ABSTRACT

BRANDY REEVES. Title of the essay/capstone project. (Under the direction of Dr. Barbara Bennett)

Discussion on femininity in canonical and contemporary Southern literature tends to focus on separate female characters within the broader scope of Western patriarchy. There has been insufficient focus on Southern femininity as it relates to Southern patriarchal expectations. The idea of motherhood as a common genre within Southern literature and its influence on the contemporary Southern text has not been developed in the discourse to its fullest extent. Even less attention has been given to the concept of maternal abandonment/betrayal present in many Southern texts. Based on the analysis of three literary texts in contemporary Southern literature, this essay examines the concept of Southern motherhood as a social construct based on notions of Western femininity and narrows the focus of the feminine within specific Southern American hegemony. Examining the various forms of abandonment through literary, psychanalytical, and feminist themes in Jesmyn Ward’s Salvage the Bones, Anne Tyler’s Dinner at the Homesick Restaurant, Dorothy Allison’s Bastard out of Carolina, this essay argues that maternal abandonment is the result of paternal abandonment. By offering a range of theories about the construction of identity and influence of the historical past, such expectations show the permeability of identity of the Southern feminine and its relation to the Southern masculine in the patriarchal hegemony. Through the juxtaposition of Southern patriarchal standards imposed on the Southern mother figure, abandonment by the mother is seen as an idea that results from the patriarchal order. It is the burden of paternal abandonment that creates the conditions of maternal abandonment, leaving the burden on the mother figure.