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EVELYN SCOTT'S *A CALENDAR OF SIN*: FREUDTOWN OR CLARKSVILLE, TENNESSEE?

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Edwin George, a character modeled after Evelyn Scott's Grandfather Thomas, is a major link in her historical trilogy -- *Migrations* (1927), *The Wave* (1929), and *A Calendar of Sin* (1931). His attitude towards Mimms, a fictionalization of Clarksville, is expressed in *A Calendar of Sin*: "He said it was a distinction to affront Mimms. Opprobrium in Mimms was an inverted compliment. You always earned it some time or other in your life, if you were intelligent" (II, 302). Evelyn Scott, born Elsie Dunn, certainly shared with Edwin George a willingness to affront Clarksville. During the 1920s she scandalized her hometown not only by running off with a married man, but by having the audacity to expose her sin in her finest book, *Escapade* (1923). She became synonymous with the bohemian, globe-hopping, free living and loving of the lost generation.

A Calendar of Sin is Scott's most ambitious novel and her last successful novel. Scott was ill-suited for the 1930s. Her youthful energy was subdued and the 1920s rebel searching for new artistic forms to oppose Victorian deception was oddly transformed into the middle-aged Southerner seeking shelter from the militant left and its strident demand for sociological rather than psychological interpretation. In her best works -- *The Narrow House*, *Escapade*, *The Wave*, and *A Calendar of Sin* -- Scott is a writer of daring psychic exploration. *A Calendar of Sin* is her attempt tot come to terms with the 1930s. She would not yield to economic interpretation, but she did attempt an expansive investigation of social structure while retaining her 1920s preoccupation with Freudian insights. In his biography D. A. Callard explains the influence of Freud on Scott's life and time: "Shadowing almost all of Evelyn's published writings and the whole intellectual atmosphere of the twenties was the figure of Freud. Her letters are dotted with phrases such as 'Freudianly explicable,' and 'Freudianly understandable'" (135). As Carl Van Doren wrote in his review of *A Calendar of Sin*, it might well have been called *A Calendar of Sex* (16). Although Scott is not concerned with phallic symbolism, dream interpretation, or the Oedipus complex, she does emphasize the distortions and neuroses that derive from sexual repression. Her novel is more dependent upon late Freud with its universal interpretations of cultural illusions and the cyclical movements from repression to violent upheaval.

Her subtitle for *A Calendar of Sin* is *American Melodramas*. Robert Penn Warren considered this subtitle "peculiarly accurate, if the term means that the violence and sensational action is not adequately based on examined motive and realized character" (158). Warren was critical of an approach in which the violence was "founded on instinct," and he argued that "behaviorism does not provide a workable basis for literature: a multiplicity of cases proves nothing" (159). Warren, whose later fiction is an ironic secret sharer with the melodramatic sensationalism and sprawling "history" of *A Calendar of Sin*, did admire some of the characterization in this novel. Having lived in Clarksville, he certainly knew the social milieu of the novel. Scott started with actual lives and events and progressed to sensational secrets or violent revelations which refute the calm exterior of ordinary lives. The novel begins with the raids of the KKK in Clarksville and continues through two volumes and 1367 pages to the raids of the Night Riders forty years later. In 1867 the blacks suffer the brunt of mob violence, and in 1907 Scott portrays vigilantes preparing to lynch a black for the rape and murder of a

white girl. It is not progression of history but rather the appalling sameness which disturbed Warren and which is indeed most striking in the novel. Scott dramatizes such factual material as the actual raid against the freedman's school, which occurred in Clarksville after the war, and her youthful memory of the hanging tree in Russellville, Kentucky. She relies upon historically-based but grotesquely-imagined characters whose feigned responsibility merely perverts their sexual impulses. A prime example is Clarksville's Judge Tyler, one of "the original Ku Kluxers" (Background 180), who becomes the mad mob leader, Judge Tyler, in *A Calendar of Sin*.

Scott's technique results in a shocking use of family history. Beginning with *The Narrow House*, she had been preoccupied with the secret hatred and lust within the family structure. In *A Calendar of Sin*, the Dunns, the paternal and Yankee side of Scott's family, become the Dolans; the Thomases, the southern maternal side, become the Georges (Welker 36-54); and the Graceys, Scott's relatives by the marriage of her mother's sister, become the Cowleys. Scott also had stalwart Clarksville relatives from another of her mother's sisters who had married Dr. Drane; these relatives became the Poole family. Scott's memories of Clarksville revolve around the Thomas-Gracey mansion -- the antebellum home owned by her grandfather Thomas, then purchased by her Aunt Minnie and Uncle Julian Gracey, son of the Civil War hero, Captain Frank P. Gracey. Scott's mother was brought up in this mansion and always assumed that she belonged there, although as an adult her long visits were as her sister's guest. One pattern in *A Calendar of Sin* is the older man's lust for a young woman. This lust is never fully admitted but is disguised as polite affection or family concern. When Linda George marries into the Cowley family, she and her husband are forced to struggle for survival until Linda George Cowley goes with her child to visit her recalcitrant father-in-law, Major Cowley, a clear fictionalization of Captain Gracey. Major Cowley despises his own son but is won over by his daughter-in-law, a reaction derived from her sexual vitality and his sexual frustration.

The pattern is repeated more explicitly in the next generation as the Major's son, Eugene Cowley, becomes obsessed with his sister-in-law, Laura Josephine. His attentions take the form of semi-controlled kissing and fondling. He horsewhips youths who court Lolly until she finally breaks away and marries Montgomery Dolan. Lolly is based on Scott's mother, and Eugene Cowley is based on Julian Gracey, the admired Clarksville citizen who until his death in 1929 controlled the Gracey fortune which was used to support Scott's mother. The connection of Eugene Cowley's lust to Julien Gracey's character is not confirmed in Scott's other words. In *Background in Tennessee*, Julien is treated kindly as an "impeccable" gentleman (276). When he is again fictionalized as Uncle George in *Eva Gay*, he appears as a rather pleasant though dull, small-town patriarch. Scott's mother was difficult and hypersensitive; she was not at ease with her demotion to poor relative within the mansion in which she had once been the spoiled child. Her insecurity resulted in a preoccupation with the real and imagined weaknesses of others. As a child Evelyn Scott closely identified with her mother. In *A Calendar of Sin* Scott intensified a childhood reality, relying upon a Freudian emphasis on sexual motivation, to dramatize the hidden tensions beneath Victorian decorum.

The sexual pattern recurs after Lolly George and Montgomery Dolan move to St. Louis with their only child, Edith. Lolly's niece, Patience Poole, comes to live with them, and Montgomery is enchanted by her. Edith, the alter ego of Evelyn Scott, is aware of the tension in the house: "Edith, in bed, heard Patience's name, then Father saying something, her replying; and, at last, Father going out. She lay there. No sound came from Mother's room. Edith, the gloom so queer, the banging of the front door worse than all, wondered if Mother had committed suicide" (II, 561). Later, Edith speaks to her cousin about her father's desire; once the secret has been expressed, Patience flees to Mimms. Montgomery is shocked and angered by his daughter's honesty and retreats even farther from his wife and child. Edith begins to mother her over-sensitive, immature mother. This mother-daughter reversal is central to understanding Scott as the product of a bad marriage. We may doubt whether an infatuation with a Clarksville cousin contributed to the deterioration of the relationship. Scott may have created or exaggerated a sexual situation

to give dramatic expression to her mother's insecurity and her own sense of rejection. The characters in *A Calendar of Sin* participate in a melodrama which externalizes the trauma of Evelyn Scott's childhood and which she explained through a Freudian emphasis on sexual drives. Scott was aware of the infidelity of her father and the frigidity of her mother; these elements are reintroduced in *Eva Gay*. She was caught between a mother absorbed in hypersensitive fears and a father who withdrew his love when he saw his wife's sensibility reflected in his daughter. Given this scenario, it is not surprising that the father, as recounted in *Escapade*, abandoned his wife by dumping her on the doorstep of his impoverished daughter. Nor is it surprising that the daughter felt suffocated by her mother, returned her to the Clarksville relatives, and sought to express both her love and guilt in her fiction.

While much of Evelyn Scott's psychic intensity derives from her relationship with her mother, *A Calendar of Sin* reveals the extent to which her aunt, Minnie Gracey, provided a model for Scott's struggle to attain autonomy and artistic ability and the trap of small-town Victorian values. Minnie Gracey's paintings are still preserved within the Gracey family. She was educated in a Cincinnati art academy. Several paintings were produced during her mid and late teens, but the obligations to a very large family ended her development as an artist. In *A Calendar of Sin*, Linda George is first characterized by Eugene Cowley, her future husband, as "The Woman's Rights, emancipated, painting-nonsense one" (II, 558). Linda and Eugene become secret lovers despite his irritation with her individualism and her realization that his dull-witted conformity will inevitably confine her. Later, as Linda's family grows, she attempts to transform her sexual role into artistic expression by portraying the pure, natural act of suckling her child. In preparation, she carefully studies Madonnas, but the actual painting requires isolation. Scott expands the irony as the mother literally fights off her children. The disparately antithetical roles of Madonna and artist cannot be reconciled. Linda George is left with her private matriarchal power, including the surreptitious writing of public speeches for her unimaginative husband. The actual Aunt Minnie mothered Evelyn Scott along with her own large family and exemplified a forceful femininity far removed from Scott's mother's nervous manipulation. Aunt Minnie revealed the extent to which Victorian motherhood confined a woman, but more importantly the inevitable conflicts of love, freedom, and art. Whether with mate or with child, Scott demands that we recognize the biological nature of love and presents the sexual responses as inevitable within human relationships.

Scott seems to see her mother's hypersensitivity as more typical of the feminine manifestation of sexual repression. Madness abounds in this novel and varies between raging masculine aggression and hysterical feminine repression. The extreme of frigidity is Fanny Sydney Dolan, a character modeled after Scott's paternal grandmother. One of the finest Freudian ironies of *A Calendar of Sin* is that Montgomery Dolan, modeled after Scott's father, detests his mother and recoils from her madness only to marry a woman with a similar disposition. Both are repelled by natural fecundity, which they associate with desire, dirt, and decay. Fanny recoils from her husband, "so horrible when he came close -- that little growth. All was decay!" (I, 399). Her only peace is the momentary creation of a sterile domain: "For her, in perfect order there was perfect peace. Her trouble was that order wouldn't stay. . . . The chairs were moved. The curtains slackened from their crisp rigidity. A smear appeared upon the dusky mirror of a table" (II, 460). In the beginning of their relationship, John Dolan saves Fanny from suicidal drowning; in the end John and Fanny die of asphyxiation. This suicide is based on the actual death of Evelyn Scott's grandparents (Callard 3). Scott begins with the woman she knew as a child and completes the portrait by imaging such scenes as John finding his wife in a stupor, nude in her immaculate kitchen, after a frenzy of cleaning. The image offers a stark enactment faithful to the tension Scott felt as a child and the Freudian interpretations she accepted as an adult.

The masculine counterpart of the sexually repressed Fanny is James Dolan. James may be based on a great-uncle, but in this case he is almost completely a nightmarish invention. Like Fanny, he is repelled by bestial nature but identifies women as the source of impurity. His misogyny is an ironic echo of Fanny's quest for purity: "He'd always hated the diseased and dirty sluts. His life was clean!" (I, 158). In a mad rage he beats a young lover to

death with a stone and drops her down a well. Later, tortured by the memory, he becomes fanatically religious and castrates himself: "And there shall be a bloody sacrifice unto the God of Hosts!" (II, 35). The depiction of James Dolan is consistent with Scott's vision of life destroyed through repression, but it is too clinical and thus partially justifies Warren's complaint that the novel is a collection of case studies. Here Scott lacks an emotional referent. While the depiction of Fanny is powerfully moving, the depiction of James is mechanically sensational. The Freudian influence is no imposition when Scott relies upon the memories and emotions of her youth, but the prose loses its power when Scott creates characters to conform to Freudian expectations.

Freudian theory provided Scott a way of perceiving her early traumas. Her extension of reality is most apparent in the climax as she focuses on Edith Dolan. Like Scott, Edith is born in the mansion in 1893, a breech birth with the umbilical cord around her neck. She becomes the golden-haired only child of a father who fears madness and a mother who courts madness. Scott dramatizes the child's life within a marriage maintained for the sake of convention. She firmly believed that the social world is mostly illusion and that the artist's task is to rip away at all cost. In *A Calendar of Sin* this preoccupation with illusion is expressed by Maurice George: "There's nobody, from top to bottom of this land, who ever stopped to find out anything that was fundamental truth. They've covered several thousand years of outward progress in a century; but what American is grown-up in another sense?" (II, 581). While America remains a land of innocence, Edith is appalled by deception and longs for maturity. As a result of her father's deceptions and her mother's arrested development, Edith is forced into early maturation -- essentially, innocent America robs Edith of her childhood.

In 1907 Edith returns to Mimms in the heat of the night rider controversy and attends a subscription dance at the court house. In her initiation, she is first pawed by an aging gallant, then introduced tot he confusion of sexual awakening by a young night rider. Dr. Barton nearly forces Edith from the court house dance to the public square, yet Edith is also testing as "she wanted to feel awful things" (II, 628). The Freudian influence becomes clear as Dr. Barton "touched her breast. The contact was a loathly pain. . . . I know, she thought .that's how men act. I'm finding out. Nobody told me what men did, but now I know just what they're like! "You make me feel so fatherly,' he said" (II, 628). When Edith flees from Dr. Barton, it is into the arms of Frank Keeler, a character derived from Scott's first love, an adolescent love so overwhelming that its failure sent her into a severe depression. In *Background in Tennessee* she describes falling in love at age fourteen and the pain of the aftermath (260). The event affected her so profoundly that she tells virtually the same story in both *A Calendar of Sin* and *Eva Gay*. In *A Calendar of Sin* they ride down River Road and hide on Cowley's wharf. In her moment of indecision, Edith "felt as if she sank, sank under him; as if some awful spell were holding her, and he and she would drown" (II, 634). When she begins to cry, Frank relents and they return through the Clarksvillian setting from River Road, up Railroad Street to the town square and the court house with the "blank and fiery clock" (II, 635).

The unique form of *A Calendar of Sin* is apparent as Scott begins with this rather typical, autobiographical moment and extends it into a nightmare sequence in which Edith is raped and murdered. Unlike Scott, Edith does not recover from her initiation. In her quest for stark truth, Edith dreams of becoming a social outcast: "It might be just an accident that she was not a prostitute. She almost wanted to sink down and down. To go to jail. (From outcasts, nothing horrible was hid.)" (II, 644). The sinking is associated with the sexual drive and human equality beneath social stratification. In her rebellion she rides alone too far out on River Road. Edith knows that she may see "that foreign-looking man" (II, 645) who always stares at her, but she is determined to return his stare. This man on the edge is Sam Turnley, the rejected mulatto son of John Furness, another aging degenerate of respectable society. When Edith falls from her horse, Sam Turnley takes her to his cabin. The decisive moment occurs as she stands before his mirror: "With a trembling and oppressive sense of wicked vanity, which she, out of a defiant necessity, was compelled to evade, she picked the sidecombs from her hair. A sheet like silver water fell upon her neck. . . . She suspected he was spying on her from the porch. . . . The horrid glamour of the moment held her still, as she

prepared for something she could not prevent -- for the predetermined, dark fatality" (II, 654). As Edith sees Sam in the mirror, Scott presents both characters as helpless within a fixed moment of finality: "Her fingers went on combing her hair mechanically. . . . Repulsion was in every atom of her flesh; and yet she couldn't move. She couldn't even leave off staring at the man, who stood with his back to the outer door" (II, 655). Both characters are victims of a repressive culture, cast out to experience what the culture refuses to admit. What t hey confront is by no means redemptive. The only human nobility is in the act of confrontation. A blood force and an irrevocable fate paradoxically free the individual by precluding rational will. Robert Welker has explained at length the Liebestod theme of love and death in Evelyn Scott, but in this case Scott's Liebestod comes very close to the Freudian id and death wish.

Evelyn Scott is foremost a novelist of human psychology. The influence of Freud was profound -- much more than the fashionable panacea of the 1920s. Her immediate family and early Victorian milieu provided her with experiences for which Freud's interpretations were most apt. At times *A Calendar of Sin* loses its power as the Freudian scheme demands sensational action too far removed from Scott's experience, but generally Scott relies upon the emotional trauma of her early development. This permits her to begin with Clarksville and autobiography, but build toward cathartic, Freudian images which remain true to her psychic reality.

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