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Ima Honaker Herron

Role models, guides, mentors . . . no matter what you call the people who influence you significantly, they may have played various roles in your life. I have no difficulty in naming a dozen or more people who helped me grow up in substantive ways in just growing up. When I think of my professional life, I immediately single out a very special person - Dr. Ima Honaker Herron.

Alas, I did not have Dr. Herron for any undergraduate course, for she taught English and I majored in Comparative Literature which, then, was entirely separate from the Department of English. Although my world literature courses acknowledged that literature development was happening in England and America, we could not study any English or American works, nor did English majors study any world literature. Both groups of students suffered from the separation and compartmentalization. Years later, whatever feud had resulted in the separation of those studies was settled and the departments were merged into one, with courses correctly being allowed to consider literature from everywhere that belonged in a particular time of development. I felt very fortunate to have the Comparative Literature background when I began graduate courses in English, for I was already acquainted with the broad picture of the development of ideas and styles over the world.

I did not have lower-level courses with Dr. Herron, but Paul did have both freshman and sophomore English courses and was enthusiastic in his praise of her teaching. He told me that on the first day of a class, she introduced herself: "My name is Ima Honaker Herron, and I'm not the least bit self-conscious about it."



I looked forward to my first class with her, having talked to her several times and admired her serene appearance around the campus. This course was in the Romantic Period in English Literature. She was a tiny woman, perhaps five feet tall and very trim in her tweed skirt and crisp white shirt. Despite a shining halo of curly white hair, she had a remarkably young face, even to this twenty-something student. She did not begin with the introduction I expected, but her opening lecture was a model of clarity. She began an introduction to the background and characteristics of English Romanticism, along with a statement of her expectations for her students' work. She always presented an aura of serene order, both in her appearance and in her teaching. She obviously expected each student to be interested in the literary period and to produce a level of graduate work that most of us hadn't yet had a chance to do. She clearly believed in the validity and relative importance of all the authors in the course. Her enthusiasm for William Wordsworth and his fellow Romantics impressed me to the extent that, when I began to think about my master's thesis, I saw many possibilities in the period. I was especially interested in the influences on him of the current critical literature and of his sister Dorothy, as well as some of the other Romantics such as Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Charles Lamb, and William Hazlitt.

At the same time that I was taking courses for my degree, I was also serving as an Assistant Instructor Teaching Associate, teaching freshman English. Dr. Herron's influence served me well in the second semester when the course I taught included short stories, poetry, novels, and drama. Few of them belonged to the Romantic Period, yet I could see the continuity in the development of English literature and had to restrain myself from being too scholarly or pedantic in my teaching. I remembered Dr. Herron's insistence, as well as that of other members of the English Department, on conscientious work. This was a time just after World War II, when the majority of the students were attending college on the GI bill, and most of them were older than I. I soon discovered that I had a reputation of being hard, that is, carefully strict in demanding good composition and syntax. One day as I was brooding about my lack of popularity, I met Dr. Herron (I was never able to call any of my professors by their first names, although several expected it). She wanted to know why I was so morose. I admitted that I was unhappy with my reputation for strictness. She enthusiastically congratulated me and urged me to keep up the good work. With her endorsement, I was able to continue expecting good work from my students, but I think I did improve my classroom presentations so that my students found me less formidable. I decided that I might be their juniors but that I was their instructor, a thought which gave me permission to relax somewhat in my classroom behavior. At that time, I didn't have Dr. Herron's white halo, but I could emulate her style if I fitted it to my limitations.

I consulted with her often as I was researching and writing my thesis, always finding her helpful and encouraging. Her presence on the board which conducted my Master's Orals was a great comfort and, I think, caused me to be better collected and perhaps make better sense, inspired by her serene presence.

We left Southern Methodist University for Chapel Hill, where Paul worked on his PhD in Statistics and I taught in the English Department. We returned to SMU where I again

taught, learned to call Dr. Herron by her first name, "Ima," and continued to profit by her wise counsel.



From online:

Ima Herron taught English at Southern Methodist University from 1927 to 1931 and from 1934 to 1966. She was the first woman at SMU to achieve the rank of full professor, and received the "Woman of Achievement Award" from SMU's Alumni Association in 1965. Her papers contain correspondence spanning the years 1913 to 1990, including letters from her colleagues and long-time friends Jay B. Hubbell (1885-1979), Clarence Gohdes (1901-1997), William S. Hoole (1903-), David DeJong (1905-1967), and John Lee Brooks. The bulk of the collection, however, consists of materials relating to Herron's teaching and writing. These include tests, assignments, syllabi, lecture notes from the courses Herron taught, and four textbooks she used in her classes; as well as multiple drafts of Herron's two books: *The Small Town in American Literature* (1939) and *The Small Town in American Drama* (1969). The collection also contains many of the essays and book reviews she wrote.

For these and other endeavors, Herron received numerous awards and honors. In 1955 Phi Eta Sigma, a freshman scholastic society, named her the “Outstanding Professor” at SMU. In 1962 she was given SMU’s Faculty Achievement Award. She was the first woman to receive either of these awards. In 1965 the SMU Alumni Association honored her with the Woman of Achievement Award, the female precursor to the university’s Distinguished Alumni Award. The Carnegie Foundation, the Danforth Foundation, and Shell Oil Company all provided her with research grants.

Colleagues and students regarded Ima Herron as an inspiring and demanding teacher, a careful and exacting scholar, and a good friend. She was held in high esteem by leading academics and writers in American literature, including Hubbell, Clarence Gohdes, David DeJong, William S. Hoole, and Earle Labor, a former student who dedicated an edition of *Short Stories of Jack London* (1992) to her and Laurence Perrine.