



Louise Bogan

(1897-1970)

The Dream (1954)

O God, in the dream the terrible horse began
To paw at the air, and make for me with his blows.
Fear kept for thirty-five years poured through his mane,
And retribution equally old, or nearly, breathed through his nose.

Coward complete, I lay and wept on the ground
When some strong creature appeared, and leapt for the rein.
Another woman, as I lay half in a swoon
Leapt in the air, and clutched at the leather and chain.

Give him, she said, something of yours as a charm.
Throw him, she said, some poor thing you alone claim.
No, no, I cried, he hates me; he's out for harm,
And whether I yield or not, it is all the same.

But, like a lion in a legend, when I flung the glove
Pulled from my sweating, my cold right hand,
The terrible beast, that no one may understand,
Came to my side, and put down his head in love.

ANALYSIS

Louise Bogan has stated that a lyric must derive directly from an emotional crisis--and surely this lyric is a perfect illustration of her statement. The reader shares not only the terrifying dream but also the underlying emotional crisis.

The manifest content of both poem and dream is clear. A "terrible horse" appears and, pawing at the air, advances toward the dreamer; terrified, she lies helpless on the ground. Then another woman appears,

grapples with the horse, and suggests that the dreamer give the horse something personal as a charm. The dreamer flings the horse a glove from her right hand and the terrible beast comes to her side and puts his head down in love.

The latent content tells us much about the deep wishes of the dreamer and about the emotional crisis. The horse symbolizes aggressive male sexuality. The dreamer is both attracted and terrified. Fear of male advances, “kept for thirty-five years,” and fear of retribution if she responds, “equally old,” so shatter the dreamer that she lies on the ground and weeps. But “another woman,” actually another, more mature aspect of the dreamer, rises to the occasion and calls for a gesture or response of some sort, which, once given, transforms the terror into gentle love. Thus the struggle between the childish self and the grown-up self is resolved--and so is the emotional crisis

James M. Reid
100 American Poems of the Twentieth Century
(Harcourt 1966)
with Laurence Perrine