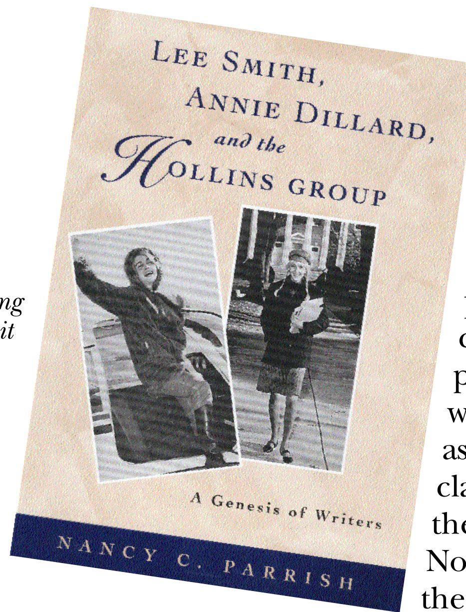
LEE SMITH, ANNIE DILLARD, and the HOLLINS GROUP

A Genesis of Writers

Please read this excerpt in preparation for completing the on-campus writing exercise. Also, you may use it as a reference when answering the essay question.



During a 1990 interview, while attempting to describe her development as a writer, Lee Smith arrived at an intriguing image for what she considered to be a significant period in her literary growth. She observed, "There are these points in your life that are pivotal, and a lot depends on who you happen to run into at those points…. I went to Hollins. So it was like falling into a womb. It was very wonderful and supportive and there were all these other people who had the same passions that I had." The general intent of Smith's words seems fairly straightforward and clear: at Hollins she found support, kindred spirits, a turning point. And yet the image she chose for summarizing and incorporating her meaning is one that has, in contemporary politics and literary scholarship, become potent enough to invite greater attention. If we ever considered the womb to be a quiet incubation chamber peacefully nurturing a child, we were mistaken in fact and in metaphor. Far from being quiet, the womb has always been the site of dynamic, incredibly complex creative growth: the womb literally senses the direct impact of sounds, chemicals, and other physical sensations affecting a woman's body. Far from being complete like a loaf of baked bread, a newborn child has only begun the process that will bring her to maturity. Hardly settled in fact, is even the most fundamental legal issue concerning the ownership of the womb: is it—as pro-choice advocates argue—the property of the woman or, rather—as anti-abortionists claim—the ward of the government? Not surprisingly, then, the metaphorical significance of the womb remains an equally contested matter: Is the womb a symbol of nurture or an indicator of regression? Is it bad form for scholars to be "essentialist" yet good criticism to validate the "blank page" of the womb as an alternative to the metaphorical penis, the pen?[1]

I pose these points as a way of suggesting that, by calling Hollins a womb, Smith has left us with a most thought-provoking metaphor that evokes not just the supportive intellectual climate of Hollins College in the 1960s but the historical controversies concerning the nature of women's higher education in this country. In a sense, women's higher education has always been a creative, contested cultural ground, what Victor Turner might term an ambiguous threshold where a person is caught "betwixt and between" the traditional positions assigned by custom and convention.[2] The evolution of the educational system for American women has indeed been a chronicle of women caught between professional aspirations and conventional social roles. What then becomes intriguing to study are the ways

women have often found to successfully exploit the gaps created by the liminal state of their education system. One means for exploiting that gap and establishing high intellectual standards for women was found in the nineteenth-century cultural movement of professionalism. A phenomenon of the middle class, professionalism seemed to offer the opportunity for improving one's class status by establishing intelligence rather than family inheritance as the criterion for assessing social worth. Women's colleges clearly benefited from the notion that objective standards determined competence in American life. Seizing upon the opportunity to enter into nationally competitive accreditation, they successfully exploited the culture of professionalism in order to overcome cultural restrictions on women's higher education. This subversion of traditional class and gender distinctions created the possibility for shifting leadership training and responsibility to women themselves. As many scholars have observed, holding positions of authority in campus organizations is one of the historical opportunities of women's colleges and was an experience that, in all likelihood, would not come to their sisters who attended coordinate or coeducational colleges.

Interestingly, for financial and cultural reasons, northern women's colleges such as the Seven Sisters tended to capitalize more fully on that potential decades earlier than did their southern sisters. Paternalism in the formation of southern women's colleges had a distinctive shape, scholar Anne Goodwyn Jones (Hollins '67) argues: strictures concerning idealized white southern womanhood have been particularly enduring because that tradition was so crucial to the South's self-definition.[3] Consequently, the education of southern women such as those at Hollins has remained pro-foundly shaped by regional ideas about gender and economics. To highlight that regional difference in women's education, I use the case of Hollins for contrasting certain aspects of its development with those of the Seven Sisters colleges while showing their typicality among other nearby women's colleges. The case of Hollins shows both why that progress was slower in the South and how, in the middle of the twentieth century, one southern women's college suddenly proved able to develop a nationally competitive writing program that produced writers such as Lee Smith and Annie Dillard.

Hollins not only is representative of the staggered timetable in women's higher education, but it offers an instructive insight into how a successful and prolific group of writers established their literary roots. In the 1960s, Hollins was not simply a warm and protected place in which to mature, but a place in which fiercely competitive women tested themselves against their peers, their mentors, their culture, and their own prior self-definition. For Smith and her peers, the years at Hollins were an active and complex gestation period for their themes and writing. And it does not belabor the metaphor to observe a further parallel: that the writing envi-ronment at Hollins proved so fertile that Hollins women have, in impressive numbers, been empowered to make striking contributions to the contem-porary literary world. My research has persuaded me of how precisely this last point completes the analogy. Hollins-as-womb was a creative starting point: out of this boisterous and challenging writing environment has emerged a long line of women who have

molded writing careers by their own visions and made striking contributions to the contemporary literary world, all while maintaining the critical and congenial ties formed while at Hollins. Because such a high level of achievement in writing careers was disproportionate to any traditional expectations for a small Southern women's college, Hollins makes a compelling claim on our intellectual interests.

The assembling of a talented group of women was not entirely coincidental. The writing program at Hollins was clearly given its initial strength by Louis D. Rubin, Jr., who has subsequently become a prominent scholar and editor in the field of southern literary studies. In essence, Rubin brought national recognition to Hollins' writing program: he brokered the terms of how the program was funded and designed; he actively sought young writers; he energetically sought publication of his own work as well as the work of others; and he offered or oversaw the instruction of all creative writing students. The design of the program attracted dedicated faculty members and an exciting program of visiting writers. Rubin's personal commitment to his students and his ability to learn from them proved to be of great importance to the young women. Lee Smith, Annie Dillard, Lucinda Hardwick MacKethan, and others credit Rubin as vital in encouraging them to go on with their writing. Rubin not only supported the students but actively fostered their professional growth by bringing them in close and constant contact with successful professional writers and publishers.

In a sense, the Hollins writing program of the 1960s was a test of the extent to which male mentors can transcend paternalism and foster the achievement and autonomy of female students. Central in changing the traditional model of familial relations on the campus were the women in the class of 1967, the women of what I have called the Hollins Group. These writers essentially redefined the familial atmosphere they found at Hollins, adjusting their roles from daughters in a tightly knit family to supportive sisters in a highly competitive academic community. They were talented, ambitious young women, who were able to seize upon the educational opportunities of the college at a moment when Hollins, and the writing program in particular, aspired to national academic excellence. Focusing especially on the figures Lucinda Hardwick MacKethan and Anne Goodwyn Jones, I describe the nature and evoke the liminal state of this community by documenting the women's experiences together, excerpting their published writing produced during those years, and analyzing the nature of the community formation that resulted from these activities. These women forged a collective identity by joining to face common obstacles and developed a strong sense of individual identity through competition with each other. Hollins was a place where these women explored their ideas, tested their writing, and established some significant relationships that would evolve as their adult writing developed. Later, as professional writers, these women have continued to offer one another criticism and support. Certainly, reading each other's writing and accepting each other's work for publication suggests a womblike security; but, in fact, these women often felt intensely competitive with each other. This apparent need for both competition

and cooperation as spurs to creativity suggest that women's communities may not be—and perhaps should not be—the entirely blissful havens sometimes romanticized in feminist literature.

Finally, I single out for close study the early years and apprentice writing of the two best-known members of the Hollins Group, Annie Doak Dillard and Lee Smith. Though these women have taken different directions in their writing careers, their apprentice work shares a common theme: the struggle of each of these women to define herself in her own terms. Both the Doak and Smith families wanted their rebellious daughters to obtain educations at southern women's colleges, partly to restrain their individualistic natures. Both young women were hostile to the constraints imposed by the college over their lives. Yet both women, despite their impatience with constraint, lived up to expectations: Doak married even before graduation, and Smith turned down a fellowship in order to marry and raise a family. Hence, we see the contradictory character of this southern women's college: it heightened and disciplined the two writers' intellectual ambitions, while it channeled them into conventional roles. In the modest counter-culture that was the Hollins writing program, these women found an intellectual alternative to the social pressures on young women at a southern college. It was a place where they could be temporarily free from the demand for conformity, identify the issues that concerned them, and search for their voices. Dillard experimented both with liminal subject matter and an unsettled persona; Smith worked with multiple narrators and more overtly feminist subject matter. The instruction, compe-tition, and collaboration of their writing community worked powerfully to nurture them as part of a new generation of talented and independent women writers.

As Lee Smith has observed, there are points in a person's life that are pivotal; and yet women have not always enjoyed a historical record of positive self-defining moments in the lives of women. Without such histories, women lack the alternative models that could be most useful in helping them with their own self-definitions. The particular contribution of this research is that it documents the circumstances that contributed to the positive self-definition of an important group of women writers. The case of Hollins College shows that successful women's writing communities are rarely the product of mere chance; rather, they represent the product of enlightened cultural forces combined with individuals of inspired talent. It is an equation we must learn if we are to continue to strengthen and expand American literature and culture. It is time we gained a more complex understanding of what a womb-like writing community for women might be.

1. Nancy C. Parrish, "Interview: Lee Smith," *Appalachian Journal* 19 (1992): 400; Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar set up this metaphorical opposition in *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Ninteenth-Century Literary Imagination* (New Haven, 1979), 3–44.

2. Victor W. Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (Chicago, 1969) 95.

3. Anne Goodwyn Jones, *Tomorrow Is Another Day: The Woman Writer in the South, 1859–1936* (Baton Rouge, 1981), 4.