilt is part of a family tradition, and it is this family angle that prompts Jenny to express interest in learning the folk craft of quilting. When Opal explains to Jenny that the Freeman tradition dictates that the women of each generation are to record the death of each family member in a quilt square, she adds that "some of the kinfolks died without a square, so there may be several to catch up on" ("Love Life" 15). This is the impetus Jenny needs to see herself as a quilter, as someone with a project composed of clear guidelines and a specific end goal: "I'll do it. I could learn to quilt" (15). Jenny is drawn to the idea of participating in the family tradition of marking the deaths of relatives with a quilt square because she has just received news of the death of an ex-boyfriend. Working on the burial quilt would provide her with a set activity through which to process her grief. By engaging in this therapeutic activity, she would be following in the footsteps of Eulalee Freeman's daughter, thus strengthening a sense of connection with her family's history and heritage. Stalp describes the sense of history and heritage which Jenny might feel if she puts newfound skills to use on the burial quilt: "In learning to quilt, women [...] can make historically meaningful connections to legacies of women (both familial and non-familial) who have engaged in quilting generations before them" (Stalp 57). Jenny would be participating in the same activity, and working on the same project, as did

all her female relatives (including Opal) in a line extending all the way back to the turn of the twentieth century.

“I could learn to quilt,” Jenny says – but *how* Jenny learns to quilt will be crucial to the definition of whether she is participating in a continuous tradition, or whether she is merely reenacting her foremothers’ activity. If Jenny learns to quilt from a book, video, or class, she will have learned a valuable skill, yet she will be a reenactor of a folk activity as opposed to a link in this skill’s chain of tradition. To be a part of a crafting tradition requires one’s participation in a mentor/mentee relationship. Jenny’s mentor would be an experienced quilter who introduced and guided Jenny through the sewing and piecing skills inherent to the craft, demonstrating in person the process and methods. Only if Jenny learns how to quilt in this informal face-to-face transmission of knowledge will she be a folk quilter.

We can assume her aunt Opal will not be teaching Jenny to quilt, as Opal’s aversion to needlecraft plus the debility caused by her arthritis (“Love Life” 3, 9) present a double block to an aunt-to-niece folk transmission of knowledge. However, Jenny has other family members from whom she could learn to quilt. Opal is her “favorite aunt” (3), implying Jenny has other aunts who might be able to transmit the folk craft of quilting. Jenny’s mother, Opal’s sister Alice – “always so delicate and feminine” (2) – sounds as if she would pride herself on her command of the gender-coded skill set and the willingness to instruct necessary to induct Jenny into the folk tradition of quilting. Her family is not Jenny’s only source for a mentor. While Stalp states that familial transmission of quilting knowledge is part of folk tradition (“Through the family, quilting techniques are passed down through generations of women”), she also emphasizes that “[t]he cultural transmission of quilting occurs between women through the institutions of family *and the quilting community*” (italics mine, Stalp 57). Even if no female relative is available to

teach Jenny how to quilt, Jenny could still learn the craft from any experienced quilter. In keeping with her newfound pursuit of her subregional heritage, Jenny may decide to limit her search for a mentor to those quilters with familial and historical ties to Hopewell and its surrounding rural area. However, as long as Jenny's learning of the skill of quilting was based in the informal, in-person transmission of knowledge, she would be participating in a continuous folk tradition.

If Jenny does enter into this continuous tradition to take up the craft, she would not have to also take on the burdens under which her aunt and the female members of previous generations suffered. The only changes to her life she would need to make would be the reception of the face-to-face informal communication of knowledge from her folk craft mentor. Bronner explains how an otherwise popular-culture-oriented person such as Jenny could also identify as a traditional quilter:

In the newer studies, folklorists argue that group identity does not control the individual.

Rather, a person selects and expresses identities strategically. How individuals negotiate between those varied identities and how they impart their personalities through folk objects will undoubtedly continue to command folkloristic research. (Bronner 144)

Jenny, a person whose identity is centered in her nomadic wanderlust throughout the United States and her independent desires – she tells her aunt she wants to “buy a house trailer and live in the woods like a hermit” (“Love Life” 2) – would not need to conform to the past's behavior restrictions in order to be considered a folk quilter. Rather, she has the opportunity to sort through and evaluate aspects of folk tradition, selecting and expressing only the elements that appeal to her. If Jenny learns to quilt from a folk mentor, she will be what Glassie calls “the person whose culture is an individualistic synthesis of folk [...] and nonfolk components”

(Glassie 4). Jenny has the potential to synthesize the material and intangible remnants of rural and familial folk culture represented in the burial quilt with her modern popular-culture influenced actions, beliefs, and outlook.

If this hypothetical folk-crafting version of Jenny materializes, she would be quilting not out of necessity or according to gender-based social restrictions, but rather out of her enjoyment of the activity, as there is little practical need in Jenny's life for the skill. If she needs a blanket, she could buy one at Wal-Mart for a fraction of the cost and effort involved in crafting a quilt.

Glassie expounds upon the fact of the modern world's lack of need for folk skills:

Many material traditions were developed as solutions to practical problems which no longer exist, and modern technologies provide easier solutions than folk ones do for the problems that remain. The material traditions for which a modern need can be found are few. Some material traditions are carried on despite practical reasons for their discontinuance because they remain satisfying to their practitioners. (137)

Quilting will not fulfill a practical need for Jenny, but it could fulfill some of her emotional needs: her need to mourn the dead ex-boyfriend, her need to get in touch with her Southern rural folk heritage, and her need to feel part of a continuous tradition.

Opal rejoices in the freedom modern technology grants her from the hardships suffered by women in previous generations of her family, such as the ruined eyesight caused by the sewing of tiny stitches on essential quilts and other needlework. She sees little value in the past. "Don't look back, hon," she tells her niece ("Love Life" 17). Opal is attempting to comfort Jenny over the death of Jenny's ex-boyfriend, but she is also defining her own approach to the past and the senses of anger and loss she harbors towards it. Opal rejects the past wholesale. Jenny, however,

is willing to look back at the past: to examine it, evaluate it, and perhaps harvest some of the satisfying elements of its material culture.

At the end of "Love Life," Jenny makes plans to take up the craft that Opal rejects. The state of cultural transition in which Jenny and Opal live provides these women with options and the freedom to explore those options. Opal can reject the old folkways, and Jenny can reapproach those same folkways in a manner that incorporates elements of her folk heritage into her pop-culture lifestyle. Neither woman's daily decisions are predictable. When Western Kentucky's rural folk culture was inundated by American popular culture, the inherent predictability associated with traditions dissolved as daily survival stopped depending on sticking strictly to tried-and-true folk practices, customs, and behavioral prescriptions. Modern-day Jenny will not be engaging in the traditional folk craft of quilting because her cultural group or survival needs command her to do so. Instead, she will tailor her personal involvement in the folk craft of quilting to suit her desires for entertainment and emotional fulfillment. Jenny will be of the modern breed of folk crafter, one who quilts for pleasure and a connection to the past. She will explore her heritage while retaining an identity and outlook based predominantly in popular, not folk, culture.

## 4 CONCLUSION

Bobbie Ann Mason's works are bursting with examples of folk craft, folk foodways, oral folklore, and folk customs, all still waiting to be examined via folkloristic literary analysis. The exploration of this rich, as-yet-unmined vein of literary folklore would greatly enhance the Mason critical canon while providing folklorists and Mason readers alike with insights into cultural collision and cultural transition.

In this thesis, I have limited my folkloristic literary analysis to only two of Mason's fictional works plus some supplementary material from her memoir. However, because Mason's personal blend of regional folklore and homogenized American culture saturates the bulk of her writing, there remain many more instances of literary folklore within Mason's oeuvre in need of analysis. I plan to expand my exploration of Mason's depiction of the interaction between folk culture and popular culture to include studies of the novels *In Country* (1985), *Feather Crowns* (1993), and *An Atomic Romance* (2005) and in selected short stories from *Shiloh and Other Stories* (1982) and *Zigzagging Down a Wild Trail* (2001). Like the contents of my thesis, these future explorations will be shaped by my analytical focus examining how Mason has woven the themes of cultural collision and cultural transition into the fabric of her fiction. Despite my belief that this particular focus is the ideal fit for Mason critique, I encourage other Mason critics harboring a folkloristic bent to create and pursue their own analytical approaches to the as-yet untapped wealth of folklore waiting in her works. This key component of her work demands extensive critical attention.

Mason's depiction of twentieth-century cultural collision and cultural transition in the subregion of Western Kentucky preserves priceless folklore, documents the complex interaction between region-specific folklore and homogenized American popular culture, and suggests a

viable method for successfully negotiating cultural change. Faced with disorienting, anxiety-producing change, those Mason characters who consciously single out and evaluate individual components of folk and popular cultures find themselves creating new, empowering perspectives of both their traditional heritage and their complex present-day environment. Mason regularly rewards such characters with life-affirming feelings of hopefulness. In doing so, she allows her fictional creations to echo their author's optimistic attitude about the possibilities contained within cultural change.

Whether or not critics and readers have experienced the late-twentieth-century Western Kentucky setting that backgrounds most of Mason's material, all can relate to the challenge her characters face in their efforts to comprehend and evaluate known outgoing confining structures and unfamiliar incoming chaos. Every change in life replaces the familiar known with the unsettling unknown. All human beings work to comprehend and evaluate the past and present as they negotiate change. A detailed analysis of the cultural collision and cultural transition in Mason's works contributes to the ongoing human quest for making sense of life's continual state of change.

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