

1999

Religion and race in the poetry of Thylas Moss

Edward W. Strong
Lehigh University

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Strong, Edward
W.

Religion and Race
in the poetry of
Thylias Moss

May 31, 1999

Religion and Race in the Poetry of Thylas Moss

by

Edward W. Strong

A Thesis

Presented to the Graduate and Research Committee

Of Lehigh University

In Candidacy for the Degree of

Master of Arts

in

The Department of English

Lehigh University

April 27, 1999

This thesis is accepted and approved in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Master of Arts.

4/27/99
Date

Thesis Advisor

Co-Advisor

Chairperson of Department

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Abstract of Thesis Paper

This paper examines two poems by American poet Thylias Moss. Moss writes from a religious standpoint about racial issues in American history. The two poems, "November and Aunt Jemima" and "Lunchcounter Freedom," use a mealtime setting within which to examine the moral ramifications of traditional racial issues. Both poems deal with the history of limited opportunity for American blacks. My paper explores Moss's reasons for using a mealtime setting as well as the religious and historical significance of her two poems.

Moss forces her reader to re-evaluate religious tenets from the perspective of an American black whose opportunities have been limited within a society which ostensibly upholds those tenets. "November and Aunt Jemima" juxtaposes the limitations associated with the Aunt Jemima stereotype and the Christian traditions of the Thanksgiving holiday. "Lunchcounter Freedom" portrays limited opportunities for blacks in formerly segregated public establishments where whites were elevated to a god-like status. Moss effectively juxtaposes and contrasts images of limited opportunity with religious themes in these two poems from *Small Congregations*.

Thylia Moss's collection of poetry, *Small Congregations*, is appropriately named. Her words often suggest small church gatherings or solemn congregations. Through her poetry Moss speaks quietly but purposefully as a representative for any of God's small congregations of believers. She resembles Tahlma Ollet who prepares food for the soul in the title poem, "Small Congregations." The narrator describes Ollet as fixing "a cook's bible that she chops / into scriptures and makes us eat, tossing them / into every course: soup, entrée, dessert" (Moss 43).

Two of her poems in particular address racial issues while providing the reader with ample food for thought. "November and Aunt Jemima" shares uniformity of both theme and imagery with "Lunchcounter Freedom." Both poems address the history of blacks in America, and both use a mealtime setting within which to examine traditional racial attitudes. In his book, *Mammy and Uncle Mose: Black Collectibles and American Stereotyping*, Kenneth Goings comments on the frequent association of blacks with food, noting that "the popular identification of an African-American with food was seen as a good endorsement" (Goings 47). But in Thylia Moss's poetry, meals function on several levels to provide more than mere food for the stomach. Ultimately they become religious experiences, the food functioning only peripherally as a source of physical sustenance. Moss recreates American traditions with her provocative imagery, effectively juxtaposing the paradoxical themes of racial persecution and religious doctrine.

Moss's poetry derives impetus from its subtle dependence on the reader for interpretation. In the first stanza of "November and Aunt Jemima" Moss writes,

“We sit at the table and that is grace, / the way one commits the prelude to kowtowing / by folding into the chair” (Moss 117). Kowtowing suggests a subservient, slave/master relationship in which obeisance is an expected part of a ritual. Moss forces the reader to re-think the paradigm of saying prayers at table before eating. There is something sacred in the ritual of congregating which, on a larger scale, parallels the act of prayer, or “kowtowing by folding” (Moss 117). The ritualistic display of subservience is applicable to both a man-God and a slave-master relationship. In what ways, asks Moss, do we figuratively offer grace? Is not the simple act of sitting together at Thanksgiving dinner a way to offer grace? In what other ways, besides prayer itself, do we offer grace? To extend the metaphor of congregating on this holiday as an act of prayer, in what other ways do our actions speak? What unconventional significance might we attribute to this Thanksgiving congregation?

Moss associates prayer with subservience in “Death of the Sweet World” as well. The last stanza describes the narrator’s mother:

When she said grace
her hands swept across the meal
as if she was in love
with the broom. (Moss 88)

The tone here resembles the prefatory ritual described as “kowtowing by folding” in “November and Aunt Jemima” (Moss 117). Moss suggests that blacks have essentially worshipped whites as if they were gods, that their subservience to whites is tantamount to a form of worship. Her choice of mealtimes for a portrayal of traditional black and white roles is quite logical; according to Kenneth Goings, the

association of blacks with mealtime “clearly harks back to the Old South myth, where every white person was looked after by a ‘mammy’” (Goings 34).

The narrator’s aunt bears a striking resemblance to Aunt Jemima, the traditional trademark of a black mammy pictured on a box of pancake mix, a robust black woman wearing a head cloth and an apron (The Aunt Jemima trademark has been updated. In recent years the headcloth has been replaced by pearl earrings and a bouffant hairdo.). Whether evocative of a house servant or a maid, this stereotype suggests an economically subservient and downtrodden position. Moss personifies the Aunt Jemima trademark when she writes, “. . . an extra place / is set for Aunt Jemima, the pancake box / occupies the chair” (Moss 117). Whether real or figurative, the narrator’s aunt recreates for the family an image of the past persecution of the American black. Everything about this woman suggests the humiliating stereotypes assigned her in a world dominated by whites.

The term “Aunt” signaled respect, and was traditionally used with “Uncle” by young slaves who addressed older slaves, whether or not they were related. Slaves were not allowed to call one another “Mr.,” “Sir,” or “Mrs.” (Goings xxiii). As for the origins of Aunt Jemima, Diane Roberts writes:

Aunt Jemima is so familiar she is practically invisible, part of America’s racial background noise. Aunt Jemima flourished in minstrel shows before she became a corporate brand name: the archetypal “mammy,” her shiny, scrubbed black face beaming, her crimson head-rag tied smartly in a square knot. (Roberts 1)

While other trademarks exist – Rastus on the box of Cream of Wheat hot cereal, Mrs. Butterworth in the shape of a brown, glass “mammy” which functions as a syrup bottle, and Uncle Ben on a carton of rice (see illustration, page 5) – none can



boast the long and popular tradition of Aunt Jemima. The advantage of name-recognition makes her an obvious choice for Moss's poem.

Using Aunt Jemima and the meal as a backdrop, Moss examines racial issues from a moral standpoint. Traditional American meals exemplify racial inequality, the black servant waiting on the white master. And as meals are a frequently practiced social custom, it follows that the segregation implied by mealtime etiquette epitomizes American racial inequality. In *Negroes in American Society*, Maurice Davie relates the story of "a white man who admitted that he had had a Negro mistress for thirty years, but defending himself hotly against any suspicion that he might favor 'social equality,' swore that he had 'never sat down to breakfast with her'" (Davie 306). Interracial sex was considered more acceptable than interracial dining!

Like robust Jemima, Moss describes the aunt's hips as "full as Southern Baptist / tents but of a different doctrine" (Moss 117). The Southern Baptist faith is not reflected by Jemima's image on the box; rather than suggesting a servant of the Lord, her appearance conjures an image of servitude to a white master. Can Moss be implying that Jemima's hips are "full" in terms of the desire they create? The "different doctrine" of whiteness, which results from an unwanted master-slave relationship, certainly contrasts with the expected doctrine of the Southern Baptist religion (Moss 117).

Moss explores what Thanksgiving might mean to an American black whose ancestors have suffered racial persecution. She presents us with this ironic scenario of a persecuted people giving thanks. The presence of Jemima reminds the narrator

of the traditional role played by blacks who waited on white masters during lavish holiday banquets. After serving whites their sumptuous spread, the black servants were likely to eat leftovers in the kitchen. Moss's simile, "Usually we eat as if on a subway" (Moss 117) appropriately recreates such an image.

The aunt's teeth are characterized as "white as the shock of lynching, thirty-two / tombstones" (Moss 117). Aunt Jemima reminds her hosts of the profane, unspoken hypocrisy inherent in past Thanksgivings. Teeth were associated with lynching in that observers often extracted a lynched victim's teeth to keep "as watch charms or good luck pieces" (Brearley 681). Named for Revolutionary War Colonel Charles Lynch's unsanctioned hanging of Tories (Davie 339), reasons for lynching blacks included the following as documented by Tuskegee Institute:

... peeping in a window, not calling a white man "Mr.," writing to a white woman, trying to act like a white man, not knowing his place, attempting to vote, being active in politics, not stopping auto when ordered to, being too prosperous, disputing over the price of blackberries, and enticing servant away [*sic*]. (Davie 346)

In the narrator's mind, Aunt Jemima's teeth represent past persecution rather than the joy of a traditional family gathering.

The holiday itself merits an unenthusiastic welcome, as the narrator associates it with guilt: "Today, though, is Thanksgiving / so guilt bibs us" (Moss 117). Because Moss's metaphoric "bib" ties around the neck like a hanging rope, it suggests the unwarranted "guilt" of blackness as well as guilt over an inability to be properly thankful on Thanksgiving Day (Moss 117). Primarily the family seems guilty of a moody noncompliance with the holiday spirit. Joseph Lattimore, an African-American, perhaps best explains the mood in his Studs Terkel interview:

If they were good slaves, somebody made them good by beating them half to death or whatever you have to do to a person. It's kind of like the Jews being made to celebrate Hitler. That's the way black people have to celebrate slaveowners of our past. (Terkel 454)

Consider the ramifications of Thanksgiving in America. It is a celebration historically associated with the friendship between Native Americans and white Europeans. But blacks were brought to America as slaves from Africa. In contrast with whites, who traditionally have given thanks for the plenitude made available through American Indian friendship, blacks historically have been relegated to the unenviable Jemima/mammy/servant role on Thanksgiving Day. Memories of their American roots as servants inspire a guilt-ridden reluctance to celebrate.

Aunt Jemima is the grim reminder, the Ghost of Thanksgiving Past. This Jemima look-alike wearing a "headrag" embarrasses the family (Moss 117). The narrator notes that this woman is welcomed only grudgingly once a year, apparently on Thanksgiving Day. In an effort to rationalize her aversion to Jemima's presence, the narrator admits, "Even Christ would not be welcome every day" (Moss 117). Like Jesus Christ, Aunt Jemima is a symbol of both persecution and perseverance. Christ's inability to "come / without judgment" (Moss 117-18) may refer to his being judged more than to his judging; that the aunt "cannot come without pancakes" (Moss 118) is indicative of how she invokes the Aunt Jemima stereotype and the "mammy" role it implies.

Moss's final image is of "the / mix in the box after the grinding of the bones" (Moss 118), which is suggestive of both Aunt Jemima's symbolic pain and the interracial mix of contemporary America. This powerful metaphor suggests that the pancake mix, our America, was formed from the ground-up bones of black people,

years of their suffering supporting the white cornucopia. In an effort to make the black race conform to white standards, the race has been reduced, symbolically, by trying to change the picture on the box into a predominantly white mix inside. The white mix represents the dominance of white values in the racial mix. It is also representative of the racial commingling of white blood through miscegenation. Inside Jemima is partially white although her exterior appears black.

Not the normally expected American cornucopia, this meal includes only pancakes from mix that represents ground bones and “syrup that is the liquid / version of her skin” (Moss 117). We learn that the aunt “cannot come without pancakes” (Moss 118), and that the syrup “flows like the promised milk and honey” (Moss 117). Moss has essentially created an American black metaphor for the sacrament of the Lord’s Supper, an appropriate ritual in that it commemorates the milk and honey which America withheld for years from its black population.

Rather than bread and wine for their Holy Communion, participants receive pancakes and syrup, thereby (through the Christ-like Jemima) participating in her suffering. One might say, figuratively, that Jemima has died for the sins of the entire race. She represents those who, persecuted through the decades, have enabled the black race to endure. Her appearance on the box wearing the bandanna symbolizes the martyrdom suffered by earlier blacks.

The bandanna is like some holy relic associated with a martyr’s suffering. Shamefully reminding the narrator of her race’s past, it appropriately supports Moss’s spiritual, or soul-food theme: instead of bread and wine representing Christ’s body and blood, we have pancakes and syrup made of ground bones and

liquefied skin. Kenneth Goings's description of the significance of the bandanna clarifies the narrator's inferred sense of racial persecution:

The use of the bandanna originally had signaled a slave's link to Africa, where the practice originated. But after slavery, the headkerchief came to symbolize the "happy darky" (particularly the mammy) of Old South mythology. (Goings 66)

That the bandanna stands for "a slave's link to Africa" certainly indicates persecution. And if it symbolized the "happy darky . . . of Old South mythology" (Goings 66), that symbol, too, would represent a form of persecution for contemporary American blacks.

Jemima is metaphorically stoned in the poem "by those whose sins / being white are invisible as her pain" (Moss 118). But the pain, like the mix, is internal. The stones thrown at Jemima are "humane stones" (Moss 118), or pancakes, which invoke the psychologically painful stereotype of a black mammy. Jemima's suffering, like Jesus Christ's, is justified in the eyes of her persecutors, "whose sins / being white are invisible" (Moss 118). Deeming themselves without sin, they have cast stones, metaphorically, at Jemima, whose pain is unfathomable to them because they are white. Their inability to empathize with the subservient stereotype is intrinsic in her persecutors' white skin. Lacking any empathic cross-racial identity, the white person naturally accepts the image of the mammy, "Aunt Jemima," and fails to perceive as humiliating the stereotype she represents.

Moss treats similar themes in "Lunchcounter Freedom," a poem that recalls the sit-ins that tested the Jim Crow laws which barred blacks from many public places and white-owned establishments in America. Full of contrasts, the poem juxtaposes

white and black, dove and crow, with subtle irony. Moss could have been speaking about either of the poems addressed here when, in a 1991 interview, she said:

“We’re not just talking about racial things here when we separate light and dark. We’re talking about the very nature of evil” (Dougherty 1). Refuting the standard associations of evil with darkness and good with light or whiteness, Moss notes that it is the distinction itself, the stereotypes attached to one color/race by another, that constitutes true evil.

“Lunchcounter Freedom” shares with “November and Aunt Jemima” themes of American black history, of suffering and subordination to whites. But “Lunchcounter Freedom” portrays traditional racial boundaries within a public setting, whereas “November and Aunt Jemima” examines racial segregation from an internalized view within a family setting. While both poems show the hypocrisy inherent in Christian religion when juxtaposed with racial segregation, “Lunchcounter Freedom” portrays the white man’s god-like status in his relation to blacks.

The first stanza of “Lunchcounter Freedom” portrays the narrator’s former idealized view of the white male. The narrator relates her dream of being desired by a white man, imagining how his hands “would fly to my breasts with gentleness / stolen from doves” (Moss 111). While doves are often white, they usually represent something gentle, an indication that the narrator hoped her dream-lover would be gentle and benevolent. The narrator makes a connection between the gentle whiteness of the dove and the man of whom she dreamed, an ideal man whose gentle nature was “stolen from doves” (Moss 111).

But this idealized white lover is turned into something vicious in the second stanza, the narrator telling us “the doves unfold into hammers. They still fly to my breasts” (Moss 111). No longer is the imaginary lover gentle and benevolent; now the dove resembles a hawk. “White men are the walls” (Moss 111), or something prohibitive like a barricade or an obstacle. Instead of suggesting gentle caresses, the white man’s hands threaten violence and harm, but they “still fly to my breasts” (Moss 111), now suggesting an assault.

The reason for this assault is that the narrator has entered a white-owned establishment where she is unwanted. No one will serve her, and she is intentionally made to feel unwelcome. Whereas she initially entered the establishment with hopes of getting served, the narrator gradually recognizes the reality of racial barriers. From her point of view, this painful situation is totally unconscionable. The narrator’s rejection of her situation echoes that of the black poet, Langston Hughes, who expressed his dissatisfaction with racial segregation in a 1943 essay:

Millions of people in New York, Chicago, and Seattle go to the same polls and vote without ever cohabiting together. Why does the South think it would be otherwise with Negroes were they permitted to vote there? Or have a decent education? Or sit on a stool in a public place and have a hamburger? (Hughes 6)

From an Afro-American or even a Yankee perspective, ordering a hamburger at the local greasy spoon was not such a big deal. But the whites were in charge, and to many of them the Negro was a lower form of life.

There had actually been debates in America over the issue of whether or not blacks had souls. That they should commingle with whites on an equal basis was

preposterous, especially in the South. Maurice Davie describes some of the measures white people used in their efforts to exclude blacks:

. . . proprietors have discovered numerous ways of avoiding or discouraging Negro patronage without seeming to bring the law into question. Or the Negro may be accepted and served food that has been made unpalatable by filling it with salt or even a violent emetic. Perhaps the simplest way of discouraging the return of an unwelcome Negro patron is to overcharge him, a practice which is also frequently utilized in private business and professional services. Another device is to insult the Negro customer. (Davie 290)

In Moss's poem the narrator encounters a hostile white who physically assaults her, shattering her illusions both of romance and of food. Like the narrator herself, the "dark bird" on her hat remains unsatisfied, "trying to pull nectar from a cloth flower" (Moss 111). Moss's "cloth flower" resembles "the promised milk and honey" in "November and Aunt Jemima." (Moss 117). In "Lunchcounter Freedom" both the narrator and the "dark bird" on her hat make futile efforts at getting sustenance, the "cloth flower" proving as illusory for the bird as the food desired by the narrator. The narrator and her "dark bird" contrast with the white patron and the whiteness of his metaphoric "doves" (Moss 111).

Echoing the statement in "Lunchcounter Freedom" that "white men are the walls" (Moss 111), Moss writes in "Interpretation of a Poem by Frost":

A young black girl stopped by the woods,
So young she knows only one man: Jim Crow
But she wasn't allowed to call him Mister.
The woods were his and she respected his boundaries
Even in the absence of fence. (Moss 116)

The boundaries, though often invisible, are understood and accepted even by young Americans. And those who try the boundaries, who attempt to live their ideals, often

find their illusions shattered. Thus the narrator of "Lunchcounter Freedom," realizing that her illusions are only illusions, finds her thoughts eroded as she seeks internal refuge in the words of biblical Psalms.

Added to the narrator's dismay at not being served is the feeling that she herself has become the prey. The one thing to get consumed in this luncheonette is the narrator's "thoughts," nibbled and gnawed at by "psalms" likened to "mice in my mind" (Moss 111). Gradually the realization that she cannot eat here sinks into her mind. Though she had "made up [her] mind not to order a sandwich on / light bread," her preferences are moot, as the waitress will not serve her anyway (Moss 111). Her initial ideas about what to order are devoured, eventually, by "psalms" as the narrator comes to recognize her precarious situation for what it actually is. To whom but God can she turn when, alone in a white establishment, the company grows hostile. The narrator's thoughts of ordering food are supplanted, or consumed, by the words of psalms, spiritual comfort for the satisfaction she evidently will not obtain at this lunch counter. As in "November and Aunt Jemima," spiritual sustenance replaces the physical.

But while her people naturally turn to religion for solace, Moss's tone toward religion reveals a dichotomy analogous to her perspectives on racial ideals and realities. Do we truly belong to a monotheistic society, or is the white god different from the black one? Moss's poems often raise this question. "November and Aunt Jemima" makes the reader think about the differences in the way blacks and whites celebrate Thanksgiving and similar holidays. A dichotomy exists between the black and white perspectives of God.

Whereas “November and Aunt Jemima” presents both the idea of miscegenation and the American black version of the sacrament of the Lord’s Supper, “Lunchcounter Freedom” gives an American black version of Genesis’s creation story:

The white man cradles
His tar baby. Each magus in turn.
He fathered it, it looks just like him. (Moss 111)

The white man is portrayed as God, the father of the black man created in his image. Her inferior status in the white restaurant prompts the black narrator to imagine the socially superior whites as gods.

On being “knocked from the stool” by the white man, the narrator assumes the passive role of a helpless baby (Moss 111). She puts herself at the mercy of the white aggressor who is essentially her god. He has established her limitations, knocked her off the stool, and now “cradles his tar baby” (Moss 111).

The tar baby was a character in the American folk tales known as the Uncle Remus stories. Uncle Remus, the fictional narrator of these animal tales, portrayed “the social role of the Negro slave as story-teller to his master’s children” (Botkin 652). Joel Chandler Harris transcribed these tales, many of which are believed to have originated in Africa (Botkin 652). Uncle Remus tells the tale of tar baby, created by Brer [Brother] Fox out of tar and turpentine as a trick to catch Brer Rabbit (Botkin 653). Both Uncle Remus and the tales he relates portray blacks in traditional roles of plantation fiction.

In one story, when the listening child asks Uncle Remus whether or not the fox killed and ate the rabbit, Uncle Remus’s response exemplifies Harris’s dialogue:

“Law, honey, ain’t I tell you ‘bout dat?” replied the old darkey, chuckling slyly. “I ‘clar ter grashus I ought er tole you dat, but old man Nod wuz ridin’ on my eyelids twel a leetle mo’n I disremember’d my own name, en den on to dat here come yo’ mammy hollerin’ atter you.” (Botkin 654)

Remus narrates the tale, but notice that there is another, omniscient narrator who apprises the reader about “the old darkey.” Joel Harris’s narrator describes Uncle Remus in his role as storyteller, and it is this omniscient narrator who can be said to represent the white creator of the black servant. Uncle Remus, who narrates the animal tales, is overseen by an omniscient, white narrator who refers to him as an “old darkey” (Botkin 654). And just as the “old darkey” (Botkin 654) is created by the omniscient, white narrator, Moss’s narrator in “Lunchcounter Freedom” feels that she has been created, in a sense, by the white man who regulates and defines her parameters. He determines whether or not she can be served or even sit at the luncheonette counter.

While blacks in the Uncle Remus stories are stereotyped as “old darkey” and “mammy” (Botkin 654), the tales themselves represent plantation life on a more subtle level. The predatory fox is analogous to a white master and the defenseless rabbit to a helpless slave. The secrecy surrounding the outcome of the tale suggests a surreptitious affair between master and slave. Uncle Remus “slyly” avoids telling what the fox does to the rabbit (Botkin 654). That the narrator “disremember’d [his] own name” suggests his unwillingness to divulge certain details to the white child, even to the extent of “forgetting” his own name if necessary (Botkin 654). In cases of miscegenation, of course, the identity of a bastard, mulatto child would at all costs be kept secret.

Thus when Moss writes of the white man in the luncheonette having fathered a tar baby which “looks just like him” (Moss 111), she refers not only to the black stereotypes fostered by folk tales like the Uncle Remus stories, but also to the white master’s resemblance to mulatto children who were the product of miscegenation. American blacks were created in one sense by white ideas about segregation and in another sense by miscegenation.

Moss makes a more obvious allusion to miscegenation at the end of “Lunchcounter Freedom” when she writes, “The menu offers tuna fish, / grits, beef in a sauce like desire. / He is free to choose from available choices” (Moss 111). Grits are a decidedly southern dish, and suggest a southern setting in which the black narrator is limited by the barriers of racial segregation. The white man, however, can pick from among white-colored foods like tuna fish and grits or dark foods such as “beef in a sauce like desire” (Moss 111). As with food, the white man has freedom to choose either white or black women to satiate his appetite, whereas the black narrator is limited in choice of both partners and food. Whereas it would be unacceptable for the black narrator to make sexual advances toward the white man or to order food, he is free to approach her or to order food. Only white men have genuine “Lunchcounter Freedom.”

“Lunchcounter Freedom” resembles “November and Aunt Jemima” in that both poems examine the American black tradition within a mealtime setting. In neither poem does the narrator eat or obtain physical sustenance from the various foods, and yet both poems offer a kind of spiritual sustenance through images associated with food. “November and Aunt Jemima” examines the expected role of

blacks at mealtime: servants, mammies, and cooks were expected to wait on the white master. In a traditional, holiday setting, blacks were subservient, and thus they might be expected to celebrate their past differently than most white Americans.

“Lunchcounter Freedom” presents the progressive ideal of racial equality at mealtime. The poem portrays a black woman’s efforts to break down the traditional barriers of racial segregation inherent in American mealtime etiquette.

In the poem “Spilled Sugar” Moss writes, “we have to redefine God” (Moss 81). As she advocates in “Spilled Sugar,” Moss’s mealtime poems re-evaluate Christian paradigms from an American black perspective. “November and Aunt Jemima” equates Aunt Jemima’s plight with Christ’s persecution and suggests a communion of pancakes and syrup as a means of commemorating the suffering of this representative black martyr, Aunt Jemima. And “Lunchcounter Freedom” sarcastically portrays the black man’s creator as a white man, thus suggesting a new approach to the biblical creation myth.

Both poems deal with traditional white attitudes, exemplified at mealtime, toward blacks in America. Religion was an integral part of early American society, and as such was an accessory to numerous racial injustices. Through the acknowledgement of racial injustice and religious hypocrisy, Moss’s poems help to purge past injustices and nurture an altered vision of both America’s past and future.

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Vita

Edward W. Strong
507 Maple Street
Roseto, Pa. 18013
(610) 588-5419

Born 3/19/54 in Trenton, N.J.
to Sally and Philip Strong
of Cranbury, N.J. 08512

Career Objective: To utilize my experience and creative skills in education

Education: Preparatory School, Lawrenceville, N.J. (class secretary, 1997-present)
Beloit College, Beloit, Wisconsin
Univ. of Montana/Missoula – B.A. cum laude, English (1977)
Lehigh University, Bethlehem, Pa. – M.A., English (1999)

1996-Present: Served on Board of Directors, Slate Belt Youth Soccer Association

1994-Present: Summer school English teacher at Nazareth High School, Pa.

1993-1996: S.A.T. verbal preparation at various N.J. and Pa. districts

1991-Present: Substitute teacher at Bangor, Bethlehem, East Stroudsburg,
Nazareth, and Pocono Mountain School Districts

1990-Present: Licensed soccer coach and referee (P.I.A.A., 1995), softball umpire
(P.I.A.A., 1996)

1990-Present: English-as-a-second-language and Homebound tutor

1990-1994: Recycling coordinator for Borough of Roseto, Pa.

1980-1990: Self-employed and otherwise as a skilled carpenter

1979-1980: Taught grades K-8 combined in traditional one-room schoolhouse at
Glacier Hutterite Colony, Santa Rita, Montana

1977-1979: Taught secondary English and speech at Opheim H.S., Opheim, Mt.;
assistant football coach, director of high school play, junior prom advisory
committee, etc.

**END
OF
TITLE**