

ANALYSIS

The Ghostly Lover (1945)



Elizabeth Hardwick

(1916-2007)

"A character in Elizabeth Hardwick's first novel, *The Ghostly Lover* (1945), asks the heroine, 'Where are you from?' The heroine replies, 'From home.' Of course. Who isn't? But where is home? This is the question admirers of Miss Hardwick's *Seduction and Betrayal* and *Sleepless Nights* want answered. Which home hatched such grace and intelligence? How and why? A photograph of the 1945 edition of Miss Hardwick appears on the jacket of this reissue of *The Ghostly Lover*. Wearing a dead animal, she smokes a cigarette. She was almost as lovely then as she is now. But the eyes would prefer to be elsewhere. We wonder about the time of mind.

Miss Hardwick grew up in Kentucky before becoming a New York intellectual, with recesses in Massachusetts and abroad. *The Ghostly Lover* is mostly Kentucky, as if Henry James had been there, drinking sour mash with William Faulkner.... While Miss Hardwick's first novel is not nearly so accomplished as her most recent one, *The Ghostly Lover* might indeed occasion sleepless nights. This 1940's fugitive is compelling and even muscular. Marian, in Kentucky during the Depression, is 16 years old. Her parents, 'watercolor cowards' with a 'childlike and religious faith in the new job and the new town,' leave Marian behind with her indolent and sexually traumatized grandmother.

Marian meets Bruce, who is divorced, and wonders about Hattie, who was, at least in 1945, Negro, and goes to graduate school ["I studied music there for a year,' Marian said."] at someplace very much like Columbia University. It takes Miriam a whole novel to figure out that her parents are children and therefore not to be despised for their fecklessness. Bruce and sex are not explained. A 'savage totem' is contemplated. Having left out Bruce, Miss Hardwick would grow up to leave out in *Sleepless Nights* almost everything that wasn't essential. She comes from essence, wherever that was. Home is literature."

John Leonard
The New York Times (2 April 1982)

"Hardwick didn't want to write about her family. She said that some readers of her first novel, *The Ghostly Lover* (1945)...mistakenly assumed that its main character was a self-portrait, when in actuality she modeled her after the bad girl next door."

Darryl Pinckney

Introduction
The New York Stories of Elizabeth Hardwick
(New York Review of Books 2010) viii-ix

"I had read this novel before--probably almost thirty years ago. I remembered the title and the cover and nothing else really except that I found it quite hard going. Now I know why, *The Ghostly Lover* is an intelligent, introspective coming of age novel--which I can't imagine having engaged with in my late teens, but which I enjoyed very much indeed this time around. Four years ago, I read Hardwick's 1979 novel *Sleepless Nights*--which is an altogether different kettle of fish, it's an elegant novel of little plot, beautiful imagery and quiet wisdom. The work of an older more accomplished writer. *The Ghostly Lover*, however, is an astonishingly good first novel--and I remain a fan of Elizabeth Hardwick's.

"Life seemed to be an enormous subterranean existence in which nobody spoke and in which people died for want of a few words they needed." Marian Coleman is sixteen in the long hot summer of depression era Kentucky. Marian and her brother Albert have been living with their grandmother, while their unreliable parents are absent, moving from job to job, chasing the seemingly unobtainable American dream. Sitting on the porch of her home as the novel opens, Marian becomes aware of a man watching her. Bruce, is a neighbor, ten years older, he is already divorced, and rather attractive, he wanders over to talk to her. As Marian sits talking to Bruce that day, she is awaiting the return of her parents, who have been absent on this occasion for two years. Their return is anticipated with a mixture of nerves and excitement.

Lucy and Ted; Marian and Albert's parents arrive, late at night hours after they were expected, and immediately begin to upset the quiet balance of the household. They are disorganized and incapable of good parenting, but Marian has yet to realize this, sorry that soon they will be off again, her father chasing yet another job that will make their fortune. When Lucy's childhood friend Mary calls, and suggests to Lucy that perhaps her daughter might have need of her, Lucy is unrepentant, determined to see Marian as grown up enough to do without her.

"I know everyone thinks it's terrible that I go away and leave the children. I know they think it's disgraceful that we can't stick to anything.' Lucy paused, and she saw that Mary's face was heavy with emotion. She was like a child, gratefully partaking of some choice confidence. Lucy thought sadly that there must always be women like Mary in the world, women with faces that showed deep concern over ever triviality, women who wore the drawn brow of sympathy like an emblem, who specialized in the quick, hushed, understanding reply. Now she had nothing to say. Whatever she hoped to tell had vanished. 'I simply cannot live here,' she said and turned away."

Hattie is the young black cleaner who works for the family, a sharp tongued, cynical young woman, with whom Marian attempts to have some kind of superficial friendship. Through Marian's critical examination of her attitude to Hattie, Hardwick touches on race relations in the South at this time (there is some use of language we wouldn't use now, although it is in keeping with the times the novel was written in, and is not overly offensive.)

"There had never been a real stranger in this house: only the native. Dark ones, swarthy-skinned, strange-tongued, foreigners with thick, alien eyebrows never entered the unknown homes, the America lying cunning and anonymous in the rich earth. In every corner, in every face, there was a quiet, lawful, unchallenged exclusiveness, unplanned, unrecorded and violent. But the members of the family made strangers of themselves to elude and trick the pale faces, the soft voices, the calm acceptance. Mother, daughter, father, and friend; each behind the mask saying, in steady rhythm to the heartbeat, in answer to the actuality within him, the relentless refrain: They would die if they knew."

The Ghostly Lover of the title is Bruce--largely absent in the novel--he is the provider of Marian's first significant male attention. During their short sojourn at home, Marian waits for her parents to show their disapproval--Bruce is after all ten years older, and Marian little more than a child--naturally they don't and even then, Marian seems to know that this is all wrong.

Marian decides to go to college in New York, a year for which, strangely perhaps, Bruce pays. Here Marian lives in a hostel with other young women who are studying alongside her--develops new relationships, sometimes remembers Bruce, writing letters to her mother and grandmother--still in denial at her mother's hopelessness. It is during her letter writing home that Marian makes a discovery about her grandmother, altering her view of her a little. There are some wonderful peripheral characters, one of the most fascinating (and elusive) is Gertrude--a woman living in the hostel, she is an older woman, foreign and rather awkward--she attaches herself to Marian, and then suddenly disappears. In time, Marian is forced to recognize her parents for who they are when she pays them a visit, shocked by their selfishness and greed--she is finally ready to make her own way in the world.

Last week was such a slow reading week that I actually took six days to read this novel which is less than 300 pages, in one way that was hugely frustrating, however, I was forced to appreciate Elizabeth Hardwick's beautiful intelligent writing, which I think benefits from reading slowly. In the end, it was a joy spending such a lot of time with this novel. I look forward to reading more by Elizabeth Hardwick, hopefully I won't wait so long next time."

Heavenali.wordpress.com
(11 October 2017)

The Ghostly Lover is a resonant first novel, a milestone in social history that dramatizes the transition of young American women in the early 20th century from a Victorian to a modern, or feminist, paradigm of relations between the sexes. It was published in 1945 at the end of World War II, which had liberated many women from the home while also increasing the postwar desire of most young people to marry and raise children, the impetus to the family-oriented traditional culture that was to prevail in the 1950s, which Marian declines to join. This traditional paradigm was an updated version of Victorianism in which marriage and children were held up as the social ideal, the "Eden" that Marian walks away from in the end. Her mother "would have been satisfied in Victorian England, in a society where women had duties rather than rights....rights represent the challenge of the most gifted." Her grandmother personifies the decadent Victorian paradigm that included "a woman's right to be spoiled."

Hardwick was about 20 years ahead of her time in dramatizing here the "second wave" of the feminist revolution. In the tradition of Realism, her main characters are representative social types, in particular the protagonist Marian Coleman. Marian is a prototypical "feminist" but not Feminist, egalitarian rather than sexist--innocent of hostility and dogmatism. Even so, her feminist traits scare off her ghostly lover. In pursuit of universality, a goal of both Realists and Modernists, Hardwick avoids specificity of time and place. The action is set somewhere in the South and sometime after the war, one of the major historical events not rendered or evoked so as to limit the focus more strictly to the inner life of Marian. The narrative likewise excludes much in her life not pertinent to the themes, making the story more clearly allegorical. Critics have said that she attends Columbia in New York, as Hardwick did. However, the text says she plans to attend "State." Later she thinks about how "She had got through college in the town"--not in the city. Near the end she says she studied music in New York "for a year."

The name *Cole*-man evokes the preferred job of Marian's father--selling *coal*. In 1945 many people burned coal for warmth, which is ironic because Ted and Lucy Coleman lack warmth. They seek warmth by moving to Florida and then Arizona, moving further south in pursuit of their American Dream, whereas Marian moves north. Having been virtually abandoned by her parents, Marian eventually abandons them. She is revealed to have the same limitation as both her parents, a lack of warmth: "She could not, with her mother, master that female, tender way of speech, or accomplish the sudden and skillful warmth which would draw them into alliance." Ironically, her mother tells Marian, "You've never been the family type." At the end when she abandons poor Leo waiting for her in the train station--just walks away--her lack of feeling for him in not keeping their appointment parallels her "evasive parents" when they do not attend the funeral of the grandmother. Ironically, neglect of children by parents, the main complaint of Marian, would become an ever more common social problem in the 20th century because increasing numbers of women had the same priorities as Marian.

Like her friend Florence, who is capable of love, Leo has a capacity for transcendence that Marian lacks: "She could feel the happiness that radiated from Leo; he was warm in the excitement of being

engrossed in something outside himself." Miriam is so isolated in her selfhood, her feminist independence, that she dislikes it when Bruce holds her arm tightly: "This strong grip somehow dissolved her individuality and made them one." Cold is a motif in the novel and Leo wants to buy Marian a fur coat to warm her. The reader may feel that Marian does the right thing by deciding not to marry a man she does not love just to attain security, but that she is like her parents in her cold self-absorption. She has an "ardent desire to supervise and feels a duty to protect her parents," but she does not really *love* them: She "began to hate her father." And "The mother's mystery had vanished. What she had left of her was no more personal than a casual snapshot. They had no united destiny." No grip on each other.

The most obvious "ghostly lover" is her handsome neighbor Bruce, divorced and ten years older than Marian. At their first meeting she feels like he is "a possible foe" and "she retreated fiercely into childhood." When he looks at her closely she feels like he is "turning a naked body on a slave block." Clearly she fears being trapped like her parents in an unhappy marriage. But she is projecting negative stereotypical traits onto men and viewing them as enemies, as is common in Feminism. When his hand touches her arm "a blinding warmth shot through her and she was ashamed of her former coolness." Defensively, and wrongly, she thinks Bruce is superficial, that "whatever he had seen in her in that one glance was the beginning and end of all he would ever see." Yet he has praised her for not wanting to talk about her father: "That's rather admirable and shows an amazing intelligence." He compliments her further by saying "If you do anything, your type, I mean, you do it well... Perhaps when you grow into a real beauty..."

Bruce displays integrity by not concealing his recent divorce and he expresses his most intimate feelings, revealing his feminine side: "a brief trembling of his lower lip. 'It wasn't entirely my fault.'" His ex-wife was a rich woman from the East Coast and Marian ends up moving there. Bruce "wanted to touch her"--but having tried marriage once and failed he is like her in fearing love: "As someone said, every love affair is an unique experience. You never make any progress. You've always got to start back at the beginning." And Marian is "damned young." In reaction to the changes in young women induced by feminism, Bruce is puzzled by her and other young girls: By their facial expressions "that were already bitter and disenchanted." His attraction to Marian makes him "terrified."

Marian's view of Bruce as a potential lover, or even husband, is expressed in one of Hardwick's frequent compressions of cause and effect in a symbolic image: "The sun touched the tips of the six crosses that dotted the roof of the hospital in the center of town. Well, she thought, so this is love." The crosses evoke holy matrimony and the hospital its consequences. "She had imagined that the man would be a bare and pure symbol, as clear and certain as the pious, sparkling emblem on top of the hospital.... She could not help but mourn the loss of warmth, the security and completeness which the childish idea of romance had promised." She had replaced belief in Jesus with belief in a romantic lover: "The messiah had seemed, even upon first meeting, a little tattered; the hope of salvation was still problematic."

Marian is like her mother in lacking warmth of heart toward any real man, as distinct from an unreal one like the dogmatic Feminist New Man: "Lucy never really cared for any man," Mrs. Gorman said dryly." Marian's mother Lucy never got close to her husband "perhaps because he loved her." Disappointment in failed romance is one of the primary motives given by many women for becoming Feminists. In Marian's next meeting with Bruce, "the warmth of the desire in his eyes" contrasts with "the peculiar emptiness inside her." Men and women have begun to fear each other. "He drew away from her.... There was nothing between them." Eventually, there is only his financial support.

When her parents leave after their rare visit, Marian is interested in them mainly for money and thinks wrongly that they "will send me the money to go to school." Bruce becomes their substitute: "He will take care of me! And it occurred to her that she had found the reason for the existence of two sexes. Albert was staring at her. She felt sorry for him because he was not a woman and had no one to turn to." It is contrary to feminism for Marian to seek dependence on a man and for Hardwick to express sympathy for the male gender and to credit men as much as she does. Marian does not become a representative feminist until the end of the novel, by finally rejecting dependence when she is in a position to do so.

The title of the novel suggests that Bruce becomes a ghost, avoids exposing himself, does nothing that might interfere with Marian or her feelings, and helps her in the best way he can, because he loves her. Bruce is like a ghost in that she does not see much of him, he is invisible most of the time, and they have only a spiritual and not a physical relationship. To a degree he is ghostwriting her life by not exploiting her in an affair, by urging her to further her education and even to go to New York City--"That's the place for a woman like you"--and by financing it all. "Bruce pushed her onward": "You must have a future. I feel it." As a Realist, the author qualifies her affirmation of Marian's (women's) independence by making her advancement depend upon a man, as it usually did in the 1940s. In the allegory of emerging feminism, Bruce represents all the men of goodwill who support the movement from a safe distance. He recognizes a career woman, as opposed to a potential wife, when he sees one: "He imagined he heard her saying that a career was the only thing she wanted."

Bruce finally tells Marian he has met someone else--"very smart," from a poor family. He hopes to persuade her "to settle down and go to college...who knows..." Implicitly, he is now giving her support as well as Marian. Maybe this girl will want marriage more than or as well as a career. At the same time, Marian "kept thinking that his life was surrounded and fulfilled by something far removed from herself and the other girl." This implies that Bruce represents the transcendence Marian lacks. She is never shown thanking him for all his financial support, his reliable charity while asking nothing in return. Bruce has a "wonderful gracefulness" and *spirituality*, another connotation of his "ghostly" nature. Bruce is Hardwick's middle name. Marian's father is a segregationist, whereas Bruce passes the moral test of racial tolerance: "Bruce likes colored people." Marian may never meet another man as good as this one, yet "she told him goodbye without any feeling except relief."

The minor characters reflect Marian. Gertrude the gushy library student from Europe who mysteriously disappears is hyperbole for Marian's own naivete and vulnerability in a dangerous world epitomized by New York City. But Gertrude "was compounded of exclusively female traits": She "needed a life in which everything from birth to death was regulated by family and household." We never learn what happened to Gertrude, leaving us to imagine the worst. Marian's friend Florence is her opposite in representing the typical young woman of tradition who chooses marriage over a career. Like Leo and Bruce, Florence has the capacity for transcendence of self, saying to Marian, "Darling, did you ever hear of love?" Overall, "the eyes of the two girls refused to meet." We will never know what happens to Florence either. Perhaps, from a feminist perspective, her selfhood will disappear in the confining role of a wife and mother. That is the future Marian envisions for her brother Albert in his new role as a husband, another cause of her own resistance to romance. At times "even the moon was sinister."

As the poor black family servant during segregation in the South, Hattie embodies ugly dark truths of life that Marian's family segregate and ignore. Her grandmother personifies in extreme the family tendency to avoid thought. The name Hattie evokes a hat on the head, associating her with thought, although she usually does not reveal her thoughts directly, but through actions, demeanor and tone of voice. Ironically, contrary to appearances, the "ignorant" black girl is more realistic and savvy than her white employers, but her experiences have made her cynical. Marian wants Hattie as a confidant and when she quits, Marian becomes desperate to find her, but she cannot. At the end of the novel, Marian makes a choice consistent with *not* finding Hattie: Choosing to marry Leo for security without loving him would have been cynical. He would be a good provider and "like some worshiped statue she might accept [his] sacrifices," but they are incompatible. In the train station at the end, "He was standing *opposite* her and intently watching the *wrong* exit." Under her circumstances, choosing to remain independent is courageous. Affirming that choice without blaming men for it, while recognizing the equal vulnerability of her brother Albert to the hazards of marriage and while also affirming the virtues of Bruce and Leo, make *The Ghostly Lover* an egalitarian feminist novel rather than a sexist Feminist novel. [Italics added]

On the train to New York to meet Leo at the end, Marian is disturbed by a young woman who sits down beside her. This stranger sees herself as parallel to Marian and may prefigure her future, saying, "I look back with disgust to the time when I was exactly where you are." This woman is from New York and displays a personality consistent with stereotypes of New Yorkers--detached, condescending, flashy, cold and cynical. "For God's sake, where am I?" Marian replies. The girl answers "I used to be so proud of myself. I felt that I had come very far and that I was amazingly good.... I told all the lies happily..." A

disillusioned rebel, "The girl looked at her with the resignation of a prophet whose visions had soon faded." When Marian tells her that she has her father's permission to go to New York, the girl exclaims, "Imagine that! You're a lucky idiot." And when she gets off the train at the station "Marian saw an elderly man and woman approach the girl and embrace her." It is ironic that this unhappy girl has, implicitly to excess, the attentive warmth from her parents that Marian has always craved so much, but feels oppressed by it. This encounter prepares for the end of the novel by contrasting the choices made by the two young women. The sophisticated New York girl is actually immature. When asked by Marian, "Do you live with your parents" --"Yes,' she answered in a small voice."

Ending the novel with an allusion to Eden together with earlier allusions to God and to faith in Jesus make this a Christian novel with many implications at the end generated by its last word, *Eden*. The word *God* appears 20 times in the novel, the word *Christmas* also 20 times, the word *Jesus* 6 times, and the words *Christ*, *Godamighty*, *messiah*, and *Bible* 6 times. When Marian is feeling secure because she is served by Hattie, "There is a God then." But when Hattie quits, Marian cannot find her. Searching for Hattie as if actually searching for God, Marian descends into the neighborhood under the viaduct where both whites and blacks live in squalor: "The color line did not plunge down to this depth." This dark neighborhood "was spoken of as a kind of Devil's Island from which there was, for the whites, no escape." Like the dead, these people "had returned to dust."

Marian enters a church with "a branchless tree, split at the trunk" beside it that evokes the Cross of Jesus, often called a tree, branchless and split because this church now represents death rather than eternal life through Christ. The church has not been maintained physically or spiritually. Its paint is peeling and "A short, stunted, red-haired Christ was painted on the center wall. It glared down like an angry pigmy at the benches below" with a "passionately cruel self-absorption." The opposite of Jesus, this actually represents Satan, as suggested by the red hair--glaring, stunted, angry and cruel. The only person in this church, now a symbol of alienation and despair, has a face "so lost and so ruined that it was impossible to interpret her expression." Though she is wearing a hooded gown of deceptively "shining whiteness" as if representing the righteousness of Christ, she offers no hope. She answers Marian's plea for help in finding Hattie, her cynical substitute for God, by saying, "Perhaps it is too late." On the train to New York City at the end, two nuns sit across from Marian.

Marian closes the doors on Eden, deliberately turning her back on God. She became aware that she had replaced belief in Jesus with belief in a romantic lover, but she is not yet aware that she has replaced belief in romantic love with belief in another earthly goal--not merely a job, but a career. Marian is not marryin', a pun that suggests she is not yet fully herself. Marriage may not often be Edenic, but it represents to Marian if not the promise then at least the possibility of security, as it did to Victorians. In rejecting marriage to Leo it seems that she is merely disobeying traditional expectations, but in truth she disobeys God by replacing him as well as Leo with secular ambition, making an idol out of a career. The parallels of Marian to the cynical girl on the train suggest that she also is immature and proud. Hardwick modeled Marian on "the bad girl next door" in her childhood (Darryl Pinckney, Intro to *NY Stories*). Her estrangement from God is implied earlier when she feels a spiritual need for salvation: "Perhaps she hoped for a new vision, some sudden reason for faith that would bring around another conversion, like a death bed repentance of atheism." She adds that "The denial of God is certainly no more terrifying than the denial of one's flesh and blood..." Her new vision prompts her choice at the end.

The author rests her novel upon a biblical concept, in effect giving the last word to God--the ultimate ghostly lover. The allusion to Eden at the end implies that Marian is like Eve in having made a choice at the cost of paradise, a choice that forces her out into a fallen world epitomized by New York, where she must struggle to survive. In theological tradition her choice is called the "Fortunate Fall" because it makes possible free will, attainment of virtue and spiritual development beyond other animals. Marian does not mean to disobey God, she rejects Leo, who has become her earthly replacement for a God she does not love: Like God, now Leo "was nowhere to be seen." The doors "upon which an icy ray of light was shining separated her forever from him and his shelter like the forbidden gates of Eden." She has likewise closed the doors on her parents: "There were no ghosts in the background, none whom she must think of when she made a decision." Like God, or the Holy Ghost, Bruce gives her free will to think for herself. Eve had the help of Adam and Marian still has the help of her human ghostly lover, who is more like God than Leo.

"The hope of salvation was still problematic." But the parallel between Bruce and God as her ghostly lovers implies that God is at least just as if not infinitely more merciful and forgiving than any man.

Michael Hollister (2020)