
TENNESSEE'S PRODIGAL DAUGHTER: EVELYN SCOTT

Caroline C. Maun
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Novelist Evelyn Scott, born Elsie Dunn in 1893, found it necessary, as a very young woman, to break with the mores of the traditional upper class family in which she was brought up in Clarksville, Tennessee. In her early writings, for example, she makes her position on the "southern belle" especially clear, exposing this role as a damaging and unrealistic model to which young southern women are compelled to aspire. Her first novel, [The Narrow House \(1921\)](#), depicts a family stifled by its adherence to social conventions, which are observed for the sake of appearances. The women of the family are trained to desire romantic love, and to be submissive to their husbands, and to devote themselves to domestic duties. Scott's first autobiography, [Escapade \(1923\)](#), tells of her experience of running away (with her lover Cyril Kay Scott) from America in general, but the American South in particular, where a woman's public virtue is perceived as the bulwark of upright society. During the six years they spent in Brazil, she experienced extreme poverty, a difficult childbirth, and failing health, all accompanied by intense artistic inspiration, which she chronicles in *Escapade*. Cyril Kay Scott developed career interests while in Brazil which forced him to travel often, leaving Evelyn Scott alone. As a foreign woman, she tried to function under the dual pressures of a socially unstable role and a strong commitment to unorthodox sexual freedom. *The Narrow House* and *Escapade* are naturalistic works which convey Scott's harsh reflection of the social conventions governing the roles of women in her native Tennessee. In this reflection, we may also discern the painful and laborious birth of her artistic self.

In view of Scott's expatriation, it is interesting to find among her works the autobiography [Background in Tennessee](#), first published in 1937, which places her in the context both of her childhood experiences of the South and the broader history of her family. She returns to the South as a successful author to reestablish, with qualification, a vital connection with the region and to conduct a reassessment of her artistic self. Years earlier, when Elsie Dunn rebaptized herself Evelyn Scott, she was not only protecting herself in her flight from possible pursuit, she was also beginning to recreate herself psychologically and aesthetically, which her autobiography *Escapade* helped her to accomplish. This self-fashioning continues in *Background in Tennessee*, with a new focus. In this book the past, a specifically southern past, is placed in the foreground to illustrate the genesis of her own artistic sensibility. As Robert Welker points out in his introduction to the 1980 facsimile reprint of *Background in Tennessee*, at the time Scott wrote her book, there was every indication that she would be addressing a wide future audience who admired her work (xi). Thus the background portrayed in *Background in Tennessee* is not simply the factual or even embellished past of Elsie Dunn, but rather the aesthetically reconstructed background of Evelyn Scott, the artistic persona into which Elsie Dunn had transformed herself.

The major purpose of this work is to ask how, in an environment unfriendly to artists, Scott was able to emerge with a heightened aesthetic sense and deeply romantic convictions. To what degree, she asks, does she remain in debt to all that she relinquished by leaving the South? To what extent does she remain in debt to the act of relinquishment itself for her artistic impulses and accomplishments? Or to put it more simply, what does Evelyn

Scott owe to Elsie Dunn, and what to Evelyn Scott? To answer these questions, Scott's *Background in Tennessee* proposes a historical treatment of Middle and East Tennessee in the light of personal and particular experiences. Historical consideration is leavened with a liberal measure of personal reflection. Scott often dwells on factual events, but always in the service of psychological probing. Most remarkably, perhaps, this psychological probing is always conducted via an intertwining of southern history and her personal history as a novelist.

Several important factors enabled Scott to assume a critical distance from her culture. She reacted skeptically to the elaborate worship of the antebellum past because her father's family was from the North and she could not fully participate in Civil War mythmaking which had become *de rigueur* in the South. The maternal side of the family, for its part, lacked Confederate heroes, although otherwise the pedigree was good. Her grandfather had been a non-combatant and took a stand against slavery, a role Scott found burdensome when representing herself to other Southerners. Scott emphasizes that the pioneer history of the region, in which her family participated, could not be far removed from the genteel veneer assumed by those made wealthy by the rise of the great tobacco and locomotive fortunes. The aristocratic pretensions of Scott's family were constantly challenged by the proximity of a rough pioneer history. Not only did she have reason to raise an eyebrow at the aristocratic affectations of her family's circle, the loss of her family's wealth during her childhood punctured the romantic facade of Scott's heritage. Such personal and family circumstances gave her the critical eye from which she looked back upon the southern way of life.

Scott maintains that for her family and for most Tennesseans, pioneer activity was too close in time to the Civil War to allow culture to develop independently of the pursuit of wealth and the affectation of prestige. While the South did, in fact, produce great artists, there were few to whom she could look for inspiration during her childhood. In *Background in Tennessee* she reveals a spiritual kinship with another American author who created a successful and authentic artistic self in spite of an adversarial cultural matrix: Mark Twain. As a young girl wintering in St. Louis, Scott caught a glimpse of Mark Twain as he entered the Saint Louis Club to join a gathering in his honor. He appeared "as I had expected him to be," dressed in white with his "satiric, kindly, hawklike face in its rampant aureole of snow-white hair" (56). She recognized later that this was "the only man who might have explained to me what I really inherited in being American! What it was that had come to me through the lives lived by my grandparents in the yet cruder days of early Tennessee! The one vital American who has preserved art, in his own person, in the environment least friendly to the artist" (57). Scott regards Twain as an authentic southern artist who managed to exist in spite of social paradoxes, and who actually drew from the cultural contradictions of the South to strengthen his fiction.

Scott reveals that the racial matrix of the South contributed to her awakening as an artist, because it was a major source of social paradox. In chapter six she recalls that when she returned to the East through Kansas, she saw crowds of blacks who descended from migrants who came from Tennessee and Kentucky after the Civil War. This sight leads her to speculate on her experience as a white in a society where peonage has supplanted slavery. She characterizes the black in the drama of American racial interaction as a "sympathetic and engaging victim," though she allows that "such aesthetic compensation may not be a substitute for economic advantage" (138). She contrasts the black's position to that of the white who has played another role: "[The black] at least has escaped the traumas which make the distorted psychology of the southern white lyncher" (138-39). The violence that existed without social interpretation presented a paradox for her childhood sensibility. One of the central images in *Background in Tennessee* is a memory of three cedars in a graveyard which her father indicated as the site of a triple lynching. What is remarkable about these trees (aside from the Biblical parallel) is that they are no different in appearance from other trees in other states, and even other regions -- except for three sinister knotholes in the trunks near the roots (145). She finds it difficult to accept the fact that those she loves engaged in or condoned lynching. The

community has participated in mob violence, yet extends kindness to little girls (144-45). In all of the anecdotes surrounding her early impressions of blacks, Scott is faced with the presence of both good and evil. She is left "Wondering, wondering what was to be done, and why even the very nice people I knew seemed to care so little!" (166). These feelings and reflections engendered a permanent unease which fostered her deep skepticism about the South. Her trust in goodness was shattered when she recognized the duplicity inherent in the foundations of her culture.

Chapter Seven begins and ends with the injunction: "Everything had to go!" meaning that Scott as a teenage girl conducted, to the extent that she could, a "reassessment of cultural values" (210). This allowed her to develop a method of seeing beyond the beliefs of other Southerners, beyond beliefs which she fundamentally distrusted. In so doing, she gained a spiritual victory. She expresses it: "[M]y faith in Tennessee-- which was the world-- suffered the first of a series of shocks, which, cumulatively, would have caused rifts and cracks in the foundations of Rome" (167). The actual relations of blacks and whites were, as she witnessed them, fundamentally different from their public representations. Indeed, her characteristic habit as an observer of racial injustice was to recognize a fundamental humanity, where the society attempted to block off the common ground between the races. This tendency resulted in contradictions. In fact, she states that such conflicts informed her aesthetically: the struggles of the South provided her with a sense of tragedy, even though intellectually she rejected the received representations of its history. She explains this contribution in the following way: "I think that what had happened to the South filled me, in my impressionable childhood, with a precocious half awareness of men's perishable ambitions" (122).

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Scott's development of her aesthetic sense is as important to *Background in Tennessee* as her outrage at social injustice, because it explains a powerful mediating force in her social criticism. After her position as a rebel was established, Scott's sensibility caused her to develop as an artist and not as an activist. An unusual example of this type of formative experience occurred when she saw a flag at half-mast for the first time lowered at the schoolhouse after President McKinley's death. She characterizes the sight as a transforming revelation, not especially because of the president's death but because the flag, a symbol she has heretofore known as a "dance of unquenchable color and gaiety in the sky itself" had been transformed into a sagging symbol of vacancy. She specifies: "What stunned me was the abrupt realization that there was a language of *things*..." (195). In this memory she isolates her first understanding of the reach of symbolism, certainly a key insight for a future fiction writer.

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A reader of Scott is drawn to the importance and specificity of the themes of both imprisonment and escape in her writing, the cave experiences being notable examples. Escape is never merely leaving reality behind; in her case it is a fresh and more authentic apprehension of reality. With Scott, there is always a return and a sense of deep responsibility. *Background in Tennessee* itself represents a return from the experiences represented in her first autobiography, *Escapade*. Drawing on the theme of imprisonment, the final chapter of *Background in Tennessee* closes with a remarkable set of paired images. On a trip through the Midwest, Scott's family stopped to tour a state penitentiary. Scott, as a young girl, recognized the individual human qualities of the prisoners before the visit concluded, yet the warden chose to guide her hand to throw the lever that locked the men in their cells. This was profoundly troubling to the young Evelyn because once again she was confronted with questions. Her grandfather then took her hand and guided her in waving goodbye to the prisoners who gathered at the windows. It seemed as if all the prisoners crowded the windows waved with "kind jocularly." She describes it as "for all the world, like the suddenly spontaneous proclamation of good will on earth! Like the enactment of a beatitude!" (299). Leaving the area, she saw, a convent for the first time, and her mother explained that the nuns were not prisoners, but tremendously good, with the minor exception of those who joined to "escape some disastrous love affair" (301). This exception was no minor one for the young girl. Both nuns and convicts separated by gender--had intent and isolation and humanity in common. Their similarities and differences thus raised ethical questions for the sensitive Scott. The ambiguity of her experiences of the prison and the convent, kindness from the evil men and the moral questionability of supposedly holy women, served in her mind to confirm the overlapping quality of good and evil, which the South would continue to maintain with all rigidity.

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