

ANALYSIS IN DETAIL

Sleepless Nights (1979)



Elizabeth Hardwick

(1916-2007)

Sleepless Nights (1979) is an experimental Impressionist novel underrated by critics who require a novel to be conventional, rather than novel. In the midst of the "second wave" feminist revolution that began in the 1960s promoting the independence and self-realization of women, the female narrator-protagonist embodies feminist concerns but not the dogmas nor animosity of later radical Feminists. The narrative is experimental primarily in replacing a linear plot with a gradual holistic revelation of her character that generates suspense and is most impressive for its poetic style and wit, as in her symbolic compressions: "This is New York, with its graves next to its banks."

Her first name is Elizabeth but no surname is given, encouraging the reader to see her story as only partially autobiographical. In the tradition of Realism, she is not merely an individual. She presents herself as a social type, a term used several times by Hardwick, as she continues to "strain toward the universal." Elizabeth is "one who stands for the whole," representing the younger generation of women who have, in contrast to her mother and other women in the past, "a singularly low birthrate." Unlike the author, who had a daughter, the protagonist has no children and seems driven to accomplish something that will compensate for rejecting a traditional female role. Like childbearing, marriage also is problematic: "Husband-wife: not a new move to be discovered in that strong classical tradition." Even a married woman may find herself in "a state of dominating dependency." Homosexuality seems no better, though she lives with a gay man for awhile--"as obsessive, critical, jealous and cruel as any ordinary couple." The one lesbian she describes lived "a nightmare of betrayals, lies, deceits, shocks, infidelities, dismissals." All considered, "To be single and busy--nothing bad in that. Such people do much good."

All her letters are addressed to M except one addressed to "Mama," one addressed to her "Folks" and one she only imagines to her homosexual friend J after he got killed in an accident. She begins the last page of the novel with "Oh, M." as if the whole narrative has been addressed primarily to her mother not only in the letters but in her mind apart from them, then she reinforces the identity of M at the beginning of the next paragraph with the word *Mother*. Elizabeth's letters contrast her life to that of her mother, who was born in Mecklenberg County, North Carolina, the place of the Mecklenberg Declaration of Independence in May 1775, but who is not a rebel, she is a traditional, even archetypal woman: "My mother's femaleness was absolute, ancient..." She had *nine* children. Contrary to the Feminists, she said "It did not make me miserable, if that's what you want to know."

Her mother is not a bourgeois conformist of the 1950s under the dominion of "The Patriarchy," she is willingly "under the dominion of *nature*," with a "natural acceptance" of the traditional female role [italics added]. Elizabeth loves and admires her mother but does not want to be like her, especially when she thinks about relations with men: "No, no it was impossible that it was the same." It is also impossible because she is a creative intellectual, very different from her mother by nature. What she chooses to do with her life is just as natural as what her mother does with hers. Elizabeth's love of the natural is expressed in her love for her mother, her love of a man, her rescue of the dog chained in the alley, and the motif of her gardening and house plants. At the same time, she depicts human nature and victims of circumstances with the resignation common to disillusioned reformers.

"It is June." Ironically, the novel opens in the month associated with weddings, whereas Elizabeth has been abandoned by her husband, though some readers would be unaware of this. A reader aware of it would be looking for the evidence. For the latter, the novel is a tease until the end, when it turns into a successful literary seduction. She opens with confident determination: "This is what I have decided to do with my life just now. I will do this work of transformed and even distorted memory and lead this life, the one I am leading today." This is *Existentialism*, popular among liberal New York City intellectuals when Hardwick joined them in the 1940s: She asserts her *free will* as an *independent* woman and *creates herself* with her *decisions in commitment to a project*, the writing of *Sleepless Nights*, "this work of transformed and even distorted memory." On the last page of the novel she suggests that she was motivated, or provoked, to write it as she did by resentment at the "concordance of truth, many have about my real life"--by the common fixation on gossip: "I mean that such fact is to me a hindrance to memory," that is, to the creation of a work that transforms memory, transcends biography and sublimates fact in art. Fact is merely literal, whereas memory transformed into literature is a figurative transcendence of the world--and often a sublimation of suffering. Elizabeth is like her roommate Louisa: "No one was more skillful than she in the confessions of an insomniac.... Her hypnotic narration is like that of some folk poet, steeped, as they say, 'in the oral tradition'."

In the first paragraph of the novel her crocheted bedspread is the metaphor of a life representing the past and a future she hopes to avoid, made by a "broken old woman in a squalid nursing home." The colors pink and blue evoke the genders in symmetrical order and gray the inevitable aging and death of us all, introducing major themes. "More beautiful" to her are the disorderly sights and sounds of her favorite city, though she is poor and "this is no city for poor people." Just as her husband had affairs with other women, Elizabeth has affairs with other cities (without hurting anyone), traveling to Marseilles, Coblenz, Rome, Amsterdam, and Boston on page two. In flight, she voids herself: "When you travel your first discovery is that you do not exist." This is self-effacement rather than transcendence.

Her suppressed grief over abandonment tilts her observations of human types toward the negative: The adulterous Dr. Z is "the eternal husband." Bartenders are "watchful, stubbornly crooked, resentful, silent thieves." This tendency is epitomized in her depiction of the legendary black singer Billie Holiday when she identifies temporarily with the suicidal celebrity's cynicism: "Only a fool imagined that it was necessary to love a man, love anyone, love life." Throughout the novel, there is "Beauty formed out of negatives," like the singing of Billie Holiday. For another example, Elizabeth's self-criticism exhibits the beauty of virtues--humility and dedication to the truth: "In my heart I was weasel-like, hungry, hunting with blazing eyes for innocent contradictions, given to predatory chewings on the difference between theory and practice"--in reference to her friend Alex's inauthentic Marxism.

Her reading of many books--"all consumed in a sedentary sleeplessness"--has been unsupported by the real life experience she seeks in travel and in exploring cities and human lives. She defines her intellectual orientation with quotations and allusions to writers including Goethe, Nietzsche, Borges, Shakespeare, Pasternak, Heine, Cabell, Verlaine, Mann, Proust, James, Hawthorne, Dostoevsky, Flaubert, Voltaire, Dr. Johnson, Henry Adams, Balzac, Dumas, Gibbon, Koestler, Sartre, T. S. Eliot, Kafka, Donne, Maritain, Rousseau, Descartes, and Motley. *Sleepless Nights* belongs to a literary plot tradition as old as western civilization: A youth journeys from the countryside (Kentucky) to the city (New York) in quest of worldly success has been a recurrent plot since the origin of the novel in ancient Greece. In the 17th century Benjamin Franklin's version of the plot in his *Autobiography* established the myth of the "self-made man" and heralded "the American Dream." Since the 19th century the Horatio Alger "rags to riches" formulation

of the plot has been a mainstay in popular entertainment. A liberated young woman goes to New York to succeed in the world is the latest version: "She will have an apartment, a lover, will take a few drugs, will listen to the phonograph, buy clothes, and something will happen."

The snow in Boston brings some peace, "like a great armistice." But she remains at sea in her soul with an iceberg under the surface. Courageous in her circumstances, she writes this novel as a discipline of grace under pressure, in the phrase of Hemingway, a transcendence of self in writing about herself. For rather than feel sorry for herself, as Feminists do, she feels sorry for others: "Have mercy on them, someone." The first victim is the "idiot man" in an alley who "keeps a dog on a chain, day and night... In the interest of the dog I call the police." However, most of the people she writes about are victims of Nature and themselves and cannot be helped by the police. She dreads being kept on a chain herself. There is something of her in most of the women she describes, even the call girl Miss Chad-wick that Miss Hard-wick lives with for awhile: "Complicity entwined us and her smile came back to me as if I were looking in a mirror." "Store clerks and waitresses are the heroines of my memories, those ladies cast off with children to raise" [also like Hardwick]. At the same time, "I have always, all of my life, been looking for help from a man." She succeeds without one, as represented by the novel she writes, except insofar as it derives from the anguish caused by "him who has left," forcing her to become more independent than she cares to be as evinced by her reference to "events, upheavals, destructions that caused me to weep like a child." This novel is therapy for her. "Don't you see that revision can enter the heart like a new love?" The last page is poignant, as if in her confession to her mother she inwardly bursts into tears.

Elizabeth acknowledges the social oppression of women, but she does not complain. She does not blame society, she is elated by "the joy of New York" and embraces the city for "its generous accommodation of women." She feels "afraid of the country night" and is more comfortable among the masses--"the millions in their boroughs--that is truly home." And again, "A woman's city, New York," a statement immediately followed by a description of bag ladies on the streets. Unlike Fitzgerald, she does not idealize wealth--though "the rich in their pyramids have a nice time"--nor women, who have in New York both "more chances to deceive the deceitful" and more chances to use charge cards. She contrasts her life with that of the broken old woman in a squalid nursing home who crocheted her bedspread: "More beautiful is the table with the telephone, the books and magazines, the Times at the door, the birdsong of rough, grinding trucks in the street." Like Dreiser and Fitzgerald, Elizabeth is infatuated with cities. In American literature, New York has been allegorized as a Hell by writers from Melville to Caroline Gordon, but to the liberated woman represented by Elizabeth, New York is "the holy city." Elizabeth was religious when young in Kentucky--"I accept Jesus Christ." But God is absent in her secular New York, where in the tradition of Ben Franklin's *Autobiography*, success has replaced salvation as the goal in modern life. "So, life after death is to fall in love once more, to set up a little business, to learn to drive a car, take airplane trips, go to the sun for vacations."

Also absent is Robert Lowell, ironically. He is the iceberg under the surface, the subject she avoids. Lowell had died in 1977 and at the time of publication in 1979, many readers of the novel were curious about how Hardwick would render Lowell's frequent infidelities, his recurrent mental breakdowns, his betrayal and desertion of her and their daughter after 23 years of marriage, and his publishing falsified versions of her letters. She accepts his outrages with grace by largely reducing him to a pronoun: An old lady gave "us" the farm in Maine. "It came to us, especially to him who has left, as a refuge." And "When we first moved to 67th Street... Come and see Miss Cramer in her car, I would say to my husband." She has "tried for a certain light tone" when writing about her life while married to Lowell--which "caused me to weep like a child." She suppresses self-pity until, finally, on the last page she confesses that this whole novel has been written in torment: "O you could not know / That such swift fleeing / No soul foreseeing-- / Not even I--would undo me so!" The novel ends with this revelation that her loss is the cause of her insomnia, of her need to talk to someone. The two Elizabeths fuse in this confession that she herself belongs to the community of victims she has depicted. Her pity for them and for humanity in general enlarges as the reader becomes one of those she "must talk to throughout the night." Hardwick once said, "I love to be known by those I care for." Above all her virtues as a writer, she was known by her faithfulness and forgiveness in caring for Robert Lowell, in spite of his cruelty. He died in her arms and she remained charitable to him in her novel as well as throughout her life, still caring for him in death.

Hardwick's wit and poetry are expressed in abundant Impressionist similes and metaphors: "beds tight as a bandage"; "lidded turkey eyes"; "the open canvas flaps of conversion"; "The halo of invalidism rose over her brow"; "She dangled on his arm like a black shopping bag"; "the lascivious gardenias, worn like a large, white, beautiful ear"; "the splendid head, archaic, as if washed up from the Aegean"; "the sister, coarse and homely as an old boot"; "her life was all about love and disillusionment, as if she had been a courtesan rather than a scholar"; "the hearse of love"; "the cautious hinges are squeaking out a sort of accusation"; "Arguments are like the grinding of rusty blades"; "Monogamy drifted about him--the scent of a hot iron on a shirt collar"; "This odd harness of habit held him in a vicious embrace"; "it is a look without seeing, just like two mirrors exactly placed on opposite walls"; "She drew on cigarettes as if they were opium, an addition to the opium within her, the narcotic of her boredom"; "the feeling of falling into a well of disgrace"; "New alliances among this restless people were like the rearrangement of familiar furniture"; "A rush of heat enters the town like the roar of motorcycles on Sunday"; "Every great city is a Lourdes where you hope to throw off your crutches but meanwhile must stumble along on them"; "One corner would be deserted, as if an entire side street had turned off its lights and closed its eyes"; "I am looking out on a snowstorm. It fell like a great armistice, bringing all simple struggles to an end." There is an elegiac undertone throughout the novel generated by recurrent evocations of death.

One trick of Hardwick's wit is hyperbole, exaggeration or incongruity that renders the effects of feelings on perceptions, as in some of her Expressionist phrases, her most unique stylistic distinction: "the fierce pessimism of experience"; "seizures of optimism"; "a savage suspicion of destiny"; "martyrdom to detail"; "violent perfume"; "ferocious hope"; "furious incredulity"; "frozen alarm"; "theatrical eyelids"; "cigarette eyes"; "vigilant passion"; "malicious splendor"; "The sister was transfixed by the spectacle of her incapacities, lifted up to peaks of feeling by every ache and pain, quick to throw the magic of her sufferings into the air like crooked smiles"; "The mobile home, the large box, resting on its plot, asleep, dreaming of the road, dreaming of being pulled along forever, someplace beyond."

As illustrated by this last sentence with six commas, by its emotional rhythms and the voice they create, Hardwick has what might be described as a feminine as contrasted to a masculine style: mostly subjective rather than objective, freely expressing her feelings--especially on the last page--rather than suppressing them as in Hemingway. Hardwick is one of the few fiction writers who developed a distinctive personal style. She often uses sentence fragments lacking verbs--receptive and passive rather than assertive--and she frequently deviates from the straightforward momentum of "masculine" subject-verb-predicate sentence structures dominant in writers such as Hemingway and Gordon. The cumulative effect throughout a novel of rhythms generated by sentence structures often becomes more obviously feminine or masculine. Feminists resent these terms, but in literary analysis such distinctions transcend gender, they are aesthetic. For example, Henry James had a feminine style very different from Hardwick's. Also feminine are Hardwick's jumps from one subject to another often without contexts--her abortion is mentioned almost in passing. The meanings implied in narrative jump cuts from one situation to another are often feelings evoked through juxtaposition rather than or as well as ideas. Elizabeth is able to render and evoke feelings in relation to others while suppressing her own deepest feelings until the end. Once a reader learns on the last page what those feelings are, the novel deepens poignantly.

Sleepless Nights is Postmodern in some of its moral implications, in its fragmentation of sentences and narration, and in calling attention to its artifice: two Elizabeths self-consciously writing the same novel. Yet the novel is also Realistic, the opposite of Postmodern, because it sustains a convincing illusion of real life and seeks the truth. Postmodernists do not believe in truth or consensus reality. The novel is Modernist in its intellectual orientation, literary allusions, respect for religion, universality, egalitarianism, transcendence of self, coalescence of mind and Nature, images as revelation, nonlinear structure, openended conclusion, techniques including understatement--"the iceberg principle"--unique individuated style, and synthesis of literary modes, in particular Impressionism and Expressionism.

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