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Nightmares in the Fiction of Ellen Douglas

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I

Ellen Douglas (1921—), a novelist from Mississippi, is noted for her portrayal of relations between whites and blacks in the contemporary South, and for her treatment of our universal issue — the plight of the aged in our society.¹ But a more detailed analysis of her work shows that these observations of her work are superficial — superficial in the sense that they overlook her emphasis on the psyche of an individual and, more important, her historical perspective of the Southern mentality which rests underneath the psyche of the individual. Douglas uses the nightmares of her characters to control the emotional direction those characters go toward. And through these characters and their emotions, she gradually involves us in historical Southern society, especially the troubled mind of the South.

Douglas introduces nightmares that her characters suffer — enigmas that, over time, drive her characters into obsession. These obsessions catch her characters unawares in their daily life, driving them into a bottomless pitfall. Accordingly her characters are constrained to investigate the causes of their obsessions. These investigations, however, are more than just investigations into the complexities of individual personalities: they are really investigations into the complex mentality of a particular community, in this case the white South.

In the pages that follow, I will attempt to explore the nightmares of Douglas's characters and how these nightmares relate to the social and historical South.

II

A Douglas nightmare at first appears to be a personal experience, but later unfolds into a collective experience, an experience that encompasses the community. One of the most elaborate examples can be seen in "Hold On," a story in *Black Cloud, White Cloud* (1963).²

Estella lay face down on the hull of the overturned skiff, and the skiff rocked and sank in the yielding water. For an instant, relief: *she's all right, safe*. Then, kicking, clutching, scrabbling her fingernails along the mossy hull, Estella slid off the other side with a half-strangled grunt, turned on Anna a terrible, glassy stare, and sank. (145)

This is a nightmare which possesses Anna Glover after her fishing boat capsized on a lake in a sudden storm. She almost drowned struggling to rescue Estella, her former housemaid. Estella could not swim, and had clung to Anna, her heavy weight almost pulling both of them under.

The nightmare recurrently attacks Anna at any time. She is left with feelings of "disbelief, terror, helplessness, guilt, and loss . . . as if sight, touch, sound, turned for the moment inward and retraveled paths grooved nerve end to nerve end in her brain by the memory." (145)

Prevented by the nightmare from leading a normal family and social life, Anna fears that she may be deprived of "all that [is] human in her," and be transformed into "the living embodiment of her own death." (147) Her nightmare, moreover, seems too absorbing and overwhelming for a personal reaction. Considering that in real life Anna had saved Estella, the accident as a whole is not persuasive enough to provoke such a powerful illusion.

Douglas explains the obsession which a recurrent nightmare produces in the psyche:

Perhaps this obsession [is] an effort, unconscious at first, to make the nightmare a reality, to objectify what otherwise [is] in danger of sinking away to the bottom of her mind and becoming, like the treacherous water of the lake, the source of fears and illusions. (147)

A nightmare is, thus, a warning signal, part of a personal defense mechanism. But Douglas also indicates how defenseless and susceptible is the defense mechanism to image formation in a nightmare:

There are images . . . that are printed on the retina in the womb, their outlines filled from time to time by incarnations in the temporal world. They can be as threatening as the shadow of a hawk to a baby chick or can trigger, like the image of the mother hen, all one's need for warmth, food, love, company, can make one follow — without question — over a cliff, into the sea.³

In the above quote, Douglas suggests that the process of nightmare formation is not limited to the individual domain of the individual psyche, but also through the physiological medium includes the mentality of a particular society, in this case the mentality of the South. The Southern psyche, she suggests, can drive an individual into such psychic nakedness as to deprive that person of any mental or moral refuge.

III

Psychic nakedness, the stripping away of any psychic cover, is a universal fact especially in post-war wasteland. But response to a traumatic experience differs from society to society, because each society has exemplified its own communal and historical identities.

In the wake of the Civil War, in the South the very foundation of the social system collapsed. Black people, previously used as mere workhorses, were emancipated and became by law human, independent members of Southern society. Reacting to this forced reorganization of society—foisted on the South by the North—Southern whites invented the so-called Southern myth: a communal vision, the product of a Southern white defense mechanism. This myth afforded an idealized vision of the antebellum South. The purpose of the myth was, of course, to offer Southern whites a "shelter" from post-war reality—to put the blacks back where they were before the war.

As time has passed, however, this myth has deteriorated, the deterioration caused by Yankee influence in industrialism, urbanism and nonmorality. In *Apostles of Light* (1973),⁴ Douglas illustrates this disintegration by portraying a traditional plantation house as it is transformed into an old people's home. The conflict in this story is between the old myth-oriented inhabitants and the modern economy-oriented caretakers. The myth-oriented inhabitants are losing their battle to retain their myth, and are falling into mental disorder.

In the story, Martha Clarke, the seventy-six-year-old hostess of the house suffers a nightmare: the dead body of her mother and sister, her mother/sister—"both of them rolled into ... one"—"was lying in Mama's big old four-poster in the nursery downstairs," the smell of death drifting up into the room where the hostess was lying paralyzed. Then three people (two of her relatives and a nurse) took the old furniture out of the house and painted everything on the wall; then she was down in the nursery and found that the body was now on the painted bed "with the belly blown up and the flesh fallen away from the bones of the head." (75-6)

This nightmare of Martha's symbolically represents that which the household itself suffers: the head of this plantation house is in the process of being starved to death or of becoming paralyzed and incompetent. And the reason for this is that since she has been so loyal to the pristine order of the Old South, she hasn't been able to keep up with the reality that the fabric of plantation society is disintegrating, and is being reorganized into an artificial entity founded mainly on mammonism, functionalism and rationalism. The head doesn't realize that her hand and foot, blacks, no longer work to produce her food supply; Southern blacks have been rapidly losing their sense of identity with white households.

Matthew Harper, a black servant in the Clarke house, has his own moral principle established through reading historical books and articles. He believes that obscurity is "vital" and "valuable." (109, 110) He makes "a cave" to live in for himself and his family, and keep them "invisible in a town full of people." (124) His granddaughter, under the influence of Yankee materialism, has no mind other than to leave her home for her independent life and to "snap like a just-fledged bass at the first glittering silver spoon dangled in front of its nose." (126) They are both devoted to their own purposes.

Matthew Harper at first regards the Clarke household as his cave, "his first line of defense." (126) When the house is transformed into an old people's home, he is taken by surprise. He begins "to know in his bones and in the raised hairs on his arms that there [is] danger in the air." (127) And as he predicts, the household is fallen into hellfire.

The old folks who become the inmates of the home, selected from several respectable families, feel deprived of their pristine codes and roles. They are thrown into a prison of emptiness. Whenever they exhibit deviant behavior, they are forced to conform to the norms fixed by the caretakers.

The caretakers are under the control of Howie Snyder, a third cousin of Martha, who as a "practical" and "enterprising" man, initiated the project of transforming the big house into an old people's home. He did this without giving any consideration to the feelings of the old people gathered there, even though he himself is retired and in his sixties. At the end of the story, a doctor, Martha's sweetheart, sets the house on fire after a long struggle with Howie. Thus the house was destroyed as a result of internal strife between the opposing forces living

in it.

This destruction of the Clarke house is a metaphor for the collapse of the Old Southern structure and its spiritual backbone, the Southern myth. Those who have survived the collapse are expected to learn to live without any psychic shelter.

Thus, *Apostles of Light* provides not only a treatment of the problem of aging in a modern society, but also infers a historical process in the disintegration of the Southern myth.

IV

In *Apostles of Light*, the character, Harper, says that he had regarded the Clarke household as his first cave until it was remodeled into an old people's home, but that his first impulse was to retreat from the house when he was "aware of the depth of the change." (126) This remark signifies that the Clarke family, or rather Martha, had a cozy, reliable relationship with the black servant. Accordingly the remodeling may have come to the black historian as a critical situation in Southern history: the new home, which has a number of people from different walks of life, might in its contradictions constitute a miniature of the contemporary South, jeopardizing his secure "cave" life.

Douglas further explores which social events actually have been decisive in the termination of the diminishing relationship between whites and blacks. And the event she has pinpointed as the decisive cause is the civil rights movement of the 1960s. Her novel *The Rock Cried Out* (1979),⁵ discloses a series of causal incidents which are hidden in the personal experiences the protagonist had at the age of puberty.

In this book, too, Douglas uses obsession as a vehicle for her story. Alan McLaurin is obsessed with a traumatic event: his young beautiful cousin, Phoebe, whom he loved, was killed in an auto accident in 1964, when he was fifteen years old. He has since been suffering an emotional conflict about Phoebe, who he was told had something mysterious to do with the cause of the accident. Considering, however, that the life in his hometown was completely changed when Phoebe and Timmie, a black woman, were killed in a car driven by Timmie's husband, Sam Daniels, Alan re-investigates the accident, and discovers that the accident is closely related to the civil rights movement. The accident happened during "Freedom Summer" in 1964.

Alan concludes that Phoebe was shot to death by a son of a local KKK member while she was riding to a nearby black church to attend a civil rights meeting with Sam and Timmie. This conclusion relieves Alan of his emotional conflict about Phoebe, but leads him to a new problem: a suspicion that the movement has created irrevocable antagonism between whites and blacks.

Sam serves "as caretaker, forester, and guardian" (18) for the McLaurin summer house. To Alan he used to be "a powerful, beneficent presence," (34) who taught Alan much about the essential and indispensable ways of living with nature. Alan is informed, however, that after the auto accident took place, Sam was desperate enough to venture on a series of illegal acts against the government facilities. Sam was arrested and sent to prison, and then he was shot and crippled attempting to escape when he was being transferred from a county jail to a

state prison. Sam's desperate actions seem to Alan to have resulted from Sam's strong distrust of whites.

Furthermore, Alan discovers that Phoebe was deeply involved with the Freedom Summer activities. Consequently Alan realizes that his old relationship with Sam is severed. He feels as if the ground suddenly caved in under him.

As Alan reflects, Freedom Summer was in a sense a tragedy in the South. The civil rights movement of the 1960s is known as the Second Reconstruction. The First Reconstruction (1865-77) liberated blacks from the societal system of the South, but the Second, the civil rights movement, tore them from their personal affiliations with Southern whites. As we have discussed in chapter III, the First Reconstruction produced the Southern myth out of its communal defense mechanism. But what kind of moral vision did the Second produce now that Southern whites were stripped of every possible measure, social and personal, to continue their traditional relationship with blacks? No matter how difficult a situation might arise, whites were expected to come up with a new moral vision to live by.

Douglas writes about this expectation as her duty.⁶ She creates her vision from a new perspective of the Southern black people, a perspective based on the realization that Southern white people should appreciate black people for their ability to live a life seated in the real. Blacks, she believes, are vital for the existence of the whites who are driven to consider the world a disorganized wasteland. She proposes that the whites establish a fraternal and respectful relationship with blacks. Then the blacks would give the whites concrete knowledge of how to live an objective and orderly life—as Sam does to Alan when Alan returns home from a city in the North.

An example of how Douglas aims to treat the Southern black people, can be seen in the relationship between an old white widow and a black woman in "I Just Love Carrie Lee" in *Black Cloud, White Cloud*.

Thus Douglas leads us to understand how oversensitive Southern white people may become because of their immemorial guilt and suffering, especially when they misbehave to the black people. This misbehavior is the real reason why Anna Glover suffered the nightmare (in chapter II). Her nightmare was symbolic of her overreaction to the way she mishandled her former black housemaid. The nightmare and her reaction to it illustrate the discrepancy between what she believes happened, and what actually happened in the mental context of the South.

V

Although Douglas's vision is created by an unsheltered white soul responding to a defense mechanism, as we have discussed in the previous chapter, she insists that this vision be based on the white soul's respect for a black soul, and that without this respect, the white soul cannot survive.

She requires the reader to take note of another quality found in Southern black people: their close and harmonious relation to the earth. The earth is strong and re-creates everything that crumbles to earth, as Noah, an old black man, suggests at the end of *The Rock Cried Out*. The black people's relation to the earth substantiates their realistic and productive mode of life.

Douglas attempts to prove the truth of her vision in a paradoxical way: what will happen to Southern whites if they invent their vision, and it doesn't include involvement with Southern blacks? In her recent work, *A Lifetime Burning* (1982), this is the theme.

This novel, in the form of a diary written by Corinne, a sixty-two-year-old college teacher of literature, revolves around the lives of Corinne and her husband, George, a surgeon. Corinne writes her diary in order to confess her inner life to her children. She lists a series of crises: George has stopped sleeping with her; he has extra-marital relations with a housewife next door and, later, homosexual relations with a young patient; she comes upon an old roll book in the church which lists the name of George's grandmother with the word "suicide" next to the name; she finds a secret diary belonging to the grandmother—a gallant widow whose heroic life and mysterious death will somehow help to understand George's attitudes toward Corinne.

After listing the series of crises, she confesses her own love affair, a lesbian affair, at the age of forty. As she is writing, she hears a dream voice say, "Where art rules, the artifact is a source of power," (209) This forces her to her final concession: "I am not, then, confessing, not at all, not making myself known, but creating an object that will wield power . . . over your [her husband's and children's] imaginations, will transform and distort your lives." (209) And here the reader realizes that all the events she presents in her diary are nothing but fictional episodes, and that she has fabricated these episodes as smoke screens to cover her sinful activities.

Corinne's fabrications represent the creation of her own moral vision—a creation inspired by her defense mechanism. In her case, however, she intentionally and arbitrarily manipulates the creating process of her vision. She exploits her dream for "clarity, understanding, peace, fulfillment . . ." (9), following what she reads in a monograph, "Senoi Dreamwork," which explains Malaysian "technique of dreaming and interpreting dreams." (7) She dreams that her son drives her and her dead grandmother to Colorado in his car. In the middle of the dream, "half-waking," she asks her son to present a gift, following "the instructions in the monograph," and, "he climbs down to the edge of the beautiful clear tumbling roaring river, picks up a green stone from the water, and brings it to [her]." (9) At this moment, she wakes up, goes outdoors and picks up a greenish, white-veined rock. This stone leads her to the discovery of the diary written by George's grandmother. This discovery, however, turns out to be her imagination.

For Corinne a dream does not become a nightmare, but becomes a beautiful, if enigmatic, image, which takes her nowhere but to her own "frustration, impotence, passivity, hatred, imprisonment, death." (152) From the beginning, she is in an isolated world of chaos. Reality is completely confused with a fiction she unconsciously cherishes for her own shelter: she is neither supported by blacks nor by the land. This working mode of her mind originated with a childhood experience: when she saw an old black man mowing the lawn in the yard through the window, she tried to confess what worried her as a sinful act, but her mother held her back, saying, "Well, apparently it didn't hurt you, my dear. You're not having *nightmares*, are you?" (153, italics mine) Her mother's attitude has allowed Corinne to fabricate her own world, a mixed-up conception of reality and fantasy. Corinne establishes a method of controlling her dreams so that her dreams won't change into nightmares.

But some of the images Corinne is obsessed with are beyond her control. They are "printed

on the retina in the womb . . . [and] can be as threatening as the shadow of a hawk to a baby chick or . . . like the image of the mother hen . . . can make one follow—without question—over a cliff, into the sea.” (166)⁷ And it is her “automatic writing,” (153) an unconscious act, that finally helps her discover her obsession. She acknowledges that her lesbian love affair is the cause of her obsession, and that her feelings of guilt have made her build smoke screens of imaginary episodes to hide behind. She finally realizes the intentional fallacy inherent in her thinking, and to overcome this fallacy lays herself on the earth with her husband, as if they were performing a rite of communion with the earth and offering “some mysterious unspoken pledge” (211) of eternal fidelity to each other on the Perseids in summer night sky. Only by following unconscious and physiological guidelines, she discovers, can she reach the universal order of earth and sky. And only through an awareness of this universal order can she create a realistic, moral vision.

Douglas ultimately seeks the basis of moral vision in the permanent order of earth and nature. And the only way to become aware of this order is, as we have seen, through an unconscious and physiological process, and not through an intentional and methodological means. Born this way are Southern blacks, who have a long history of living in harmony with earth and nature. Southern whites, Douglas believes, ought to respect their wisdom of life, and learn from them. The nightmares in her stories give the whites one of the best opportunities to put this into practice, because the nightmares are warning signals: the whites have done something contemptuous to blacks, or to the earth and nature.

Thus, to Southern white characters who are deprived of moral principles, Douglas's nightmares are signs indicating that the white characters must examine themselves, and create a new moral vision. Nightmares, then, are the motif by which Douglas creates new fables for contemporary Southern fiction.

NOTES

1. See, for example, Martha E. Cook, “Old Ways and New Ways,” in *The History of Southern Literature* ed., Louis D. Rubin, Jr., Blyden Jackson, Rayburn S. Moore, Lewis P. Simpson, Thomas D. Young (Baton Rouge and London: Louisiana State University Press, 1985), p.531.
2. *Black Cloud, White Cloud* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1963). The numbers within parentheses following the title indicate the page references to this edition. The same is true with her other novels.
3. *A Lifetime Burning* (New York: Random House, 1982), p.166.
4. *Apostles of Light* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1973).
5. *The Rock Cried Out* (New York and London: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1979).
6. Thomas Daniel Young makes a suggestive remark on “Southern writers whose best work began to appear following World War II” that “many of them were trying to find their place in an apparently meaningless and absurd universe. To make their separate existence plausible and significant in a universe from which the gods seemed to have disappeared, these writers felt compelled to resort to techniques that would make their world appear . . . extra-real.” (*The History of Southern Literature*, p.466)
7. The latter half is similar to the image expressed by Walker Percy, her contemporary writer from Mississippi: People who feel “anxious without knowing why” are “like the cartoon cat that runs off a cliff and for a while is suspended, still running, in mid-air but sooner or later looks down and sees there is nothing

under them." ("The Delta Factor," in *The Message in the Bottle* [New York, 1975], p. 19). Douglas writes a short study of Walker Percy's novel, *The Last Gentleman*, though in 1969.