

## ABSTRACT

Morality at Work in the Novels of Ellen Douglas

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In Ellen Douglas's novels, characters must negotiate the rules of their professions to act justly. Truth and justice neither vanished nor became irrelevant with the collapse of metanarratives that formerly defined these guiding principles of humanism. Rather, Douglas's novels show characters acting justly by listening to marginalized, silenced characters; in Jean-Francois Lyotard's terms, these characters play by justice's rules, and justice is one of many language games that structure society in the absence of metanarratives. Justice occurs at the level of the quotidian in Douglas's novels; a character's profession—a language game—determines his power to silence and marginalize or to listen and act justly. These novels also show Southern society further marginalizes the individual based on gender and race, and, as the twentieth century progresses, limits work options through the institutional hurdles of increased specialization and the cult of expertise which restrict the professions in which one can participate and sometimes influence characters to try to assert the rules of their professions in other areas of their lives.

The medical profession in Douglas's novels requires the doctor to dehumanize the patient in the twentieth-century efficiency-minded medical industry, so Douglas's doctors are particularly susceptible to acting unjustly and marginalizing other characters.

Douglas's entrepreneurs are not anti-humanist or evil, necessarily, but the characters who only develop, who are salesmen above all else, must victimize others to gain control of their assets. Hired help—domestic workers and farm hands—are the most vulnerable to exploitation because most are black in a political context that denies black workers and black people their rights and their voices, either by law or by custom; these workers must play inventively to survive, but to preserve their humanity against the temptation to hate their employers and exploiters, they have to be willing to break the rules of their professions when they must do so to act justly. The artist characters that are also narrators play the justice through their artistic practice, trying to approach truth through their creations.

Morality At Work In The Novels Of Ellen Douglas

by

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A Dissertation

Approved by the Department of English

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## CHAPTER ONE

### Introduction

Ellen Douglas's novels explore the relationship between identity and profession; because she focuses on truth and justice throughout her fiction, her characters' work significantly impacts their moral choices. Her characters' professions are as important to their identities as their race, gender, class, and personal histories. The relationship between profession and identity is also important to Douglas as a writer; Ellen Douglas is, in fact, the pen name of Josephine Haxton, born in 1921 in Natchez, Mississippi. Haxton lived with her family in Hope, Arkansas until she was ten, at which time the family moved to Alexandria, Louisiana; both these moves were the result of her father's professional life as a civil engineer (Tardieu 15-20). After earning a bachelor's degree at Ole Miss in 1942, she, like many other young women, sought to earn her own living while her fiancée was deployed. She entered a business program in Alexandria, followed by a tedious position with the Social Security Administration. She also worked as a disc jockey, first in Alexandria and then in Natchez, writing short stories while the records played; then at an induction station at Camp Livingston; then at Gotham Book Mart in New York City (32-33). Then she married Kenneth Haxton and kept his house and raised their children (33). They lived in Greenville, where Kenneth ran his family's clothing store, converting a corner of it to a book shop (35).

The book shop brought the Haxtons into the literary social orbit of Greenville in the mid-1940s; they became friends with Shelby Foote, Walker Percy, and Ben Wasson,



literary agent of William Faulkner. Josephine Haxton, however, was too focused on her new marriage and her new babies to write (Watts 42); her first book, *A Family's Affairs* (1961), was published after her sons had entered school. In 1962, this novel won the Houghton-Mifflin/Esquire Award and was among the *New York Times's* five best novels of the year. The following year, her collection of short stories, *Black Cloud, White Cloud*, (1963) was among the *Times's* ten best works of fiction. *Where the Dreams Crossed* (1968) experienced less enthusiastic reception, but *Apostles of Light* (1973) was a finalist for the National Book award. In 1976, Douglas received a National Endowment for the Arts fellowship for *The Rock Cried Out* (1979), which won the Mississippi Institute of Arts and Letter Literature Award. Her next novel, *A Lifetime Burning* (1982), also won that award. In 1985, she received the NEA Fellowship again for *Can't Quit You, Baby* (1988). *The Magic Carpet and Other Tales*, a collection of fairy tales illuminating the linotype prints of Mississippi artist Walter Anderson, was published in 1987. Her most recent book, *Truth: Four Stories I Am Finally Old Enough to Tell*, was published in 1998, and again won the Mississippi Institute of Arts and Letter Award. Throughout her writing career, she has accepted numerous professorships and visiting writer positions throughout the South (Reid xx-xxiii). As her novels progress, she focuses more and more on the ethical and moral implications of work, particularly on her own professional responsibilities as a writer.

In Douglas's novels, characters must negotiate the rules of their professions to act justly. But the possibility of acting justly is more complicated for Douglas's characters because Douglas's novels take place in a cultural space with no firm foundation; in this postmodern fictional world, no authority provides a story that can explain and assign

meaning to human experience. Any entity that could stand in for such an authority is obviously, in these novels, a social construct, made and re-made daily by the community, residing in part within the mind of each individual, whole and intact nowhere. Somehow, through mutual experience in a shared physical and cultural landscape, these Southern characters collude and agree to maintain the very systems that threaten their wellbeing and limit their lives, systems like apartheid, economic predation, and the oppression of women. The culture these characters construct is not entirely inhumane or amoral, however. Douglas's fictional South constructs and re-constructs a morality based on the characters' indebtedness to one another, a sense of justice that requires each individual to pursue the truth in all endeavors, especially the most quotidian, common, daily endeavors, like work. Work is the intersection of the public and the private self. The occupation is the point at which a character intersects with the wider economic world, making work a person's prime opportunity to exercise moral agency, for good or ill. Douglas's depiction of jobs shows the extent to which work can shape identity and vice versa, especially when the worker lacks a script by which to act.

This script, when it is present, can be described as a metanarrative. In "The Postmodern Condition," Jean-Francois Lyotard defines postmodernism as "incredulity toward metanarratives," (xiv) those stories that seek to explain history and human experience (xi). For example, Lyotard is most concerned with the Marxist metanarrative, in which the owners of the means of production oppress the proletariat until a grand revolution disperses economic power among all workers. Lyotard notices that history neglected to enact the Marxist metanarrative; rather, power in contemporary politics seems to have been usurped by or delegated to bureaucrats, technocrats, and specialized

experts (xiv). Metanarratives are not specific to any particular place or time period; they are recurring cultural constructs that seek to explain, simplify, and ascribe meaning to human experiences that could possibly, otherwise, seem meaningless. The metanarrative assigns meaning to each individual story and establishes the rules by which that individual must tell her story and live her life. A postmodern approach would focus on little narratives, illuminating as many aspects as possible of individual lives and stories to expose complications without attempting to explain them away.

For example, the Marxist metanarrative insists that revolution resolves economic oppression. This story marginalizes those whose lives follow a different pattern or no discernible pattern at all. Metanarratives necessarily leave out details and gloss over complications, like the poor black woman who loses her inheritance because of the machinations of her greedy father and a rich white landowner, accepts her loss, and spends most of her adult life seething against the wealthier white woman for whom she keeps house. The Marxist metanarrative fails to take race and racism into account. It also assumes solidarity among laborers, which is certainly not always the case, particularly in the twentieth-century American South, with its history of slavery and Jim Crow violence, and its occasional hostility toward the idea of egalitarianism.

In Douglas's *The Rock Cried Out*, Mrs. Boykin's deceased parents understand the economy and the nation in Marxist terms, and their concern with the laborer's alienation from his work and his oppression in the capitalist system inspired them to live in poverty and ignominy as union organizers during the Depression. The Southern laborers to whom they preach the gospel of Revolution are not, in market terminology, buying what these organizers are selling. For all its promise of egalitarian utopia, the Left is no more

responsive to these pulp workers than the Right; as Ernesto LaClau and Chantall Mouffe argue, the Left “has postulated ‘society’ as an intelligible structure that could be intellectually mastered on the basis of certain class positions and reconstituted, as a rational, transparent order, through a founding act of political character” (15). The Marxist metanarrative does not accurately account for or describe the lives of individuals within the American labor economy; they silence and gloss over complications of race, gender, ideology, and personal idiosyncrasy. The postmodern novel recognizes the shortcoming of metanarratives by illuminating the complications of little narratives without trying to resolve them in a positivist manner.

Classical humanism is a positivist metanarrative that insists on Truth and Justice as absolutes, and in so doing, overlooks the complications inherent in understanding human experience. In *Postmodern Fables* (1993), Lyotard defines the goal of classical humanism as “a community of equal and enlightened citizens deliberating with utter freedom about decisions to be taken concerning common affairs” (202). He describes a belief system that required certainty and foreclosure; this humanism had the capacity to be totalitarian because those “equal and enlightened citizens” took it upon themselves to decide how best the society should run (202-204). In reality, however, “common affairs” are seldom, if ever, actually held in common by every member of a society. Each individual human subject will have a different perspective, a different history, and a different set of assumptions and beliefs, and these idiosyncrasies are mutable. To further complicate any attempt to describe universal human truth, different groups of people in different locations have different shared histories and cultures that significantly impact the individual’s concept of right and wrong, good and evil. Also, as the individual can

change from day to day, so can the culture. Classical humanism demands truth and justice, but honest and holistic inquiry into the varieties of human experience generates the following questions: Justice for whom? Truth by what standard? Linda Hutcheon describes classical, liberal humanism as the “paradoxical desire for stable aesthetic and moral values, even in the face of [humanists’] realization of the inevitable absence of such universals” (6). Hutcheon argues that the postmodern novel rejects liberal humanism because postmodernity recognizes all truth-claims as subjective, context-bound, and provisional (6-7). By this definition, any humanist, objective claim to truth or justice will marginalize anyone who tells a contradictory, but equally valid, story.

However, in *Democracy and Humanism*, Edward Said proposes a postmodern humanism that upholds the precepts of liberal humanism like justice, fairness, and access to information without the marginalization and oppression typical of a metanarrative. The goals of humanism can best be served by recognizing that the individual human subject and the larger aggregate of human cultures are provisional, mutable, and too complicated for one-size-fits-all descriptions of human lives and human systems.

According to Said,

Humanism is not about withdrawal and exclusion. Quite the reverse: its purpose is to make more things available to critical scrutiny as the product of human labor, human energies for emancipation and enlightenment, and, just as importantly, human misreadings and misinterpretations of the collective past and present. (22)

Humanism can redeem these misreadings by actually looking at them, not just ignoring them. This postmodern humanism looks at the context of truth-claims, recognizing multiple subjectivities in a way that celebrates truth as a tapestry woven of many different little narratives.

In Douglas's novels, focus on the little narratives does not result in an amoral, relativistic dissolution of the concepts of good and evil, right and wrong. Truth and justice neither vanished nor became irrelevant with the collapse of metanarratives that formerly defined these guiding principles of humanism. Rather, Douglas's novels show characters acting justly by listening to marginalized, silenced characters. In a 1978 interview, Douglas responds to being called a moralist by couching her discussion of good and evil in humanistic terms, with the individual person as the center of all moral and ethical dilemmas. She says, "I suppose I'm a moralist in that I would find it difficult to imagine writing a good novel if you didn't have a sense of evil. That is, I think people do good things and bad things, and that they do make moral choices, maybe if only to choose between what's bad and what's worse" (Hood-Adams 42). As a group, Douglas's novels pursue two interdependent themes: justice and truth. When characters do not know the truth, or when they ignore the truth to pursue their own ends, they silence the voices of the past, often the voices of the dead, but sometimes the voices of the vulnerable and disenfranchised, people to whom no one will listen. To act morally, however, these characters must know the truth—the truth about their pasts, their families, their neighbors, or their natures.

But without a metanarrative by which to evaluate right and wrong, how can a character make moral choices? According to Alasdair MacIntyre, the enlightenment left an authority vacuum from which the liberal tradition was born. In the liberal tradition, "Every individual is free to propose and to live by whatever conception of the good he or she pleases, derived from whatever theory or tradition he or she may adhere to, unless that conception of the good involves reshaping the life of the rest of the community in

accordance with it” (336). This state of affairs might seem like a social miasma, an unstructured amoral free-for-all. But according to Lyotard, the postmodern world, in which metanarratives are sublimated to the cultural unconscious (“Postmodern Condition” xiii), does have a structure, albeit a complicated one.

In Jean-Francois Lyotard’s terms, justice is a language game, and those who act justly play by its rules. According to Lyotard,

For us, a language game is first and foremost someone talking. But there are language games in which the important thing is to listen, in which the rule deals with audition. Such a game is the game of the just. And in this game, one speaks only inasmuch as one listens, that is, one speaks as a listener, and not as an author. It is a game without an author. (72)

This is not a concept of justice predicated on any judge, a singular, powerful figure determining the right and wrong of any given situation based on the fair application of widely-known rules and precepts. To act justly, one must not attempt to declare a verdict; rather, justice as a language game requires the players to listen to one another and, when they speak out, they re-tell what they heard while they listened to one another. Such telling and re-telling occurs often in Douglas’s novels, although her characters more typically distort that which they heard to make themselves seem brighter, kinder, or more righteous, obscuring their complicity in oppressive social structures that directly impede fair and equal access to occupational and economic opportunities.

Douglas’s novels also show that Southern society marginalizes the individual based on gender and race, restricting the jobs available to women and people of color. Douglas sets these novels and their flashbacks in historical periods characterized by silenced women, women whose societies restricted their voices and their actions more severely than the institutional regulation of specializations. Class and race distinctions

also limit a woman's working possibilities. In *Can't Quit You, Baby*, Cornelia's mother does not work because she is wealthy and white. The Anderson women in *A Family's Affairs* are white but not wealthy, so they work as teachers or nurses. None of the black women in Douglas's novels are wealthy, so all of them work. They are most often cooks and housekeepers like Clakey and Sarah in *Where the Dreams Cross*, but they can also clean and feed invalids like Lucy in *Apostles of Light*, or they can farm with their husbands like Tweet in *Can't Quit You, Baby*. Leila of *The Rock Cried Out*, however, cannot work on the farm according to the strictures of her father and family (133); black women with no other income can labor on a farm, but white women with no income cannot. White women can be artists, like Leila and like Corinne in *A Lifetime Burning*, but none of the black women in the novels is an artist.

In Douglas's novels, institutional regulation of professions brought about by specialization and the cult of expertise limits a man's work opportunities, the patriarchy denies women those work opportunities men have, and Southern racism denies black women the work opportunities white women have. These systems—specialization, sexism, and racism—deny each character his or her full potential, although all three systems collude to unjustly exclude black women from all but the lowest-paid, least prestigious work. These impasses were not, certainly, insurmountable in the real South, even during Jim Crow segregation, but Douglas creates her characters from fragments of her own experience; her later novels, with their self-conscious narrators, reveal the writer's professional limitations in the presentation of the truth.

As the twentieth century progresses throughout Douglas's novels, the institutional hurdles of increased specialization and the cult of expertise further limit work options,



even within individual professions. An expert, specialized in one field, is presumed to know only about her profession; conversely, she has power over her specialized information, and therefore, she assumes a position of authority. According to Said, “The cult of expertise has never ruled the world of discourse as much as it now does in the United States, where the policy intellectual can feel that he or she surveys the entire world” (*Humanism* 123). Lyotard identifies these experts as decision makers, and says that they “attempt to manage” the various language games that intersect with their own games: in the name of efficiency, the decision makers justify usurping power over other people playing other games (*Postmodern Condition* xxiv). Specialization and efficiency, then, are the language games that attempt to impose their rules on other games.

But specialization and efficiency cannot elevate themselves to the status of a metanarrative at a postmodern moment in history, and no player should attempt to enforce the rules of efficiency on other games; according to Lyotard, the “social universe is formed by a plurality of games without any one of them being able to claim that it can say all the others” (*Just Gaming* 58). Any attempt to speak for a different game restricts the rights and the rules of that game. A failure to listen to opponents, even when those opponents are playing different games, can lead to injustice; as Lyotard explains in *Just Gaming*, justice is also a language game, and its primary rule is listening (72). The justice game requires players to relinquish control. If one should act justly—and fairness and justice are among the aims of postmodern humanism—then one must not apply the rules of his game to someone else playing a different game, and one must not attempt to silence his opponent.

Furthermore, cultural associations with different jobs influence characters to try to assert the rules of their professions in other areas of their lives. Those characters pretending that the job is the sole, or even the primary, determiner of personhood and conduct tend to silence those who play by other rules and, therefore, act against the aims of humanism and justice. Specialization and expertise restrict the language games in which one can participate; they also maintain oppressive, marginalizing economic and political structures. The medical profession in Douglas's novels requires the doctor to dehumanize the patient in the twentieth-century efficiency-minded medical industry, so Douglas's doctors are particularly susceptible to acting unjustly and silencing other characters.

### *The Medical Profession in Douglas's Novels*

The ostensible purpose of the medical profession, healing, does not conflict with the aims of humanism, but chapter one of this study will show that the twentieth-century doctors in Douglas's novels play by two sets of professional rules that often conflict with each other and can corrode the doctor's moral integrity. The older set of rules is established in the Hippocratic oath, which itself has changed over time, but which consistently emphasizes uprightness, honesty, respect, and often, silence. The newer, more modern set of rules by which doctors play requires efficiency, self-righteousness, hubris, impersonality, and detachment; these rules require the player to dehumanize and objectify the patient, so when the doctor plays family or romance games by his professional rules, he objectifies and dehumanizes the ones he loves.

The changing relationship between the Anderson-McGoverns and their doctor shows the collapse of the pre-twentieth century closeness between a doctor and his

patients in *A Family's Affairs*. In *Where the Dreams Cross*, Wilburn's experience with his wife's gallstones leads to a dialogue with Nat that exposes a mid-twentieth century rejection of the new medical industry and outlines some of the new rules of the medical profession. George in *A Lifetime Burning* illustrates the necessity of a doctor's professional detachment, but the narrator struggles against that detachment for decades in their uneasy. *Apostles of Light*'s Lucas commits murders because he plays the justice game by the conflicting rules of his profession, but the rules of the entrepreneur's game force him into the situation that leads him to act so unjustly.

### *Entrepreneurship in Douglas's Novels*

The second chapter of this study will show that Douglas's entrepreneurs are not anti-humanist or evil, necessarily, but the characters who only develop, who are salesmen above all else, must victimize others to gain control of their assets. Douglas's entrepreneurs are the human agents of the historical force Lyotard identifies as development; in these novels, development is not, in and of itself, unjust or anti-humanist. According to Lyotard, development is an ideology that demands "setting things in motion totally and mobilizing energies" (*Toward the Postmodern* 159); development is just because humanity must develop in order to ensure survival, but development requires a busyness more like mere survival than like "the true life of the human soul" (162). Development serves the aim of humanism insofar as it serves human survival, but it acts against humanism when its demand for constant action impedes spiritual growth understanding.

A postmodern humanism creates an ontological space in which a little narrative can address non-material concerns like spiritual growth and the human soul. A

traditionally humanist worldview centered on man, rather than on God, could neither honor nor recognize a spiritual essence originating from the divine. But Douglas's postmodern humanism is not centered on a man; it is a de-centered universe of fragmented individuals. In his essay "Of the Fragment," Sanford Budick demonstrates that each individual life and human creation is a fragment of the universe at large; the human beings and the culture they create are "a constellation of fragments" (Budick 121). Some of these stars may glow with a spark of the divine, or perhaps none do. Douglas permits her characters to believe or not, as they see fit, and she does not attempt to foreclose on the possibility of the spirit or the hereafter.

For example, the narrator of *Can't Quit You, Baby* does not contradict Cornelia's doubt or discomfort when Tweet talks about her grandfather's ghost, and Tweet has the privileged place of the last word, imbuing her words with power and mystery if not objective truth. Tweet explains that she can visit her grandfather's ghost at the turnrow where he died. The lack of quotation marks blur the line between Tweet's words and the narrator's here, as in many other passages. Either Tweet or the narrator says, "The dead stay in the place where they die and their power is in that place" (26). Tweet is clearly the source of the statement, "I'm afraid, but nevertheless I go. I lay a flower in the furrow. Sometime—maybe not next year or the year after—his soul might move on, but now it's still there. More than once he has spoke to me" (26-27). Cornelia's response is unequivocal: "But Julia! Cornelia stepped back, folded her arms across her breasts and shook her head, *No*" (27). But Cornelia's rejection of Tweet's statement provides the reader room to doubt rather than foreclosing this supernatural possibility. Tweet's explanation of her communication with her dead grandfather continues as earnestly as it

began: "Tweet laid her finger on her lips and looked away as if she were listening for her grandfather's voice. He speaks to me, she said again. I make myself strong to listen. I know I need to listen, to give way to him. I have to be strong to give way" (27). Tweet can discuss the evils of entrepreneurship with spiritual language, and the narrator presents her words earnestly, without judgment or disbelief. Tweet is allowed to believe in the grand epic struggle of good and evil, so she interprets her victimization at the hands of greedy men by saying, "The devil thinks all the gold in the world suppose to belong to him" (44).

In Douglas's novels, the characters that only play by the rules of capitalism and development, who are salesmen in most situations regardless of context, are likely to act unjustly, often to their own detriment. Most of the entrepreneurial characters in Douglas's novels are less sympathetic characters, if not outright villains. Those characters ironically justify their injustices by claiming to serve some greater good. According to Fredric Jameson, this irony must always be sustained. Of the "two rather contradictory features of the market system, freedom and equality," Jameson says "everybody wants to want them; but they cannot be realized. The only thing that can happen to them is for the system that generates them to disappear, thereby abolishing the 'ideals' along with the reality itself" (262-63). Jameson deals with capitalism on a systemic scale, but Douglas illustrates this irony at a more human level. Lee Boykin in *The Rock Cried Out* seduces Alan's girlfriend, denies his father's Klan membership, and silences the story of his grandfather's murder so that he can put together a more marketable photo-essay, one that focuses on the labor movement; when confronted with his father's racism and, therefore, his own hypocrisy, his drive to complete his project

collapses. Howie Snyder in *Apostles of Light* hides the abused and suffering residents of the nursing home he cunningly makes from his elderly cousin's home, all in the name of serving the elderly. When one of the home's residents threatens to expose Howie's attempts to debilitate the other residents, Howie's caring façade collapses. These entrepreneurs' success is predicated on their seeming to work toward the common good while maintaining economic inequity and all manner of social prejudice because these systems create victims from whom they can profit.

Women in Douglas's novels seldom control enough capital to qualify as entrepreneurs, so they tend to be victims of the more ruthless money-makers; but when a woman does play the business game, she must do so without seeming to do so, using traditionally feminine behaviors and motivations to obscure her goals. Douglas's entrepreneurs are almost all men—all, in fact, but Leila in *The Rock Cried Out*, and she only succeeds in business because she acts surreptitiously, hiding her profit-making efforts under the pretense of her femininity. In most cases, however, the professional money-makers are successful only when they can exploit the weak and the disenfranchised: women, the elderly, the poor, and people of color.

### *Hired Help in Douglas's Novels*

The third chapter of this study will discuss an economically and socially disenfranchised profession in the Southern economy, the hired help. Hired help—domestic workers and farm hands—are the most vulnerable to exploitation because most are black in a political context that denies black workers and black people their rights and their voices, either by law or by custom; these workers must play inventively to survive, but to preserve their humanity against the temptation to hate their employers and

exploiters, they have to be willing to break the rules of their professions when they must do so to act justly. Some hired help are successful in their work and also avoid internalizing the oppression inherent in their menial jobs. In the interest of self-preservation, some of these successful characters fail to listen to anyone in the employers' (white) class and, by failing to listen, withhold help when help is needed most. Mr. Royal in *Where the Dreams Cross* explains the ideology that justifies hating an employer, but Clakey and Sarah ignore his warnings and act justly toward Nat without violating the rules that hold them apart from their employers. Harper in *Apostles of Light* codifies his detachment from whites, elevating his code to the status of a metanarrative that would lead him to abandon those who need his help. *Can't Quit You, Baby's* Tweet seems to play her working game more by Royal's and Harper's rules, but the layers of narrative and Cornelia's perceptions—both of which are the writer's and the narrator's language games, and which can be understood, in terms of working games, as the artist's game—place Tweet in a role more like Clakey's.

### *The Work of Making Art in Douglas's Novels*

The final chapter of this study will argue that Douglas's artist characters have an opportunity to act justly through their artistic practice, trying to approach truth through their creations. The extent to which they recognize this search for the truth determines, in large part, their success or failure as artists. The artist characters that are also narrators—Alan of *The Rock Cried Out*, Corinne of *A Lifetime Burning*, and the unnamed narrator of *Can't Quit You, Baby*—best exemplify the artist's participation in the justice game because these three narrators try use their art to approach truth, but recognize their limitations and subjectivity. These artist characters are the postmodern humanists,

engaging in the artistic enterprise Hutcheon calls historiographic metafiction, a postmodern approach to the past that “reinstalls historical contexts as significant and even determining, but in so doing, [. . .] problematizes the entire notion of historical knowledge” (Hutcheon 87). Corinne, for example, problematizes the history of her husband’s grandmother by providing excerpts from her diary, then retracting them, claiming that they are fictional, but that they could be true. All three of these first-person narrators eventually must reckon with the past by telling it, even to the point of admitting its ultimate unknowable mystery. Alan and Corinne must engage in this reckoning because of their responsibility to the other characters, but the narrator of *Can’t Quit You, Baby* has to tell the truth about her own existence, her role in the construction of the story, for the benefit of the reader to whom she frequently refers in the second-person.

This brilliantly-devised narrator calls the reader’s attention to the truth of the novel as a social construct, written by an author with a specific history and motivation and thereby exposing the artwork as the product of the artist’s work. In interviews and speeches, Douglas repeatedly argues that it is indeed work, and not even glamorous work: the writing profession is solitary, low-paid, and largely disrespected. Ironically, Douglas also considers writing a terrible responsibility. The writer must present “a true lie” (IHFI 13), a representation of the world that reveals a hidden meaning of the world. Such a responsibility could have a corrosive effect on the psychology of the writer; internalizing the mandate for unflinching honesty, combined with an obsession for putting chaos to order, could create an unpleasantly narcissism at best, or, at worst, a constant sense of epically-proportioned failure. Not surprisingly, Douglas keeps her professional self separate from her personal self, even to the point of maintaining the Douglas-Haxton



duality afforded by retention of the pen-name. As Douglas's fiction shows, one's work has a tremendous impact on identity and, therefore, on one's capacity as a moral agent in both the public and private spheres.

Douglas's novels prove that postmodern does not mean postmoral. Traditionally, one man with one self, one soul, must follow one set of rules—and the set of rules depends on the particular tradition—to behave morally. A postmodern concept of personhood recognizes that the individual is not singular, and identities depend on contexts: one man can be a father with his children, a husband with his wife, an employer to his housekeeper, and an employee in his professional life. He has further dimensions of gender, race, age, class, religion, and history that define him to greater or lesser degrees depending on the context and on his minute-by-minute awareness of himself. One man, in a postmodern scheme, does not have one fixed self. He has many, mutable selves. Each self is somewhat bound to a particular context, and each context has its own set of rules. Behaving morally may be more problematic in such a world, but Douglas's novels insist that the pursuit of truth, justice, and truth are still entirely necessary in every context, regardless of the complications or difficulties.

## CHAPTER TWO

### Douglas's Dehumanizing Doctors

#### *Introduction*

Ellen Douglas depicts the power and prestige of the medical profession, but this power and prestige result more from social expectations about doctors than from doctors' actual ability to heal the sick. This power has a corrosive effect on some of these doctor-characters, distorting their sense of justice toward patients and loved ones. Doctors, in Douglas's novels, exemplify the extent to which one's professional position of power can twist one's sense of self and direct moral choices. This chapter first explores the social construction of the doctor as a doctor, demonstrating his economic and cultural power and investigating the extent to which that power is derived from science and from myth: the practice of medicine is grounded in and legitimized by its allegiance to science, but the infallibility and, historically, the effectiveness of the physician are widespread fictions. Douglas's first novel, *A Family's Affairs* (1961), exposes the lie of the infallible healer through its presentation of doctors and other character's responses to doctors. These doctors perform no medical miracles; rather, they serve mostly as family advisors and observers of birth and death, which is an historically accurate representation of the actual role of most doctors in the early twentieth century. *Where the Dreams Cross* (1968) presents a resistance to major change in medical practice: in this novel, doctors are part of the efficiency-driven hospital industry of the mid-twentieth century. Although these doctors save lives better than their immediate predecessors, they do so, in part, by dehumanizing their patients. *Apostles of Light* (1973) raises concerns about the impact of

a doctor's professional authority on his conscience and sense of self, concerns that intensify to inform the central question of the truth about selfhood presented in *A Lifetime Burning* (1982). This novel's narrator is obsessed with the truth, with presenting herself and her husband as truthfully as she can, although she recognizes the impossibility of such an endeavor. She creates portraits of her husband, but she can never re-create the man himself in a way that would explain his actions or her reactions. Because she writes him, he is a construct, not a man. Similarly, the physician is a construct, a role society imbues with authority and power. Douglas's novels expose the social creation and maintenance of the physician's role, investigating the effect society has on the role of the physician and the effect the physician's socially-inscribed role has on the identity of the doctor himself.

The prestige associated with the medical profession is socially constructed and re-constructed along with social change, but the way society constructs its concept of prestige is primarily grounded in a market in which scarce skills have more value. In *The Human Condition* (1958), which Douglas read (Tardieu 37), Hannah Arendt describes the ancient distinction between liberal and servile arts. As Arendt explains the distinction made by Cicero, the liberal arts are those that require "prudent judgment," like politics, while the servile arts are the most useful ones, like cooking and fishing (Arendt 91). Cookery is useful because it is directly necessary for survival, but anyone can cook, so this skill is less valuable than the politician's skills, which are more difficult to demonstrate directly, but also more difficult to learn and duplicate. To a large extent, this division between servile arts and liberal arts still determines the prestige of a profession and, accordingly, its value in the marketplace. The definitions of prudent judgment and

usefulness, however, have changed. The doctor, for example, provides infinitely useful and pragmatic services for his patients, but so does the nurse. The doctor's work is more prestigious because his specialized knowledge should enable him to make informed decisions beyond the nurse's level of expertise.

The different connotations of the word *profession* and the word *job* indicate the contemporary distinction of prestigious work, like doctoring, from less prestigious work. According to Richard Malsheimer's definition of a profession, professions require specialized training that affords esoteric knowledge of others' lives; societies hold professions in higher esteem for their service to the public; the specialized knowledge and social power of professionals can cause the public to mistrust or fear the professions to which they formerly granted authority; and professions must limit their own numbers, balancing society's need for them with their own need to minimize competition within the profession. Malsheimer formulated this definition to illustrate why doctors are professionals, not workers or laborers (7-10). By this definition, like the definition Arendt borrows from Cicero, a doctor's work is revered, and doctors are revered by association, primarily because of the effect of their specialized knowledge on society.

Science is the source of the doctor's specialized knowledge and, therefore, the source of the doctor's power and authority. This power necessarily displaces the authority of other organizations of human experience. Lyotard argues that the imposition of a scientific ordering system over complicated social structures is violent and oppressive:

In matters of social justice and of scientific truth alike, the legitimation of the power is based on its optimizing the system's performance—efficiency. The application of this criterion to all of our games necessarily entails a

certain level of terror, whether soft or hard: be operational (that is, commensurable) or disappear. (*Postmodern Condition* xxiv).

When new methods and discoveries after the industrial revolution insisted that a doctor be a doctor-scientist rather than a practitioner-neighbor, medicine could not avoid evolving from a familial, socially-dependent practice of solitary men visiting homes into an efficiency-driven, depersonalized institution on which society depends for its wellbeing, for better or for worse.

And medical practice is sometimes for the worse. Science is not an unchanging ethos, and medicine is not a static practice. Science is a method that does not change, but practitioners disprove and displace old theories with new theories, and the doctor must adapt his practice in accordance with new theories which may or may not prove false. Jameson's claims about positivist, scientific disciplines like economics and physics also can be applied to the medical profession: "A historical examination of the disciplines, for example, undermines their claims to correspond to truth or to the structure of reality, by betraying the opportunistic way in which they swiftly readapt to this or that current hot topic [. . .] (323). The recent history of American medical practice illustrates this trend from art to science, showing that innovations and discoveries, scientific as they may be, do not always correspond to improvements, but they do correspond with an increase in the doctor's prestige and authority.

Doctoring is and has long been a semi-sacred profession in America, largely untouched and unregulated by the government despite its impact on the public welfare; the doctor once governed life and death within family homes, but now he is a policy expert presiding from the hospital or research laboratory, and the government has not infringed significantly on his authority in either role. Hospitals proliferated in Europe

from 1750 to 1850, but the vast majority of American doctors practiced in their patients' homes until after the 1880s (Stevens 9-10). The hospital setting was the primary force in the institutionalization of medicine, made necessary by rapid urbanization and population growth following the Civil War (34). The first American medical school comparable to European schools was Johns Hopkins, founded in 1893 (Larson 35); through its own demand for better practitioners, the American medical profession began to control the educations of young doctors. In rural areas at this time, according to Rosemary Stevens's history of American medicine, physicians "found it necessary to develop a clearer notion of their professional identity," contributing to a diffuse but nationwide push for uniformity and higher standards in medical education and practice (36). By the beginning of the twentieth century, with the increasing primacy of the hospital as site of medical care and with the rise of medical specialties, "The doctor as family adviser was overtaken by the doctor-scientist" (42). Many of these doctor-scientists, however, were revealed to fall short of both designations during World War I, when the American military found that rejected large numbers of specialists—from thirty-eight percent of self-claimed plastic surgeons to seventy percent of otolaryngologists—from serving as military doctors (127). Reform, however, was uneven and fragmentary, as individual specialties formed their own committees, curricula, and licensing examinations throughout the 1920s and 1930s (153). The Depression and World War II created opportunities for increased government-imposed uniformity in the growing healthcare industry, but after the war, political conservatism prevented government involvement in the training or licensing of doctors (274-75). Those statesman Cicero designated as chief among practitioners of the liberal, as opposed to the servile, arts did not deign to claim

the expertise necessary to regulate or interfere with doctors whose increased devotion to scientific efficiency often obscured their dubious efficacy as healers.

American culture has constructed a mythic, semi-magical or godlike hero to stand in for its real, fallible American doctors. People need to be able to place their faith in the men who control the quality of their lives and protect them from death. According to Richard Malsheimer, the “image of the omnipotent and priestlike doctor” (3) was a myth created and perpetuated by literature and other media beginning in the mid-nineteenth century; people continue to believe in the myth of the infallible doctor because this myth creates a feeling of security and safety, regardless of the reality of the accessibility and effectiveness of modern healthcare (1-3). But the doctor is not a priest or an oracle. He treats maladies according to the scientific method and the somewhat esoteric knowledge it reveals, not by any super-human access to mysterious forces. He is a man, not a god.

Consistent use of the male pronoun is no accident in this chapter: literary doctors are men. Rebecca Shannonhouse’s compelling, albeit small, anthology of women’s writing on mental health shows no evidence of female doctors until a female psychiatrist treats Allie Light in Light’s “Thorazine Shuffle,” published in 1999 about her experiences with psychiatric treatment in the 1960s. Allie Light goes to the hospital, where they put her in a padded room to wait for the doctor. “A doctor finally came, crowding into the space. She was a woman psychiatrist, the first female I had seen in this capacity” (168). But she behaves no differently than a man in that capacity: she just takes a medical history and fills out paperwork, then leaves. Even if a literary doctor is a woman, she occupies a traditionally male role.

In their presentation of doctors as white men, Douglas's novels reflect the actual demographics of American physicians. Up to 1970, women never comprised more than 7% of the doctoring population. In 1980, 11.6% of doctors were women, and by 1990, their numbers had risen to 16.9%. Where women have made modest progress, African Americans have not. By 1975, 5% of medical school graduates were black, and that number had only risen to 6.6% by 1995 (More 5). Accordingly, Douglas's doctors are all white men. As a literary technique, her all-white male doctors reinforce racial and gendered tensions by presiding over their patients, most of whom are women, and some of whom are black. The lack of physician diversity in her novels also presents an implicit critique of the racial and sexist elitism of the medical profession.

Douglas's presentation of doctors often critiques the medical profession, particularly in its twentieth-century incarnation as a business and an industry. When her characters rail against the hospital machine, the doctors whose cold detachment and businesslike manner debases sick people to the status of objects, Douglas illustrates a rejection of the idea that the expert, the specialist, always knows better than the layman, and that the layman should necessarily bend to the will of the specialist. This rejection of the ultimate primacy of expertise is like Edward Said's definition of humanist resistance.

Resistant reading, for Said, is

the ability to differentiate between what is directly given and what may be withheld, whether because one's own circumstances as a humanist specialist may confine one to a limited space beyond which one can't venture or because one is indoctrinated to recognize only what one has been educated to see or because only policy experts are presumed to be entitled to speak about the economy, health services, or foreign and military policies, issues of urgent concern to the humanist as a citizen. (75-76)



Because doctors heal people, recognition of humanity and individual personhood should be a necessary component of the medical profession. Treating patients with dignity, connecting with them emotionally, and truly observing their suffering are ideal practices in medicine, but in Douglas's novels, doctors often fall short of his ideal.

Douglas creates doctors who are morally ambiguous, blind to human suffering, or prone to dehumanize people in and out of the hospital; this is a postmodern presentation of the medical profession because it undermines the near-consensus of the doctor as a wise and benevolent healer. According to Linda Hutcheon, postmodern writing "works to 'de-doxify' our cultural representations and their undeniable political import" (Hutcheon Politics 3). Douglas is not a doctor, nor has she ever been a doctor, so she speaks only as a humanist concerned with human welfare when she presents doctors too convinced of their scientific righteousness to treat patients as humans, and when she depicts a late twentieth century medical industry that dehumanizes patients. In her novels and in the world, as doctors become more skilled, they move away from their role in families and toward authority in the hospital.

### *Doctors in A Family's Affairs*

In *A Family's Affairs*, the medical profession following a trajectory parallel to changes in the rest of the South: a society previously centered on the family becomes increasingly regulated and compartmentalized in ways that make the market and its institutions the primary determiners of human lives. For example, Anna McGovern grows up to marry a man with a father from the North and a Jewish mother; Anna's husband is "an alien to his wife's rigidly idiosyncratic background" (431) a man who was certainly not as well-known to Anna's mother as Anna's father was to Kate Anderson,

the grandmother and matriarch. But society, from the end of the nineteenth century to the beginning of the twentieth, had changed enough so that young women of Anna's social status met husbands in college, not at church socials attended by their entire extended families. According to Patricia Yaeger, the politico-social structure of the South is "an idiom that is not enriched by change but made hysterical," and Douglas's novels are "primarily about resistance to change" (7). *A Family's Affairs* shows no real hysteria, but it resists change, including changes in the medical profession. This resistance to changes in the practice of doctoring is part of the characters' broader resistance to the centrifugal force of a society that increasingly pulls the community and its individual families farther apart from one another.

*A Family's Affairs* presents doctors who were personally and emotionally involved with their patients but not particularly adept at healing them. These doctors bear a stronger historical resemblance to nineteenth-century doctors. According to Malsheimer, "Not until the last third of the nineteenth century could patients reasonably expect very much from their doctors. Patients could expect, and more often than not did receive, moral support and comfort during times of personal and family crisis" (44). For most of the novel, doctors console and comfort at the beginning and end of life, but they neither heal nor harm their patients. Birth and death are the doctor's touchpoints with patients throughout this novel, and the doctor's role is primarily that of the concerned family friend.

This novel's depiction of Charlotte McGovern's labor and delivery corresponds with most women's historical experience insofar as it creates a picture of the doctor as somewhat irrelevant or useless but familiar and comforting, despite the faith and trust the

birthing mother and her family invest in him and the hospital environment. When Charlotte is eight months pregnant with Anna's older sister, she takes a day-long ride by coach to Homochitto so that her cousin Sykes Anderson, a doctor, can deliver her baby (49). During her labor, she calls the doctor by his first name (52); Charlotte avails herself of the hospitalization of labor and delivery which, historically, would reduce the social and familial aspects of childbirth as it was experienced at home, attended by family and a midwife.

Charlotte's decision to deliver her baby in a hospital, rather than at home, represents a growing trend among American women in the 1920s. In 1925, only about one third of all American babies were delivered in hospitals (Leavitt 12), which is where Charlotte delivers her firstborn (*AFA* 51); most women, however, moved their childbirths from the home to the hospital by 1930 (Leavitt 82). But late-nineteenth century and early twentieth-century obstetricians most often learned to deliver babies theoretically, and their only practice came through delivering doll babies from manikin pelvises (Leavitt 63). Sykes's discomfort with Charlotte's protracted labor exemplifies this historical failure of medical education. When her labor lasts longer than he had expected, "Sykes was beginning to look as anguished as Ralph [. . .]" (53). The doctor's apparent vulnerability when confronted with a difficult labor corresponds with the historical fact that, despite the faith placed in the doctor and the hospital, many doctors lacked the training and experience necessary to do much good in childbirths that deviate from the textbook norm they read about in medical school. Sykes's fear exposes the lie of the infallible doctor by depicting a flawed man who may not deserve the trust a birthing mother invests in him.

According to Judith Walzer Leavitt, more women delivered in hospitals under doctors' care because women believed that medical intervention ensured their safety, and drugs ensured their comfort (56-57), but Charlotte's hospital delivery differs from the typical hospital delivery of the 1920s in that Charlotte experiences an unmedicated birth. Middle-class women delivering in hospitals tended to benefit from the most recent advances in anesthesia (Leavitt 85). If Charlotte had desired and received drugs to make her more comfortable, the doctor and hospital could have been clearly advantageous, but because she gets no drugs, the hospital and the doctor seem even more irrelevant.

Sykes is similarly ineffective as a healer when Ralph McGovern's father falls ill, although Sykes fulfills his role as an adviser to the family. On his deathbed, Mr. McGovern expects the doctor to be able to heal him, apparently believing in the promises of twentieth-century medicine and ascribing to the cultural myth of the doctor's invincibility in the face of death. After a painful struggle to breathe, Mr. McGovern asks, "Where's that damn doctor? Get him out here and make him do something about this damn foolishness. What's a doctor for if he can't get you well?" (75). But Sykes had already disabused the family of any hopes that he might get their patriarch well: "Sykes told Ralph when he arrived that there was very little hope for his father, and that he should call his brothers' home" (63). Sykes does address Mr. McGovern's medical condition, but then he advises Ralph on the more personal business of arranging for the family to be present at the deathbed or funeral. Sykes's concern is more social than professional.

The Andersons seem to be grandfathered into the custom of treating patients like family. When Kate breaks her pelvis some twenty years after Mr. McGovern's death, the

young Dr. Shields, whom Kate's children call Jimmie, still insists on treating Kate for free, even though, as Charlotte says, "It's not a bit necessary, of course; they're only third cousins" (391). In this novel, even in the middle of the century, the practice of medicine was not yet so regulated by the hospital industry that such treatment without pay is impossible.

Dr. Shields's emotional attachment to Kate as a person works against his professional interest in healing her. He must cope with the tension between treating the body and recognizing the human occupying the body. This tension frustrates Kate's doctor because she damages the body he is supposed to heal:

Young Dr. Shields, his high, round brow wrinkled by a combination of professional gravity and familial concern, his long, sorrowful mouth held carefully, as if he reminded himself not to be exasperated with Kate because she persisted in abusing her poor body, told them that the pelvis seemed to be broken, probably hopelessly shattered, although of course X-rays could not be made for some time. (385-86)

Dr. Shields allows his emotional attachment to Kate to inform his decisions about her care. After she gets pneumonia, he explains her treatment options to her daughters in a speech that vacillates between emotional sentiment—"You know I love Cousin Kate. She. . . I *love* her"—and medical terminology—"If we started her on penicillin and glucose and oxygen right away, we'd have maybe a fifty-fifty chance to pull her through this attack" (421). Ultimately, he tells Kate's daughters that if they want to cure Kate's pneumonia, he will transfer her care to a different doctor because he "can't put her through all that suffering, can't keep her hanging on just so that she can suffer again and more" (421). Dr. Shields is caught between the pull of efficiency and his self-assumed obligations to a woman he thinks of as part of his family. As a doctor-scientist, he should

treat her symptoms, but as a moral agent and part of a degenerating community that values Kate's dignity and comfort, he cannot meet the demands of his profession.

Dr. Shields works at a transitional time in the history of medicine, illustrating the slow demise of the general practitioner. The course of *A Family's Affairs* shows the development of specialization in medicine. Sykes, the doctor who delivered Charlotte's baby, is also the doctor Ralph's mother calls when his father is near death (63); the year is 1924 (61). But by the time Kate fractures her pelvis and lapses into a coma some twenty years later, Kate's son Will Anderson wants to transfer Kate's care from Dr. Shields, a distant cousin and general practitioner who treats Kate for free, to a specialist in geriatrics (400). This movement from generalist care to specialist care parallels the historical development of medical specialties in the United States: full time specialists comprised 17 percent of U.S. doctors in 1931, but by 1971, 70 to 80 percent of physicians were specialists (Stevens 3). A general practitioner in the late nineteenth or early twentieth century might have to deliver a baby, then ride out to witness an old man's death, then possibly set a broken arm in the next county; decades later, a geriatric specialist can sit in his office, waiting for patients to find him and pay him in proportion to his expertise. The doctor-scientist demands specialization because specialization increases efficiency.

The development of the doctoring profession, as presented in *A Family's Affairs*, parallels the development of the arts from the modern celebration of the old to a postmodern devotion to efficiency, which always looks forward, never backward. According to Fredric Jameson, modern art celebrated the old, and because different aspects of the culture and economy develop at different paces, "Some parts of the

economy are still archaic, handicraft enclaves; some are more modern and futuristic than the future itself” (307). In *A Family's Affairs*, medicine is one such modern, backward-glancing profession: Dr. Shields treats Kate for free because they are distantly related, as was the custom in the previous century; he makes this anachronistic decision at a time when, according to Richard Shryock, “the more people trusted medical aid, the less they could afford it” (384). *Where the Dreams Cross*, Douglas’s next novel, is set in the 1960s, approximately when *A Family's Affairs* ends. In this novel, medicine is an entirely postmodern profession. Jameson says of the postmodern that “the past itself has disappeared (along with the well-known ‘sense of the past’ or historicity and collective memory)” (309). The characters subject to the medical profession remember the past when doctors like Shields and Sykes had personal relationships with their patients, but the medical profession seems to have forgotten, having rapidly (d)evolved(?) from a vocation into an industry.

#### *Doctors in Where the Dreams Cross*

*Where the Dreams Cross* presents a small, focused portrait of medicine as an entirely dehumanizing industry with infinite power over those made weak by sickness. In this novel, the weak one is Sunny, Wilburn Griffith’s wife. The novel’s only patient is female, and all its doctors are male. The sexual distinction between doctor and patient reinforces the novel’s preoccupation with the politics of gender, one in which (white, middle-class) women are weak and (white) men are strong. According to Elizabeth Tardieu, *Where the Dreams Cross* “taps a latent, unspoken knowledge of [women’s] unfair and unequal positions in a male-dominated world,” (80) knowledge reinforced by the novel’s depiction of male doctors dominating a female patient. But can domination,

detachment, and dehumanization be beneficial or even necessary in the practice of medicine?

The authority a doctor has over a patient is almost religious; he is the priest, the man who stands between the patient and providence. A patient cannot contradict a diagnosis, and a prognosis predicts the future. Sunny has gallstones, but she wants to avoid surgery, so she seeks a second opinion. Sunny “listened while the doctor, speaking with the remote authority of an oracle, insisted that she must have an operation” (172). Sunny listens while the doctor speaks, investing in him the power over their consultation rather than arguing about other possible treatment options or actively trying to come to terms with the necessity of surgery. She is passive. He is active. His authority is described as remote, creating an ironic disconnect between his expert opinion and the intimacy inherent in the content of that opinion; aloof and detached, he talks about entering her living body with his hands. Furthermore, his is the authority of an oracle, predicting Sunny’s future, sketching out the destiny which she cannot avoid.

A doctor is aloof, in part, because he recognizes the inevitability of such commonplace horrors as illness and surgery; this recognition and detachment stay with a doctor, determining his behavior beyond the office and the hospital. Sunny postpones the inevitable surgery, but one of her gallstones finally shifts at a party following a football game, and when she complains about having strange pains in her stomach, only Nat Stonebridge’s new friend, Dr. Stanley, pays attention (181). Shortly thereafter, Sunny curls into a ball and screams, so “everyone shifted into the formal pattern of emergency. The doctor took charge” (182). The other party guests can ignore illness until the sick person starts screaming, but the doctor is always a doctor, always ready to assert his



authority, even before the situation becomes so dire that non-professionals respond to a perceived emergency. Then, once a person becomes a patient, medical professionals are the only ones who can ignore even the most severe symptoms and reactions.

Medical professionals' responsibility to treat patients efficiently sometimes results in behaviors that seem inhumane. At the hospital, Sunny screams and retches, but Dr. Stanley and the attending physician maintain that she cannot take any drugs to dull the pain because she may soon need anesthesia for surgery, despite Wilburn's horror at their failure to be moved, as he is, by her pain (185-6). Sunny's description, during the attack, is grotesque: "Sunny sat up on the low stretcher, screamed, then stood up and, bending down so that her head was below her knees, staggered across the room. Her long pinkish hair came loose from its pins and tumbled down, dragging the floor. In a corner she squatted, moaning" (185). Her symptoms, largely ignored by the doctors and nurses that enter and leave the room, transform her into an animal. She staggers rather than walking and squats rather than sitting. The pins that structure her hair fall out, and her long pink hair, exaggeratedly feminine, falls free and drags. As Patricia Yaeger says of *Can't Quit You, Baby*, Southern culture underwent rapid change to accommodate the growing demands for social equality, and "change erupts abruptly, via images of monstrous, ludicrous bodies" (4). Sunny's is such a body, calling attention to the way doctors' devotion to efficiency can dehumanize and deform the patient.

The text takes for granted the argument that doctors objectify their patients, but Wilburn and Nat engage in dialogue that investigates whether or not a doctor must dehumanize the patient in order to successfully heal her. When Sunny's doctor arrives, he ignores Sunny's friends and husband and treats Sunny as if she were "a dead body"

(188). As Wilburn says, “You put yourself in their hands and you’re like a side of beef in a slaughterhouse” (190). He theorizes about why doctors seem emotionless:

Have you noticed how the faces of doctors are smooth? As if years of scrubbing—sterility—had included washing away every line of expression in their faces. And the ones who are not that way—who *react*—I suppose the wear and tear of it kills them young. That’s why you don’t see many of them. The others—they’re in a dream—in a dream of impersonality and professional efficiency where they’re the heroes, and unknown women in dirty uniforms clean up the vomit and the feces. It might be better to die than to get involved with those people. (191)

Wilburn supports his theory by telling Nat that when he was admitting Sunny to the hospital, he saw one young doctor eating a hamburger while another stitched the wound of a heavily-bleeding young boy (191). Wilburn recognizes that these doctors seem callous and impersonal because they must alienate themselves from the people they work to save or die from the strain of others’ suffering. He understands that doctors behave inhumanly to save lives, but he does not think this lofty goal is worth the price: he wonders if death is preferable to being healed by these men.

These doctors deviate from the myth of the kindly, infallible healer maintained by popular culture during the mid-twentieth century. Nat cites fictional doctors—Ben Casey, Dr. Kildare, Dr. Zorba, and Dr. Gillespie—to argue that all doctors are not impersonal (191). Dr. Kildare first appeared in novels by Max Brand, the author also responsible for Dr. Gillespie (Malsheimer 123). The Kildare novels were later the basis of two television series in the 1960s and 1970s; the series were then adapted into seven pulp novels (119). Richard Malsheimer characterizes the plots of these novels by saying that Brand “took an already known and established fictional type, focused his attention on creating a bond of loyalty between the wise old Dr. Gillespie and the headstrong but talented young Dr. Kildare, and set in motion a series of episodic, sloppily plotted,

evidently rushed, but remarkably popular medical novels” (124). Because of the multiple adaptations and media that brought this material to different American demographics, and because the doctor characters were easily digestible owing to their predictable conformation to type, Drs. Kildare and Gillespie had a fairly widespread impact on the evolving cultural construct of the doctor figure. Nat, comically pedestrian in her appeal to these fictional monoliths, illustrates both the power of these popular fictions in the lay concept of doctors and the way in which the layperson comforts herself in the frightening face of the real medical industry, by assuring herself that doctors must have hearts of gold, just like Dr. Gillespie, even though they seem to callously dehumanize their patients.

Is the alienation of the patient from the doctor an anti-humanist historical development, or do the lives saved as a result of the objectification of patients justify the patients’ dehumanization? After the doctors and nurses take Sunny to surgery, Wilburn rails against the medical industry to Nat. He expresses the belief that the cold efficiency of doctors and hospitals is a recent and dehumanizing historical development:

“I think it used to be when you were sick, people you knew took care of you,” he said. “Do you remember that? The doctors were people you knew. They might even be your cousins. Even the nurses. I can remember when they used to come to your house.. . But it must have been too much trouble, too personal—too painful. Do you suppose?” (190)

Nat, however, counters Wilburn’s objection to the industrialization of medicine by pointing out the practical benefits of the hospital system, saying that “you can’t operate on gallstones at *home*. I suppose what used to happen was that people died of gallstones” (190). Nat argues for efficiency, demonstrating that a doctor’s objectification of his patient works in the patient’s favor. When a doctor is, like the doctors in *A Family’s Affairs*, close to the patient like a member of the family, the patient dies. Sunny, however,

lives. Rather than treating her with affectionate familiarity, her doctors rigidly maintain their roles as physicians, not friends; Sunny's situation illustrates the effect of this dehumanized relationship on the patient and on her family. Douglas's next novel, *Apostles of Light*, shows the effect of these rigid roles on the physician himself.

*Apostles of Light* presents a physician whose dedication to playing his professional role eventually twists his sense of self to the extent that he commits murder. A man formerly comfortable in a position of power, who used this power to help others, acts desperately and, I argue, immorally, when non-physicians force him into the position of a patient. Elizabeth Tardieu says that "*Where the Dreams Cross* and *Apostles of Light* highlight the tension between societal roles and a deeper, ultimately mysterious self" (112), but Lucas's tragedy is the direct result of his societal role, his profession, merging with and perverting his hidden self, the spiritual self that guides him in distinguishing right from wrong.

#### *Doctors in Apostles of Light*

Before his retirement, Dr. Lucas Alexander's conscience is stronger than his social indoctrination, and his profession is inextricable from his sense of himself as a moral agent. Lucas is so dedicated to his role as a healer that he crosses socially constructed racial borders to improve the health of black people in his community. The narrator expounds on Dr. Lucas Alexander's self-imposed poverty in the position of county health officer, describes his attempts to persuade the board of supervisors to regulate industrial water pollution as "diatribes," and calls his efforts to improve nutrition for black children "quixotic" (64). Jim Crow's extension into the medical profession is not limited to Douglas's depictions of the American South. Zora Neale Hurston's

autobiographical essay, “My Most Humiliating Jim Crow Experience,” takes place in New York City in 1931, where a gastrointestinal specialist gives Hurston a desultory examination in a broom closet to keep her away from his other patients and get rid of her as soon as possible (119-120). Apartheid would deny black people access to white doctors, but Lucas’s devotion to the work he does is stronger than the social pressures to ignore black suffering. For better and worse, Lucas believes that his authority as a doctor transcends any and all established power structures.

Almost immediately upon moving in to Golden Age, Lucas tries to assert a doctor’s authority, offering to teach Lucy, a domestic servant now performing a nurse’s duties, and Crawley, a nurse with a questionable professional past, how to administer injections and prevent infections, but Howie Snyder, the entrepreneurial spirit and self-appointed manager of the home, refuses to give Lucas that authority, saying “I wouldn’t want to put it on you, Doc. You being retired and all. And not too well. And living here. It might not look right” (82). Howie only relents when Lucas starts asking about licensing issues. Through his access to the institutions that would regulate a quasi-medical enterprise like Howie’s, Lucas initially maintains the power to which he is accustomed. Eventually, however, Howie forces Lucas out of his authoritative role as a doctor and into his subjugated role as a patient-inmate of the home, first by casting aspersions on Lucas’s capacity for empathy.

Both business and medicine require emotional detachment from the suffering of others, but doctors, unlike businessmen, are detached to benefit others. Howie cultivates his callousness to benefit from others’ misfortune, not to alleviate it. After a particularly disturbing conversation in which Howie argues that heavy sedation is preferable to

rehabilitation for the elderly, Lucas tells Howie that he “ought to be a doctor” because “You never allow yourself to be affected by the emotions—the anguish—of other people, do you?” (92). Lucas says that doctors are callous, but the narrator reveals the height of his emotions, describing “his lips pinched tight and the big vein in his temple throbbing” (92). The callous party to this conversation is Howie, who values the success of his business more than the health and welfare of the residents, and his financial success depends on convincing his clients—the families of the residents, not the residents themselves—that the home is a peaceful place. Lucas has a doctor’s concern with patient rehabilitation and conformity to state regulations, which would threaten Howie’s peace, so Howie, as a businessman, must discredit Lucas as a doctor.

The first weapon in Howie’s arsenal is sex—accusations of sexual misconduct which would discredit an otherwise credible doctor. The novel exposes sexual threats inherent in the doctor-patient relationship by demonstrating how easily a doctor could abuse his power over his patient’s body. When he hears Mrs. Cathcart moaning one night, he comforts her as a doctor rather than as a fellow resident of Golden Age. When he announces his presence in her room, he says, “Don’t be alarmed, it’s just me—Lucas—*Doctor* Alexander,” (151) stressing his professional title and thereby establishing the rules for the rest of their interaction. He is the doctor, so she is the patient. Rather than expressing sympathy for her back pain, he “helped her to turn on her side and, using the bed sheet, draped her body as if in examination room” (152). Because she says that her shots have recently stopped easing her pain, and because he has assumed the position of her doctor despite his retirement, he investigates the contents of the disposable syringe left in her bedside ashtray (153). The rules of the profession require him to try to find

Lucy, to teach her how to treat Mrs. Cathcart's bedsore and inquire about the water in the syringe that should have contained a pain-killer (153-56). Lucas speaks to Howie instead, and when he leaves, Howie creates, for Lucy's benefit, the beginnings of the accusations of sexual misconduct that he eventually uses to discredit Lucas: "He was in the old lady's bedroom in the middle of the night. Looking at her nekkid body without another soul present. Doctors just don't do that, you know it? And it don't look right, does it?" (156-57). However pure his intentions, the fact that Lucas examines Mrs. Cathcart alone and at night casts aspersions on his innocence. Howie's affair with Lucy actually does violate professional rules of sexual propriety, but he is prepared to accuse Lucas of that sort of misbehavior, and he is only able to do so because Lucas plays by a doctor's rules in Howie's business game.

Howie can manipulate Lucas and make him doubt himself because Lucas always plays by the rules of his profession. After Lucas tells Albert, George, and Newton about Crawley's abuse and Howie's sexual relationship with Lucy, Howie suggests to Lucas that he did not see what he thought he saw. Rather, Howie implies that Lucas might be suffering from cerebral ischemia. Lucas

seemed to himself to hear, to feel, the pounding of the blood in the carotid and basal arteries, a thunder of blood in his ears, and a kind of minute crepitation in the capillaries, as if the thrombocytes might be breaking loose and crackling down the corridors of his body. I am seventy six years old. Cerebral ischemia! Maybe I didn't even see what I think I saw. (207)

He is ready to think of himself as a patient because this is the way he approaches all situations. When he sees chaos in the community, the nursing home, his former lover, or himself, he asserts the order of a scientific reduction of the situation to its symptoms.

Lucas is so immersed in the language games of medicine that words and images associated with the medical profession describe his vacillation as to whether or not to implement his plan to burn Golden Age and kill some of the residents. After he raids a desk drawer for drugs, he thinks of Martha:

Her name sounded in his mind like thunder and he felt himself stagger as if a stone had struck his heart. As if, he thought, deep in anesthetized sleep, when the heart failed and the self dissolved, I felt some ruthless surgeon jolt me with fist and shock to life.

For a moment he came to himself: Am I doing this?

*I swear by Apollo the physician. . . into whatsoever houses I enter, I will go into them for the benefit of the sick.*

He closed his mind and continued on his way. (293)

Once he has established his resolve, he proceeds methodically, and the narrator describes his actions in medical language. When he goes to offer a killing dose of tranquilizers to Ethel Crane, he sits by the bed “to assess her condition” (295). But when she admits that she still wants to commit suicide, he starts to tremble, and he think, “*I will abstain from every voluntary act of mischief and corruption*” (296). The Hippocratic Oath refrains again when he prepares to drug Miss Carrie, a woman the Golden Age staff considered to be incapable of communication or understanding. Before he gives her the injection, he wants her to understand him: “‘I’m going to give you something to help you sleep,’ he said. *I will give no deadly drug to anyone, though it be asked of me, nor will I counsel such.* ‘Do you trust me?’ She blinked” (298). These echoes of the Hippocratic Oath remind the reader that killing is against the rules of Lucas’s profession, yet he follows other rules of this same profession to convince him to kill these people. He plays at the doctor’s bedside manner when he offers the killing drugs, but the image of the surgeon returns to describe his guilt at the possibility that others, with whom he did not sit, might also die in the fire. “Lucy? He felt his chest slit open and the clamps separating his ribs,



felt the hand of the ruthless surgeon lift out his beating heart” (300). Finally, just before he starts the fire, he telephones Howie to tell him to save himself, Lucy, and the Strange brothers, two fairly healthy residents of the home. As he prepares a syringe of Demerol for Martha, he wonders, “How did I decide who was to die and who to live? *With purity and holiness will I pass my life and practice my art*” (302). The Oath is ultimately insufficient to counter his moral decision, that death is preferable to living at Golden Age. But, through the narrator’s revelation of Lucas’s thoughts as he kills his housemates and sets the fire, the novel presents Lucas’s decision as morally questionable.

Lucas’s internal monologue and the narrator’s presentation of the fire complicate Lucas’s decision to kill the residents of Golden Age. Elizabeth Tardieu presents a reading in which Lucas is the hero: “Lucas attempts to help others, as well as himself, escape a merciless death when he euthanizes some (who have consented) and sets fire to the house” (Tardieu 107). For Tardieu, Lucas sets the fire out of mercy, and she claims that he secures the consent of those he euthanizes. In this reading, Lucas behaves as a physician, doing no harm. However, Lucas recognizes that he might have killed unjustly when, after Mathew Harper, a domestic servant, forces Newton to abandon further rescue attempts, Lucas “heard a sound he knew well—the voice of a woman screaming with pain. For a moment agonizing doubt, more terrible than fire, shriveled his soul” (307). Burning is not mercy. A single blink may or may not suffice as advised consent. The novel ends Lucas’s life in a moment of doubt, not certitude; ultimately, Lucas knows that he is not a hero because he deviates from the most basic tenant of his professional creed: to do no harm.

Lucas's act of desperation results from an internal tension created by his self-identification as a doctor: a doctor has power, and a doctor is merciful. Because he defined himself as a man with power over himself and others, he could not live the life of an impotent invalid whose free will was treated with narcotics by scheming, lying, idealistic money-makers. He could not live, but because a doctor is merciful, he could not simply commit suicide. He saw others living with less free will and less dignity, and because he could not live in those circumstances, he decides that they could not live, either. His moral failing was the imposition of his own personal desires on others who could not decide for themselves; in this way, he is no better than Howie. Douglas's next novel, *A Lifetime Burning*, furthers this exploration of the way a physician can internalize his profession, and demonstrates, again, that when a doctor treats everyone like patients, he does, in fact, do harm.

#### *Doctors in A Lifetime Burning*

George, the narrator's husband in *A Lifetime Burning*, is another doctor who extends his self-assumed physician's authority past his time in the hospital and the office. Like Douglas's other doctors, George exposes the inaccuracy of the mythic doctor upheld from ancient Greece to Max Brand. Doctors should heal, infallibly, but within his career, George struggles against the failings of modern medicine. Also, the mythic doctor should be emotionally detached from his patient, a facet of the profession Wilburn objects to in *Where the Dreams Cross*; however, George's vulnerability demonstrates that a physician's emotional detachment is problematic if not impossible. But George himself internalizes other aspects of the doctor as a social construct: George, with a physician's authority, thinks he knows best, and does not tolerate anyone else's irrationality; George,

with a physician's compassion, thinks he can heal emotional and psychological wounds, even in his off hours; and George, with a physician's detachment, removes himself from people's emotional suffering, telling himself that their problems are physical and therefore well within the scope of his control. His need to control others and his resistance of vulnerability are intrinsic parts of his personality, and they are the obverse traits to his professional authority as a doctor.

Panthea Reid Broughton and Susan Williams emphasize the discontinuity between Corinne and George's private selves and their working lives, but George's profession as a medical doctor demands and reinforces certain behaviors and personality traits that carry over into his personal relationships. According to Broughton and Williams, "Corinne emphasizes that what she relates is her inner life, that at the same time that she and George were acting out their secret passions they were going to work, entertaining friends, and functioning normally" (63). Broughton and Williams also imply that Corinne and George's professional and private lives have an ultimately positive impact on each other, personally, and on society, professionally: "Though Corinne struggles against the chaos of her passions, this is a tale not of depravity but of essentially decent, kind people, a mother, a father, a teacher, and a physician, who manage to comfort, protect, and get along with each other" (63). But Corinne, the only lens through which to view this fictional world and its inhabitants, provides a more ambiguous picture of George's effect on his patients and a fairly negative portrait of George as a husband and lover.

The American literary doctor owes his primary allegiance to science; the scientific mindset can be antithetical to belief in the unseen or the anti-rational. George

shows that a doctor's intellectual objectivity interferes with the ability to believe in religion, God, or the afterlife; he cannot even pretend to believe as a gesture of respect or solidarity. His wife, Corinne, writes that

trapped in church—say he's a pallbearer, sitting on the front row, across the aisle from the bereaved family—he stands through prayers with his head unbowed, his eyes open, keeps his lips close when everyone else is reciting the Lord's prayer. That's not honesty—that's mulishness, intellectual pride. (29)

In this respect, George resembles the husband/doctor from Charlotte Perkins Stetson Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper" (1892). According to the narrator, "John is practical in the extreme. He has no patience with faith, an intense horror of superstition, and he scoffs openly at any talk of things not to be felt and seen and put down in figures" (32). Positivist certainty, then, seems to be a trait common to American literary representations of doctors since at least the late nineteenth century when the doctor's role changed from family adviser to scientific expert.

Scientific rationalism does not necessarily preclude the possibility of emotional vulnerability, however. George, for all his supposed objectivity, still reacts emotionally to his patients. Corinne remembers his internship early in their marriage:

He'd lost a patient. I could say I remember who it was: a beautiful and brilliant young girl, a courageous child—someone who brought home to him in a poignant way the bitter tragedy of human fate; but I don't remember. He's lost so many patients; there have been so many days when he's looked like that. (42)

Throughout his career, George grieves for lost patients. He has grieved for lost patients so many times that Corinne knows she cannot assign details to the patient he had lost in this vignette. This surgeon never become desensitized to death and loss; human feeling is not separable from the human practitioner of this profession.

Keeping the patients away, however, is the doctor's prerogative; the rules of this profession provide for a physical separation of doctor and patient that maintains the doctor's power and authority. Not just anyone can see the doctor at any time. In Allie Light's experience as she explains it in "Thorazine Shuffle," doctors were physically removed from patients in mental health facilities in the 1960s. The patients had contact only with "techs," medical technicians, while the doctors "were shut off in a glass-enclosed area" (169). This spatial remove reinforces the doctor as being apart from the patient, untouchable and removed; the process by which a person enters the doctor's zone of authority places that person in the role of a patient, subject to the doctor and his scientific method.

In his office, George defaults to the doctor-patient relationship even when his visitor is not a patient. When Corinne's lover, Judith, becomes pregnant, Judith's husband Lee believes that George is the unborn baby's father. Lee goes to confront George at George's office, where "He had the usual screen of receptionist and office nurse to speed him through the day as efficiently as possible" (190). In this sentence, the ostensible purpose of the office and staff is efficiency, but the narrative focuses on the office and staff as a "screen," a buffer between the doctor and any patients who might threaten his order with their chaotic demands on his time. Lee gets through this screen by waiting in the office until George's patient leaves, and because he gets through the screen of office and receptionist, George treats Lee as a patient. Once he gains entrance to George's office, and George wrongly takes him for a patient, George asserts the rules of his profession over Lee even though Lee is not participating. In Lyotard's terms, these men are playing two different language games. George asks unjustly by failing to listen

to Lee and forcing him to play by the rules of the wrong game. According to Lyotard, “For us, a language game is first and foremost someone talking. But there are language games in which the important thing is to listen, in which the rule deals with audition. Such a game is the game of the just. And in this game, one speaks only inasmuch as one listens [ . . . ]” (*Just Gaming* 72).

Lee, playing the game of the jilted husband, says he can smell his wife’s pregnancy, but George is not listening to what Lee is saying; rather, George hears, and he hears as a doctor hears a patient: “As soon as he heard ‘abnormal sense of smell,’ the surgeon in him sat up and took notice” (192). Lee has a story to tell, to make sense of his experience, but George ignores the story to listen to the symptoms. Indeed, he must do so, because the doctor as scientist must overlook the deviations and confusions of a chaotic narrative in order to apply the order of his investigative method. As Fredric Jameson argues in his forward to Lyotard’s *Postmodern Condition*, when science is the dominant mode of Western culture, it downplays the lessons learned by individual lives and delegitimizes narrative and storytelling, modes people otherwise use to make meaning of their experiences (xi). The office setting seems to preclude just listening and narrative understanding for George because it is part of the system that maintains his authority as a doctor at the expense of the person-turned-patient.

If this novel presents the office as the site of inequality and injustice between doctors and their patients, it downright condemns the other institutional setting of the medical profession, the hospital, as the site of utter miscarriage of this profession’s ostensible purpose. The hospital, from its admittance paperwork to its discharge orders and billing specialists, is designed to treat and charge patients as efficiently as possible.

Although doctors live comfortably because of the efficiency of the hospital business industry, this efficiency sometimes acts against a doctor's humanist goal: healing the sick. According to Corinne, "George cares about his work, but he hates his profession. Also, although he wants to be comfortable, he hates to make money. And doctors can't avoid making a great deal of money—far more than they need or deserve" (56). In the real-life medical profession, however, doctors as a collective could indeed avoid their high salaries; even though Medicare and private insurance companies have determined reasonable costs for procedures and treatments, "Fee setting itself rested on the integrity of the medical profession" (Stevens 449). Individual doctors may experience social pressure to charge nearly as much as their cohorts, but they are under no legal obligation to do so, although Corinne posits that doctors may be morally obligated because, according to her, they do not deserve the money they make.

The hospital, in this novel, also acts against the humanist aims of medicine by providing an environment in which the sick become sicker. Corinne provides an anecdote of another doctor's more extreme reaction. This doctor, of whom Corinne only has second-hand knowledge, works at an outpatient clinic in Boston where he spends his entire shift sending people home, explaining to them why they do not need medical attention. He tells them,

You don't need an antibiotic. Those things upset the bacterial balance in your intestines and turn your teeth yellow. No hemorrhoidectomy—go home and sit in a hot tub. Of course you don't want to have those vertebrae fused. Are you crazy? Go home. Go home! You'll live to be a hundred if you quit smoking, eat a balanced diet with plenty of roughage, stay off the freeways, look both ways before you cross the street, and laugh a lot. (58)

This doctor uses his expertise to undermine the authority of his profession and re-invest authority in the would-be patient. His orders take the form of verbs: one must go, sit, quit, eat, look, cross, and laugh. These un-patients are, for this doctor, active agents in their own health rather than passive recipients of treatments.

This anti-doctor's concerns are well-founded. The National Nosocomial Infections Study (NNIS) conducted in the United States in 1975 is among the most-cited, most influential studies on hospital infections, and according to this study's findings, patients would suffer far fewer infections if they were admitted as late as possible, spending no more time in the hospital than absolutely necessary. This and similar studies also indicates the dangers of common pre-operative hospital procedures such as shaving the operation site and open drainage of wounds (Ayliffe and English 174-75). In 1986, the NNIS found that the general rate of infection in U.S. hospitals was, on average, 5% for every 100 discharged patients (188).

George is concerned with the frightening data that indicates the dangers of hospitals, and although he conscientiously alters his career accordingly, he does not abdicate his own authority as a doctor to the extent that the anti-doctor of Boston does. According to Corinne,

But wealth is not the only consideration that has driven George away from his profession. He decided some years ago—and now, of course, there are innumerable studies to back him up—that doctors and hospitals were killing people. His practical response to this realization was to stand in the hospital door, so to speak, and send people away. That's how he got into emergency medicine. (57)

Here is an apparent irony: George must work in the hospital to undermine the hospital. In the emergency room, he can send patients home as soon as they are fit enough to survive, because at home, they have less exposure to the germs and the doctors that might



harm them (57). Although he acts out of an intention to help people avoid situations in which they are subject to malpractice and infection, his stance against the hospital still comes from a belief in his own authority and expertise. Regardless of whether or not the patient believes she needs treatment, George intends to stand in her way because he knows best.

George's professional authority and belief in his superior knowledge extends into his personal life, motivating his extramarital affair, justifying the lies he tells his wife, and providing a way to excuse his absence from their home. George first uses his profession as a way to avoid his wife. After a full night of surgeries, he claims that he is too tired to listen to Corinne, who writes "I was irritated because I was sure he wasn't all that tired—surgery exhilarates him—he was simply putting the screen in place" (25). Corinne also uses the word *screen* to describe the way in which an office waiting room and receptionist separate George from his patients (190). George can use the office system to remove and detach him from the outer world, just like he can use the hospital and its demands on his time to hide himself from Corinne.

George's profession facilitates his affair throughout its course, even in Corinne's revision of it, as if she cannot even imagine a scenario in which George hides from her without the hospital as his refuge. In Corinne's first version of George's affair, a story she later retracts, George can be gone overnight without rousing Corinne's suspicions because of his job: surgeons often work long hours, and "He'd told me he had a twenty-four-hour shift at the hospital Friday" (35). When she writes about confronting him about the affair, he uses details of the shift, names of witnesses and times of arrival and departure, to substantiate his claims of innocence (45). This hyper-fictitious George

presents a fiction within the fiction Corinne uses to cover the real story (Douglas's fiction), and George's fiction takes place in the hospital.

George also requires his profession for his actual affair, the homosexual relationship Corinne cannot initially face; the hospital is the site of their meeting, and, not surprisingly, George's authority as a doctor in the hospital setting establishes the imbalance of power that defines the relationship. Corinne explains that George has an affair with a young laboratory technician he meets, of course, at the hospital. According to Corinne, George chooses his lover because the young man is intellectually inferior and emotionally crippled, an ideal romantic patient. Corinne explains that George's lover is "uneducated, limited, desperately, fatally flawed and wounded, ill, feeble—small," and George is "a doctor, after all. Doctors have chosen, to begin with, a profession in which they are always standing up, patients lying down; they are strong, patients weak; they know, patients are ignorant. Doctors have, by definition of their situation, to be in charge, directing" (59). A doctor has this power and authority because of the situation, the context, in which he is a doctor, but George takes his authority out of the doctor-patient situation and wields it in an interpersonal, non-professional situation. Corinne does not seem to distinguish a professional situation from a personal situation in this passage: George is always a doctor, and he will behave like a doctor during and after his shift.

George is not the first literary American doctor to bring his work home with him, so to speak; in Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper," the narrator's husband treats her like an invalid patient, marginalizing her by denying her identity as a wife, mother, and writer. According to this narrator, "John is a physician, and *perhaps*—(I would not say it to a living soul, of course, but this is dead paper and a great relief to my mind)—*perhaps* that

is one reason I do not get well faster” (32-33). The narrator can voice her concerns only to the dead paper, which she would have no living person read, because she would not challenge a doctor’s authority, even when the doctor is her husband. Her husband believes, and her physician brother concurs, that she is not sick, only temporarily depressed, and that she will improve with air, rest, exercise, and tonics. She disagrees, and thinks that excitement and work—writing—would help her (33). Her disagreement has no great impact on husband’s prescription for her care, so she hides from him. She hides her work like she hides her grief and pain, and rather than noticing her anguish and responding like a lover, her husband sees only symptoms and responds as a doctor.

Like Gilman’s John, George sees physical disease where there is only emotional pain. George decides to give his lover some of his family’s old, unused furniture and framed art, and he and his lover bring Corinne with them to set up the bed and hang the pictures in the young man’s house. Corinne describes the scene as if it were a dream—a dream featuring confusion and nausea as its dominant themes. On the way home, George asks her what is wrong, says she looks strange, and asks her if she is sick. She allows him to believe his faulty conclusion about the cause of her strangeness, saying “Maybe I am coming down with something” (76). George would overlook Corinne’s emotional pain, but he can only do so by mislabeling it as physical pain, a tactic with the added benefit of giving him the upper hand. If he reckoned with her emotional pain, he would have to face the injustice of his affair, she would become the aggrieved party, and he would lose; but if he can diagnose her, he can be the doctor, maintaining his position of power over her.

George ultimately reveals that such power plays, in which he forces his lovers into the subjugated position of patients, cannot last and do not serve his interests for long. Before George and Corinne talk openly about the affair, George explains to her why he wants to help the young man. He thinks that by listening to the young man and gently guiding him through his many personal and financial problems, he can improve the young man's life. Corinne writes, "George is arrogant, I suppose—or used to be. Thought he could sew up a soul as he sews up a split lip" (65). After he tells Corinne about the affair, and Corinne encourages him to be with his lover if doing so will make him happy, George finds that he cannot help the young man come to terms with his homosexuality. Eventually George's lover ends the affair, moving to another city where no one knows that he is gay so that he can start over without temptation. In his depression, George immerses himself in his work, falling back into the only set of rules he knows (122-3). He must return to the professional situation that has made him accustomed to wielding power over other people. His attempts to re-create this imbalance of power in his personal relationships alienate him from his wife and cause him all the more grief when his lover leaves him. These damaged relationships are proof that the physician's role is based on a fiction of omnipotent benevolence, a fiction that hides the truth of the individual doctor's humanity and capacity as a moral agent.

All of Douglas's doctors struggle with the truth that their abilities can never live up to their socially-constructed roles, and as her novels deal more intensely with the difficulty of presenting the truth, her doctor characters must confront more directly the truth of their identities and the grief caused by their failure to conform to impossible standards. Dr. Sykes cannot raise Mr. McGovern from his deathbed or alter the course of

Charlotte's childbirth any more than Dr. Shields, decades later, can restore Kate's youth. By the time Sunny's gallstones force her onto the operating table, her doctors cannot live up to the expectation that a doctor should have the detachment of a scientist and the gentle heart of a saint; they err on the side of the scientist, and although their emotionless demeanors horrify Wilburn, they save Sunny's life. These doctors do seem to have some limited power over life and death, but this power has a deleterious effect on the moral capacities of Lucas and George, two doctors who marginalize others because they have internalized the physician's authority and apply it to people who are not their patients. Lucas acts against his profession's prohibition against harming others because he cannot stand to lose control, and because a doctor knows best, he assumes that death is also preferable to powerlessness for the other inmate-patients of the home. George also thinks he knows best, which is why he takes a lover who needs his help; he rationalizes the effect of this affair on his wife, ignoring her capacity for pain because her emotional pain is not within his jurisdiction as a doctor. But George hurts Corinne, Lucas murders his housemates, Sunny's doctors dehumanize her, and Sykes and Shields fail to heal their patients: none of these doctors live up to the standards society sets for them because none of them can. They are, first and foremost, human beings with flaws and complications, despite the fact that the medical profession and society's expectations of the medical profession would have them be gods. Douglas's novels must expose this lie to approach the truth of what makes a man who he is.

## CHAPTER THREE

### Douglas's Evil Entrepreneurs

#### *Introduction*

Entrepreneurship is dangerous business. The entrepreneur's only real contribution to the economy is a proposition, a theory about how to acquire money from investors, and then, from consumers. Without investors to fund the manifestation of his idea, and without buyers to pay for that manifestation, the entrepreneur's business remains in his head with his imaginary profits. And yet, despite the insubstantiality of their services, entrepreneurs and their dreams drive the American economy, for good or for ill. In Douglas's novels, successful entrepreneurs do whatever they can, often acting viciously or at least uncharitably, to transfer that danger to the investor and the consumer, lying and swindling and stealing to generate profit for themselves and, possibly, for their investors. Perversely, these fictional businessmen justify theft and exploitation by appealing to some form of humanistic idealism: *Apostles of Light's* (1973) Howie Snyder believes he does God's charitable work, *The Rock Cried Out's* (1979) Lee Boykin professes allegiance to the working man, and *Where the Dreams Cross's* (1968) Floyd Shotwell claims to act out of romantic love. These men rob, rape, bully, deceive, or otherwise dehumanize anyone from whom they can leverage a dollar because they have so completely internalized an economic system predicated, at these points in history, on one man's gain at the expense of another's loss. Douglas does not, however, create a fictional capitalism that overpowers and indoctrinates the individual; on the contrary, her

plots and narrators hold these villains accountable in a manner that contradicts any supposed primacy of an economic system over human free will.

Capitalism and entrepreneurship are certainly not peculiar to the modern era, but the concept of capitalism as a dehumanizing system is fairly specific to the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1930), Max Weber argues that modern capitalism differs from traditional capitalism in that, in the modern era, “Man is dominated by the making of money, by acquisition as the ultimate purpose of his life. Economic acquisition is no longer subordinated to man as the means for the satisfaction of his material needs” (53). Weber presents a capitalism that supersedes human need and individual humanity. The system, for Weber, no longer has any regard for the people within it. Weber’s capitalism is a thing unto itself, above and beyond human lives like an absent deity.

Postmodern depictions of capitalism and capitalists differ from Weber’s 1930s model; according to Linda Hutcheon, postmodern texts expose capitalism as a cultural construct (Politics 2) rather than a system by which man is “dominated,” in Weber’s terms. From a postmodern perspective, people make the economic system, so the individual is empowered to replicate or to resist the system. Douglas’s entrepreneurial characters are not mindless drones in the capitalist machine. Rather, they are thinking, feeling people with all the moral responsibilities or any other characters in any other lines of work. They can choose to behave charitably and equitably, but often, they do not. Instead, they choose to acquire wealth above all else. Douglas presents entrepreneurs who create social and economic situations that place other characters at a disadvantage. These characters enact the social construction of capitalism on a small scale, but they

participate in the power politics of the wider world, replicating in microcosm the brutal power wielded by the haves over the have-nots.

But the driving force of entrepreneurship, development, does not necessarily pose a threat to the dignity of individual human lives. As Lyotard argues in his *Toward the Postmodern* (1996), development “is an entity no less abstract or anonymous than nature or history, and it maximizes the effect described by Arendt: setting things in motion totally and mobilizing energies” (159). Development is not abstract—it can be observed—and it is not anonymous, not guided by any capitalist invisible hand; rather, individual hands of entrepreneurs and employees, buyers, sellers, and consumers drive development. Lyotard argues that development does not act against the buyers, consumers, or workers: “We all share the ideology (but is it an ideology?) that we must, at any cost, develop and complexify in order to survive. The enemy is not human, but rather, entropic” (159). Development means motion, and without motion, humans and humanity stop growing.

Despite the necessity of development, constant work robs individuals of the life of the mind made possible by idleness. Lyotard argues that development acts against the human spirit. He states, “The faculties of judgment, imagination, and paying homage to birth again are more solicited than suffocated in this process, but solicited in the suffocating busyness of performativity: a busy survival” (160). Development, then, is crucial to the aims of postmodern humanism because development alone ensures human survival; however, development’s postmodern repercussions, a crushing mass of quotidian tasks and manufactured needs, prevent individuals from realizing or even recognizing the mind and the soul.



Busy working and directing others to work to make money to spend on things he does not need, the capitalist entrepreneur devalues charity; indeed, he must act uncharitably to maximize profits to expand his business to serve the community, and is this not all in the service of the common good? To what extent can the capitalist entrepreneur be judged as a moral agent? According to Alasdair MacIntyre, in the liberal tradition, “Every individual is free to propose and to live by whatever conception of the good he or she pleases, derived from whatever theory or tradition he or she may adhere to, unless that conception of the good involves reshaping the life of the rest of the community in accordance with it” (336). Unfortunately, however, no man is an island, particularly in the marketplace. Business decisions always have a moral component, because, in the free market, “Only those who have something to give get. The disadvantaged in a liberal society are those without the means to bargain” (MacIntyre 336). This winner-take-all game, in which the winners are wealthy at the expense of losers with little to no chance to improve their odds, continues to shape the modern concept of the human subject. MacIntyre’s claim is that individual psychology and the emerging liberal tradition came together to define “a new social and cultural artefact, ‘the individual’” (339). This individual is not an individual as citizen or as enquirer or as property owner—he is simply his self (339). The liberal tradition, then, requires each subject to formulate his own morality which he uses to make decisions about his position in society, which is where he exercises his moral code.

The entrepreneur is a morally ambivalent agent. He locates himself in relation to society as the chief beneficiary of the capitalist economy, making money at the expense of those who provide him something to sell to those who have money to spend. He

declares his own subject-position, and he must objectify others as potential gains or expenditures in order to do so. And yet, without him, the employee lacks the wages necessary to participate in the economy at all, and the customer is deprived of whatever goods or services the entrepreneur would have provided. Douglas presents some moral entrepreneurs, men who make their living because they provide quality goods and services at reasonable prices without taking unnecessary advantage of any employees, competitors, or customers. Douglas also, and more frequently, presents capitalist villains who exercise their power over others in the course of their business.

Ellen Douglas's almost Dickensian criticism of entrepreneurship is not rooted in Josephine Haxton's experience with the businessmen—and they are men—in her life. Haxton's father was a civil engineer, building roads in Hope, Arkansas until he had trouble with the Huey Long administration when the family moved to Alexandria, at which point he started selling gasoline wholesale (Tardieu 23). Haxton's father's entrepreneurship, then, was probably more like Ralph McGovern's gentlemanly construction business in *A Family's Affairs*: Haxton's father and Ralph McGovern were both civil engineers working for salaries on contracted jobs, and both entered into businesses related to civil engineering. Haxton's husband Kenneth went into a business in a manner similar to Cornelia's husband John in *Can't Quit You, Baby*. Kenneth Haxton, like John, fought in World War II (32). After the war, Haxton took over his family's clothing store, converting a corner of it to a book shop (35). The fictional John owns a bookstore. The novels show neither Ralph nor John lying, stealing, or exploiting the disadvantaged to succeed in their businesses; likewise, none of Haxton's extant biographical information indicates that anyone in her life made unethical business

decisions. Her predatory entrepreneurial characters do not spring fully-formed from her personal history. Rather, they serve mostly as literary devices, characters motivated by greed to create obstacles for the more sympathetic characters.

Douglas's depiction of the sins and pitfalls of mid-twentieth century Southern entrepreneurship are best interpreted as literary condemnations of the flaws of that system. According to Elizabeth Tardieu, Douglas avoids generalizations in her creation of characters (38), and "Douglas is adamant that readers not mistake her fiction for a realistic, definitive picture of life since she believes the world and one's experience of it are anything but objective and complete" (39). Almost all of her entrepreneurs are despicable or foolish, but Douglas does not attack real-world capitalism or real-world capitalists. She is not a propagandist. These characters criticize the social institutions that maintain the disadvantages of the black, the poor, and the elderly, and the entrepreneurship of Douglas's time and place is among those institutions.

#### *Entrepreneurship in A Family's Affairs*

Douglas's first novel, *A Family's Affairs*, depicts entrepreneurship as corrosive to the human heart. This novel's failed entrepreneur, Charlie, steadily sabotages himself by attempting to become the business man of his fantasies. Charlie develops a kind of pathetic Stockholm syndrome in relation to the business world through which the novel portrays the brutality of business. Although Charlie's ventures always fail and he never makes enough money to support his wife financially, or even to move her out of her mother's house, Charlie remains devoted to the entrepreneurial spirit, a spirit he identifies as antithetical to charity and to faith in one's fellow man.

According to Charlie, a good businessman cannot trust others. Charlie believes that Ralph enabled Alderan to steal from him by failing to sufficiently guard himself against theft. According to Charlie, “Ralph has always been as naïve and trusting as a preacher. If he’d had his mind on his business, he’d have kept his warehouse locked up” (168). Blaming Ralph for being victimized empowers Charlie: if a man can control whether or not he is robbed, Charlie can make sure that he is never robbed, and he can do so by never making himself vulnerable through an act of charity. For Charlie, business requires the entrepreneur to be conservative in his gambles on people.

The entrepreneur must, however, be liberal in his gambles on ideas and ventures. Charlie criticizes a local banker by saying that bankers “don’t seem to realize they’re in the business to lend money. You’d have thought I was asking him to do me a favor, instead of putting him in the way of a little business” (172). His imprecation against the banks is ironic considering his earlier condemnation of Ralph. Charlie believes that anyone with capital should risk it on him, but no smart businessman would trust anyone else, even a family member. He fails to recognize the fact that his own formulation of business’s rules creates an entirely unfair system, one that would benefit him, if no one else. His imaginary business rules are the polar opposite of the business world in which he fails to operate, a world that seems forever slanted against him.

Almost a decade later, Charlie reiterates his frustration with the banks’ failure to take the risks that would have made him rich; doing so, he inadvertently reveals the entrepreneur’s predatory, or sometimes scavenging, nature. As he tells Anna,

You know I’ve always been willing to take a long chance, to gamble on a good thing. Well, the chances that were there for the taking in the early thirties would have made your mouth water—the property to be had for nothing but taxes. And I *knew* it. I knew things had to go up. They

couldn't go down any more. Why, if I could have gotten hold of a little capital then, right now I'd be the richest man in Mississippi. But all I could do was manage to keep eating. Bankers! (265-66)

If the property was available for only the amount of back-taxes the owners owed, the property was probably seized by the government to pay the owner's unpaid property taxes; the purchaser would only be able to gain through the original owner's incredible loss.

Douglas revisits this predatory real estate practice in *Can't Quit You, Baby* (1988). Her narrator asks the reader, "Are you aware that fortunes have been made everywhere in the United States (are still being made) simply by paying certain taxes which illiterate or careless landowners are unaware that they owe? That ownership of land is quietly transferred every year to people who pay the taxes on other people's land?" (113). In *A Family's Affairs*, Charlie bemoans the fact that he was not in a position to benefit from these losses, rather than decrying a financial system that pits neighbor against neighbor. He recognizes, if only implicitly, the iniquities of the system, but he remains devoted to it.

Charlie wants so badly to succeed in business that the stress ruins his health, but he remains obsessed. The narrator explains that he has lived his life twice:

Once, working at the succession of jobs that had kept him alive, and again, anxiously, day and night, in waking and sleeping dreams of wealth and power that kept his slow mind whirling at a speed too great for it, his heart beating wildly for the success of one doomed venture after another. (297)

His first life is the life of his daily job. Charlie's work apparently lacks the esoteric knowledge and social prestige typical of a career, and he does not care enough about these jobs for the narrator to refer to any of them as a profession, or even to name the jobs specifically. He works for others who make the money and maintain the power that he dreams of in his second life, the life of his mind. This passage explains why Charlie fails,

why his money and power are relegated to his imagination: his mind is too slow to keep up with his imagination. He cannot intellectually realize his capitalistic desires. And yet his desire is too strong to abandon. This endless yearning and social impotence become his most pronounced personality traits, the traits that define him as an individual.

His unfulfilled desire for entrepreneurial success leads him to have a heart attack, and his convalescence brings him back to his mother-in-law's home and within the spatial and social parameters of the novel. After his wildly-beating heart fails (298), he struggles with restless depression. Sis tells Charlotte that Charlie invents implausible stories of investment opportunities, "And all the rest of the time his eyes, as if they didn't have anything to do with the rest of him, are saying, 'Please pretend you believe me'" (303). His infatuation with money-making schemes is, late in his life, rendered all the more pathetic because of his continued devotion to a system that nearly kills him.

Carol S. Manning argues that, through his final, failed efforts to provide for his family, Charlie "attain[s] a degree of nobility through [his] belated efforts to assume traditional responsibilities" (121). However, according to Charlotte, Charlie never assumes the responsibility of providing financially for his family, although Charlie identified this as his duty to his family and tried, in his way, to fulfill it. In the last months of his life, he "talked seriously and intensely" to his daughter's new husband about "his schemes, of buying into the tow-boat business, of renting a farm, of contracting to cut timber for the paper mill in nearby Natchez," because, according to his daughter, "He knew he was going to die, and he was thinking only about Mama and Billy and me. He never could succeed, everything's an awful mess, worse than if he hadn't tried to do anything, but that's what he was thinking about" (342). The narrator gives

Charlotte the last spoken word on Charlie's final attempts to provide for his family, and Charlotte sees a loving man who leaves behind a mess, despite his good intentions. Anna identifies Charlie's dying efforts as successful, but not in an emotional way, not in the traditional masculine financial way. Anna thinks, "He used on dying all the courage and intelligence and self-denial that he could never find to use in his life. This one time, he was a success" (342). According to Anna, Charlie succeeded in sparing his children the pain of watching him die, but at no time does he succeed in the ventures he believed to be the most worthwhile, so he never achieves the status of the wealthy patriarch that he so desired in life.

His obsession with entrepreneurial schemes deny Charlie the opportunity to assume the responsibilities expected of a white father and husband in the early twentieth-century South. This gendered dimension of the acquisition of wealth supports the central focus of Douglas's next novel, *Where the Dreams Cross*, in which the capitalist enterprise frames an exploration of power and domination.

### *Entrepreneurship in Where the Dreams Cross*

The conflicts that drive *Where the Dreams Cross* come from perversions, unnatural or uncanny violations of social expectations and norms. This novel's protagonist, Nat Turner, violates expectations of normal womanhood. Nat first appears in the novel during a conversation among the women of her home town, Philippi; in this conversation, Sunny Griffith, the wife of Nat's cousin and only friend, Wilburn, defends Nat against gossip about her age-inappropriate sexy clothing and her mythic exploits as a college student (4-5). Also, the narrator describes Nat's appearance in a way that highlights her abnormality as perceived by the (male) observer: "Striking, she was, in a

sexy, but at the same time almost ugly way—any man could see that” (14). The villains of the novel also pervert cultural expectations, but they do so within the frame of capitalism, violating the ethical norms of the business world. These entrepreneurs—Morris Shotwell, his son Floyd, and Floyd’s friend General Pershing Pruitt—make their money by creating situations in which they can control other people, either through extortion or theft, and they rely heavily on social rules, familial connections, and knowledge of unethical (but not uncommon) business practices to manipulate their victims into these positions of powerlessness.

Morris can assume a position of power over Nat’s Uncle Aubrey because Morris understands the doctrine of planned obsolescence, the twentieth-century industrial policy of making products that are built to fail and thereby artificially inflate demand. Aubrey owns a hardware store, but his entrepreneurial failures come as a result of his attempts as an inventor. He designs a device that would extend indefinitely the functional life of the washing machine. Miss Louise suggests to Aubrey that he sell the design to a manufacturing company because doing so seems like the fastest way to profit from the invention, but Aubrey seeks Morris Shotwell to invest the capital in a factory. Instead, Morris patents the machine in his own name (133-135). Aubrey reacts with moral outrage at the thought of a common corporate policy that acts against the normal trend of development:

Anyhow [Morris] did show the plans to this fellow, and he says that it’s common knowledge among the big companies that everybody turned down a design like this about three years ago. Too good, he said. Like the light bulb that never burns out. They want a machine designed so that it’ll wear out in five to seven years. Planned obsolescence, they call it. So Morris and Green say the way to make money on it is to *threaten* to build the plant and then to sell the rights to the highest bidder for the purpose of *not* producing it. (135)



Aubrey subscribes to a theory of capitalism in which a man can achieve the mythic status of “Henry Ford” or “Chrysler or DuPont” (135) by inventing and creating products people want or need, then selling those products at the highest price the market will bear, a price commensurate with the quality of the product. Morris, however, understands and operates within a different system. In the early twentieth century, a business could still profit handsomely from the simpler tactic Aubrey values because most people, at that time, did not yet own washing machines or cars or radios. American consumption doubled from 1945 to 1960 (Packard 10); the middle class bought washing machines, so the washing machine manufacturers had to find a way to manipulate buyers into buying machines despite the fact that they already had them. The Depression and World War II, combined with a social shift toward a commodity culture, changed American capitalism significantly.

During the Depression, Americans necessarily abandoned the conspicuous spending of the 1920s, and the decrease in demand for consumer goods exacerbated the failing national economy. In *Ending the Depression through Planned Obsolescence* (1932), Bernard London characterizes planned obsolescence as a humanly-constructed stopgap against economic chaos (5). London’s was a very complicated plan requiring the government to partially reimburse people for the outworn goods they turn in at the end of period specified at the time of purchase, then requiring manufacturers to reimburse the government for the cost of those items (6-8). According to London’s plan, consumers would need to replace the items they had turned in, increasing demand, which would stimulate manufacturers to increase supply, which would increase jobs and lower unemployment (19). Other economists and industrial executives in the 1930s also argued

in favor of planned obsolescence on the same grounds, insisting that the economy would fail unless products were made to wear out faster, forcing their miserly customers to abandon frugality and spend more money (Packard 58-9). The United States government did not, of course, implement any of the plans London advocates, but private industries deliberately produce goods that will wear out more quickly, effectively manipulating consumer demand within the free market without needing government intervention.

By the 1960s, the decade in which *Where the Dreams Cross* is set, manufacturers, salesmen, and entrepreneurs routinely relied on planned obsolescence to turn citizens into consumers, convincing people to buy items they should not need to buy. In *The Waste Makers* (1960), Vance Packard describes the American economy as a “hyperthyroid economy that can be sustained only by constant stimulation of the people and their leaders to be more prodigal with the nation’s resources” (6). Packard describes the ways manufacturers fool customers into wasting their small purchases, mostly through faulty design: potato peelers are discarded with the peelings because the manufacturer painted the peelers the color of the peelings; paste is wasted because the paste brush cannot reach the paste at the bottom of the jar; lipsticks are thrown out with half an inch remaining at the bottom of the tube, inaccessible because the tube cannot be screwed all the way up (47-48). As for more durable goods (although the phrase “durable goods” can hardly be understood without irony in such a context) like washing machines, engineers need only replace one small part of the design with an inferior part: “The life of a product tends to be as long as that link, especially if that link is difficult to replace” (Packard 57). Aubrey was the designer of a hard-to-replace link in the design of the washing machine, but his was a part that would cause a washing machine to last longer. Unfortunately for Aubrey,

GE and other corporations profit most from machines that break down in a few years.

Morris understands, but Aubrey does not, and Aubrey's ignorance and his trust in Morris make him vulnerable to exploitation.

Aubrey's naiveté and his social and familial entanglements expose him to victimization by more savvy entrepreneurs. Uncle Aubrey should keep the invention and Morris's investment secret, but Nat and Aunt Louise both tell Wilburn about it (74, 85). Floyd also knows (85). Miss Louise urges Aubrey to play this business game by the rules of the genteel Southern lady, and if she was empowered to make business decisions, Aubrey would lose as surely as if he played poorly by business rules. Louise tells Aubrey to do whatever Morris advises so as not to offend the Shotwells, saying "Think how nice Floyd has been to Nat this fall. And all those lovely tomorrows and that delicious sweet corn Morris brought you last summer. Why, they're old friends of the family" (137). Allegiance to friendships, to garden vegetables and traditional manners, is ridiculous in the context of mid-twentieth century business.

General Pruitt, the local racketeer who helps Floyd steal from Morris, can manipulate Miss Louise because she values traditional Southern social customs over such unladylike traits as shrewdness, caution, and prudence. The General wants to see Aubrey's machine, so he needs to convince Miss Louise that he is trustworthy. After a conversation in which he establishes his kin ties to the area and, remotely, to Miss Louise, she asks him what he does for a living. If he told her he was a gambler and a wholesale illegal liquor salesman, she would probably send him away from the store, so he tells her, "you might call me a money man. Always willing to take a chance on a fellow's making a good crop," and "I'm an independent operator" (219). Miss Louise confuses family

with business, and Louise reveals this confusion by moving rapidly from a desire for guidance in business to clarification of The General's lineage in one line: "'Well, heaven knows I wish *I* had someone to rely on for advice in all this confusion,' Miss Louise said. 'Did you say your grandfather was old Winston Pruitt?'" (221).

The General's investment in deceiving Miss Louise pays off when she tells him the entire story of Aubrey's machine and their financial and legal entanglement with Morris Shotwell. She even shows him the model machine and tells him that it works (227). Under his new guise as her friend, confidant, and advisor, he even convinces her not to tell her husband about their conversation because, as he says, "That way, I can approach him in my own way and I'll be able to have a more objective type conversation with him. You can comfort yourself that you've been a great help to him this afternoon" (228). Later that night, the General steals Aubrey's model and locks the door after him, and he does so quickly and easily because of the information he got while convincing Miss Louise to trust him, and because he had left the door unlocked (229). Miss Louise does not realize her error until Nat returns. She only tells Nat about the General's visit because she thinks the General can help convince Aubrey that, in a fit of senility, Aubrey stole his own machine and hid it from himself (238). Miss Louise's comical moment of clarity returns to the notion of family: "And I thought. . . If he isn't a Mayersville Pruitt, who is he?" (239). The General recognizes that Louise operates in an entirely social and familial idiom, and he uses her allegiance to the traditional Southern set of social rules to manipulate her and her husband into a powerless position.

Similarly, Floyd manipulates Nat, using Aubrey's machine and his financial security as leverage, and Floyd does so because he has thoroughly confused affection

with his desire to dominate Nat. For Floyd, sex, love, and money are all the result of his power over others. Floyd first rapes Nat because he wants that power over her, and he comes to extort sex from her because he believes he has genuine affection for her, but he cannot make himself vulnerable by risking rejection. The only way he can conceive of a relationship with her is to make it part of a business transaction, and only he can set the terms of that transaction.

The narrator establishes Floyd's confusion of money, power, sex, love, and domination first to explain Wilburn's mistrust of Floyd. Before Nat comes back to town, Wilburn sees Floyd at a bar, and Floyd, drunk, tells Wilburn that all women are whores, although some do not get paid. He tells Wilburn that he had just offered a woman five hundred dollars to marry him, but she refused (77). Floyd, before he meets Nat, seems to believe that romantic relationships are contractual, and that he should be able to negotiate a marriage like any other purchase.

However, he does not attempt to initiate his relationship with Nat as if it were a business deal. He courts her, taking her dinner and football games, but they struggle for power over each other, and eventually, when he finds that he cannot control her, he rapes her. After they leave Sunny and Wilburn at the hospital, they return to the hotel, and when they return to the hotel, Nat believes that "she would not have to spend the night alone" because "she was sure she had Floyd under control again" (197). But then, partly asleep, Nat calls Floyd Wilburn, and then Floyd becomes violent, shaking her, commanding her, "Wake up [ . . . ] You *will* wake up. See me" (203); he tells her he loves her, threatens to kill her, and rapes her (204-205). Their relationship was founded on a

fight for control, but after he rapes Nat, she would no longer willingly give him an opportunity to try to make her behave the way he wants her to behave.

At first, Floyd first wants to keep his relationship with Nat separate from his plan to get a controlling interest in the washing machine her Uncle Aubrey invented, but after he rapes her, Floyd has to use his knowledge of Aubrey's debt to Morris in order to re-assert his power over Nat. When Floyd first starts dating Nat, the General proposes to Floyd that "a happy arrangement can be made," regarding his feelings for Nat and Nat's coldness toward him, "Taking in considerations of the washing machine, as well as everything else" (121), and Floyd violently disagrees. But then, after Floyd rapes Nat and the General steals Aubrey's machine, Floyd offers to give the machine back to Nat if Nat will sleep with him for six weeks (252). He tells her, "All I want in the world is you," (252), and "You might get to like me better" (253). This arrangement of sexual extortion is not at all incompatible with Floyd's concept of love. For Floyd, a man's power and money and a woman's sexuality or love are fungible assets. His is an extreme and demented version of patriarchal capitalism which, even in its less prurient incarnations, frequently works against women or anyone less socially empowered.

Most of Douglas's socially vulnerable characters wholeheartedly ascribe to the same cultural systems that place them at a disadvantage, and the more wolf-like entrepreneurs can manipulate them by paying lip service to these systems and traditions. Louise is so limited by the social borders of her family and her kitchen that she cannot conceive of a world that operates by different rules. Her ignorance prevents her from protecting her niece or her husband from victimization at the hands of men who do play by rules she cannot imagine. These rules require the player, if he is to succeed, to assert

his will over anyone who has what he wants, whether it be money or sex. However, to gain the trust of people like Louise, a player has to pretend, like the General does, that he, too, believes in her ideals of family and tradition. Floyd goes so far as to delude himself, claiming that he seeks to control Nat because he loves her. He claims the ideal of romantic love because otherwise he is only a rapist. The entrepreneurial villain in Douglas's next novel, *Apostles of Light*, also claims to love the elderly woman he comes to victimize, although he claims, as does the General, a filial love for his aging cousin. This ruthless businessman, Howie Snyder, appeals to the common good, as if profits are only secondary to his quasi-religious mission and his devotion to his family.

#### *Entrepreneurship in Apostles of Light*

*Apostles of Light* depicts a Southern reaction to intrusion of the market into elder care, a set of practices previously confined to the home and family (and made possible by the desperate economic situations of black laborers who were willing to care for elderly middle-class people in exchange for unconscionably low wages). As Tardieu says of *Apostles of Light*, "Many of the characters are a newer generation of Southerners who follow the American Dream of wealth and comfort rather than specifically regional aspirations" (92). The villain and entrepreneur of this novel, Howie Snyder, is one such character, capitalizing on the growing national trend toward institutionalization of the elderly. The trend may be national, but the narrative betrays a markedly Southern slant against the trend, creating a worst-case scenario nightmare version of the nursing home. According to Patricia Yaeger, the South is "made hysterical" by change, and Douglas's novels are about those changes and the attendant hysteria (7). The intrusion of the free

market into what was previously a family matter, care and treatment of the elderly infirm, is an example of such hysteria. This hysteria, however, is not without reason.

Douglas wrote *Apostles of Light* during a decade of legislative investigations that revealed widespread corruption and crime in the burgeoning nursing home industry: according to Joseph Giacalone, nursing homes were frequently opportunities for managers to embezzle federal funds allocated to residents whose inadequate care was provided by unqualified, sometimes abusive staff (27). These revelations cast serious aspersions on a fairly new development in American history, the institutionalization of the elderly. The elderly did not largely start to fall under institutional control until the nineteenth century, at which time poverty started to be associated with moral failing rather than accepted as a normal outcome of aging; the elderly poor were relegated to the almshouse and the hospital, relying on religious charities or, after passage of the Social Security Act and its Old Age Assistance program in 1935 and changes to Medicare in the 1950s, on the state (Giacalone 21-24). As American culture came to accept the routine institutionalization of the elderly and as the American government made more funds available for care of the elderly within institutions, nursing homes grew into a profitable industry. Before 1940, no data is available to indicate how much money Americans spent on nursing homes, but in 1940, that figure was \$33 million. By 1950, expenditures on nursing homes rose to \$187 million, and by 1965, \$1.3 billion (Giacalone 24). Treatment of the elderly infirm follows a trajectory not uncommon in Douglas's depiction of historical change, a movement from the family to the marketplace.

Even before the family home becomes a nursing home, the novel indicates that the younger generation of Clarke family thinks of the previous generation in terms of



dollars and cents. Martha's family and the omniscient narrator refer to the family gathering at the beginning of the novel as a "conference" (5, 8), and the content of their conversations—Medicare (5), hospital bills (5), real estate values (6, 15, 22), stock market losses (19)—demonstrates that managing the elderly is primarily a business matter. Albert and Newton stress financial practicality when they argue that Martha's cousin second-cousin Howie should move in and rent a room (21, 24).

The family ultimately agrees to allow Howie to turn the Clarke house into a nursing home for two reasons: money and Martha, but the narrator addresses money first, and the discussion of the financial benefits for the family is twice the length of the discussion of Martha's feelings. In a remarkably bitter tone, the narrator presents details about the cost of the household on the family:

[. . .] while all the cousins were reasonably well off, this outlay was beginning to be an inconvenience. And larger expenses faced the family in the future. The house would soon need a new roof and a coat of paint, the stove and refrigerator had both seen their best days, insurance and tax payments would be coming up in January. It might turn out that George would have to forego buying Louisa the fur coat he had planned to give her for Christmas, and that Albert would not be able to make his annual hunting trip to Alberta for moose. (61)

These two men would not sacrifice a fur coat and a hunting trip so that Martha, the woman who raised them, can continue living under her own new roof with her own new appliances. The pettiness of the price of her autonomy casts her nephews as immorally greedy and selfish.

Lucas believes that this selfishness and greed are a new development, and that they compromise the humanity of these money-makers. After he tells Albert, George, and Newton about Howie's mismanagement of the people staying at Golden Age, Lucas goes to Martha's room, where he sees pictures of George and Albert as children. Lucas

wonders, “*What happened to them? Have they all, for some mysterious reason (a new virus first identified in the last third of the twentieth century), become less human?*” (209).

Ample historical and literary evidence indicates that greed is not, in fact, a twentieth-century phenomenon, but the commodity culture that justifies trading a fur coat for an elderly aunt’s comfort is, perhaps, peculiarly American.

Howie profits from peoples’ losses by silencing and marginalizing them, but he acts in accordance with a moral code assembled from an American desire to get rich and an ostensible Christian desire to help others, whether they like it or not. According to Tardieu,

Howie craves power and money. Americans often pursue prestige, wealth and a comfortable life: “the American dream.” Modern literature reflects this longing, in texts as varied as Gloria Naylor’s *Linden Hills*, Arthur Miller’s *Death of a Salesman*, and Richard Wright’s *Native Son*. Like many in the United States, Howie creates the illusion of wanting to help others, of following a Christian path, in order to disguise his true motives of selfishness and greed. (94)

The successful businessman must be certain that his gambles and manipulations serve the greater good, even if they hurt individual people, and the greater good is progress, expansion, and efficiency. As Howie says to Lucy, he believes he is doing “the Lord’s work” (142). Reid and Williams call this Howie’s “armor of piety” (58); he deflects Lucas’s accusations of sexual misconduct by aligning himself with the will of God, and he equates doing God’s will with his own financial gain.

Howie gradually turns a practical, supposedly familial living arrangement into a profit-making venture; the narrator implies that he did so deliberately and dishonestly while wearing his piety costume. The narrator says that Howie “may have had [the plan] in mind from the day he first thought of moving into the Clarke household” (53). Howie

tries to convince Martha's nephew's son Newton, who is also the executor of her estate, that he needs "a little more authority" (54), and he does so by casting aspersion on her sanity. He assures Newton, "I don't mean to imply that she's crazy" (55), then proceeds to do exactly that: he cites evidence that she overexerts herself dangerously in the garden. Howie demonstrates that Martha needs care from three adults—himself, Lucy, and Harper—and argues that those resources could generate profit if he were permitted to convert the house into a genteel sort of nursing home (55-58). This gentility is more a matter of appearances than actual social grace: the entrepreneur, devoid of all but the most self-serving ethics, readily exchanges others' free will for the trust of his investors.

Howie is more concerned with the appearance of cheerfulness and medical efficiency than with actually creating a happy and medically sound environment because creating such an environment costs money, but the appearance of that environment makes money. He boasts to Lucas about the benefits of segregating and medicating the very sick residents in the back of the house, saying "You've got to hide the sick ones and the crazy ones, if you want the relatives to stay happy" (88), and "I can see the place just as quiet and orderly—peaceful. Why you ought to see what they've done up at Whitfield with drugs! Everybody in the place as happy as a kid with a sugar tit" (91). And when Lucas complains to George, Albert, and Newton about Crawley abusing a patient and administering injections of water rather than narcotics, Howie convinces Martha's nephews that, to prevent a scandal that might cause residents' families to withdraw their parents (and their money) Howie should slip tranquilizers into Lucas's food (218).

Beyond the novel, drugs are the modern institution's primary method of pacifying its wards; drugs keep overhead costs low by relieving the institution of various

rehabilitative therapies that might help to control pain and reduce the behavioral symptoms of dementia. In “The Loony Bin Trip,” (1990), Kate Millett explains the use of narcotics and other drugs in mental institutions. She believes that the problem is not the institutions: the problem is

the drug—the drug as healer, as official method now—is insidious, the true evil. Generally the drug is advocated because it pacifies and makes work easy for the aides and nurses, the guards. Actually it does a great deal more, all very contrary to sanity; it induces visions, hallucinations, paranoia, mental confusion. Nothing could be harder than to maintain sanity against the onslaught of a drug. (100)

But the entrepreneur who abandons his own humanity to justify the sins that make the profits will have no compunction about robbing others of their own humanity.

Accordingly, Howie makes his work easier by pacifying his patient-inmates, drugging them to cover the magnitude of their suffering for the benefit of those who provide his pay check. He lies to his investors to cultivate the trust that he needs to gain complete control over the home’s income potential.

The entrepreneur requires relationships with others to provide him the capital he needs to generate more wealth, but the rules of the entrepreneurial game require a solitary, egoistic independence because even his relationship with investors is an exploitative one in which the idea-man trumps the money-man. Howie perceives Newton’s reluctance to allow him to turn the Clarke house into a profit-making nursing home, so he brings the conversation from the way his proposal would benefit the family and the community to the way he, himself, is the boon: ““I want you to consider one more angle before you go, Newton,” Howie said. ‘Just so you’ll have all the facts. And that angle is *me*’” (59). Howie describes himself like he would describe any of the other parameters of his proposal, as an angle, a bit of business jargon. He describes himself as one of the facts,

an incontrovertible given, a constant in the equation. Howie cares about numbers, and he numbers himself among the numbers, considering himself to be an angle more than a man. His devotion to the money-making enterprise warps his capacity as a moral agent, an individual subject with the ability to honor others' humanity.

The individual entrepreneur, like Howie, who defines himself as an agent of development by devoting himself to the acquisition of capital will disrupt the family, usurping its authority in the pursuit of money. In *Apostles of Light*, this disruption is ironic because Howie only has the opportunity to develop Martha's home because of his familial relationship to her. Douglas's next novel, *The Rock Cried Out*, shows that the family is an entirely inefficient organization for the allocation of power and the maximal exploitation of property for the generation of capital. The entrepreneurial villain of this novel, Lee Boykin, exploits his own family members in his attempt to make money from their religious beliefs and practices, and he exploits his newfound friends' political ideals to get them to help him. The novel's other entrepreneur, Leila, is more ambiguous and certainly more sympathetic, although she also lies to the ones she loves for profit.

### *Entrepreneurship in The Rock Cried Out*

Women in Douglas's novels seldom control enough capital to qualify as entrepreneurs, so they tend to be victims of the more ruthless money-makers; but when a woman does play the business game, she must do so without seeming to do so, using traditionally feminine behaviors and motivations to obscure her goals. Douglas's entrepreneurs are all men except for Leila in *The Rock Cried Out*, and she only succeeds in business because she acts surreptitiously, hiding her profit-making efforts under the pretense of her femininity. Leila, however, is far from the conniving entrepreneurial

villain depicted in Douglas's earlier novels like *Where the Dreams Cross* and *Apostles of Light*; she does use cunning to win the upper hand over socially and economically marginalized characters, but her motivations more easily inspire the reader's sympathy. Unlike Floyd's demented love transaction in which he extorts affection from Nat, Leila acts out of a very human sense of self-righteousness, as the jilted party in a fairly unconventional relationship.

The secrecy of Leila's entrepreneurial scheming protects her from seeming too greedy, too driven, or too motivated, all characteristics that would both cast aspersions on her femininity and perhaps draw attention to her real motivations. The protagonist-narrator Alan learns from his Uncle Lester that his Aunt Leila was the actual mastermind behind the lease of farmland to the government for the naval space observation station, the SPASURSTA; far from being common family knowledge, Leila's role in acquiring the family income comes to Alan as rumor. Alan assumes, although he was never told, that his uncle Lester had persuaded the family to lease some of the land to the government to build the space surveillance station (30). Further obscuring Leila's hand in the transaction, Lester casts Leila as a behind-the-scenes operative, manipulating social and business connections to her advantage: "A little push here and a nudge there—you understand. I think at the time she had a friend from Jackson who was on the Senate Armed Forces Committee" (151). He simultaneously downplays Leila's control over the deal, saying that she "lucked into it," that "She happened to hear about it and think about the landing strip" (151). But then Lester admits that Leila made this deal with the government through concerted effort, saying "she really knocked herself out to get it"

(152). Lester vacillates between Leila's passivity and her strength, indicating that Leila effectively veils her capacity as an active agent in the acquisition of wealth.

She also effectively obscures her motivations, although she does not so easily hide the feelings that feed those motivations. Lester believes that Leila's intent for leasing the land to the government was, in part, malicious. Alan expresses his concern for Sam's feelings at the time of the deal, mentioning that Sam had been renting that piece of land for years before the SPASURSTA leased it. Lester says that "Leila had it in for Sam along through there, God knows why. (Although if I were you people, I'd have it in for the Danielses permanently.) And she was right about this in the long run. The government pays us a helluva lot more money than Sam ever did" (152). Lester approves of Leila's unfair business deal because it results in more income for the farm, and because he approves of any misfortune that befalls the Daniels family. Lester, of course, does not know that Leila and Sam had an affair, so he cannot imagine that Leila's malice could have resulted from Sam's rejection of Leila. Sam also believes that Leila leased to the government land he considered his out of revenge (236), but Leila denies the accusation, saying that she loved Sam (237). Through this denial, Leila obscures her motivations from the narrator and the reader as well as from her lover and her family. The female entrepreneur remains enigmatic.

By contrast, the male entrepreneur of the novel, Lee Boykin, is a bald-faced businessman, cast as a heartless moneymaker from his first entrance. When Alan first sees Lee in the Calloway's store, he describes Lee's hippy attire and his discordant "alert, brisk, heads-up walk of the born salesman" (94). Later, as Alan's jealousy increases, he calls Lee "that bastard, that shithhead, that *salesman*" (173). Lee's identity is bound up in

selling and making money. Defining himself in this way ultimately helps him meet his definition of success: Alan, as narrator, mentions that Lee succeeds in business, parenthetically revealing that “(He’s probably still a car freak and, now that he’s made it, spends Saturday afternoon washing and waxing and polishing his BMW and has an antique Chrysler or a reproduction Cord in the garage)” (173). Although Lee’s clothing, hair style, and drug use may seem to set him apart from mainstream social conventions, Lee fully embraces the strictures and dictates of capitalism, but as a self-proclaimed antiestablishmentarian, his entrepreneurial schemes must at least pay lip service to leftist political idealism.

Lee first explains his plans during the dinner party at Alan’s cabin, and his explanation blends ideology with money as if the two were inseparable for him. He begins by talking about the unheard voices of white and black pulpwood cutters, then expresses his desire to “get next to” the hostile Calhoun brothers he met in the store that day because “They can get me in with the blacks. And I know a couple of Daddy’s old buddies on the white side. I want to work up a couple of specs. A picture story, first. I know I could sell that without any trouble” (110). Lee also thinks he might be able to turn the picture story into a book, “But it would have to be worth my while” (110). Later, when Allan and Lee discuss the direction in which they should take the picture story, Lee exposes his priorities, saying, “Listen, let’s just begin taping and photographing and, most important, looking for money, and decide later how to structure the pieces” (144-45). Looking for money is most important. The money will decide the focus of their work. As Alan becomes more aware of Lee and Miriam’s mutual attraction, Alan describes Lee’s talk about the project as “making money and offing the system at the



same time” (173). Lee sells the project to Alan and Miriam as if it were a new concept, a way to generate capital in the service of great ideals, when in fact, Lee’s capitalism is an older variety, not dissimilar to the Protestant work ethic and the Calvinist belief that those who work in the service of God will be prosperous on Earth as well as in heaven.

Alan’s Uncle Lester’s concept of capitalism and development is ostensibly Christian. When he tries to convince Alan to pursue a stable and sensible career, he argues that Alan’s family has wasted their land by failing to fully exploit it. He draws on the Bible for support, saying that when the family failed to impose businesslike order on their frivolous farm, “they took their talent and buried it” (157). For Lester, an acolyte to the new bureaucratic-industrial-corporate god, failing to develop any property or leave any dollar unearned is a sin.

The economy in which Lester operates is predicated on a postmodern capitalism in which authority is so diffuse that no employee works for a boss; rather, everyone serves the system. According to Lyotard, in the postmodern economy, the machines hold the data, and the experts have access to the machines. These decision-makers are no longer the “traditional political class, but [composed] of a composite layer of corporate leaders, high-level administrators, and the heads of the major professional, labor, political, and religious organizations” (14). Lester recognizes and appreciates the complexity of this composite authority structure, and he preaches its gospel to his nephew.

Lester values this new business world for its efficiency. He appreciates the work of entrepreneurs, although he is not a risk-taker. He works for J.C. Penney’s, and as he praises the corporation to Alan, he says, “The complexity of an organization like that, the brains it takes to put it together, to keep it operating at peak efficiency, to make the

decisions that keep you competitive, to place everybody where he makes his best contribution. . . “ (151). Where a Calvinist may have valued providence, Lester praises the order established by a complex retail establishment which can effectively quantify the employee’s talent and see that he does not bury it, assign him to his calling and his identity, forestalling uncertainty and doubt.

Lester sets up a binary scheme in which eccentricity, frivolity, play, and chaos act against security, work, order, efficiency, and J.C. Penney’s. He tries to convince Alan of the dangers of his family’s “eccentricity” in keeping the farm, saying “that putting landscapes and queer old houses ahead of security can destroy you” (153). Alan counters with the argument that the world is eccentric now, but Lester maintains that “Penney’s is not. [. . .] You think you’re superior. But nobody’s superior to disaster. And Penney’s is the kind of shelter that can bring you through in disaster” (154). Lester’s conservatism values order, and Penney’s is orderly, an efficient corporate machine. As he advises Alan, “Here’s a way to think about it: it’s possible to keep everything quiet and orderly, to survive, but it takes a constant serious effort—effort to hold off—*chaos*. Yes. That’s not overstating it. You have to think of your life as a holding action, a drawing in, a defense” (155). Lester, certainly, is justified in feeling that he needs to defend himself against chaos. The death of his daughter in a car accident disrupted the natural order of life in which children bury their parents, not the other way around. His love for his family made him vulnerable to the pain of losing his daughter, but through his work as a cog in the Penney’s machine, he is less a father and more an employee.

Working is safe, and accumulating money is safe. Any other way of spending time or making a living, Lester defines as “playing,” “Playing with Chickasaw or

weaving or whatever strikes their fancy. I'm not talking about farming, you understand. Farming can be a business—as orderly, almost as safe as Penney's. I'm talking about how the way you people deal with Chickasaw exposes the dangerous—*dangerous*—weakness in the family character” (157). For Lester, the family cannot be trusted with its own property because the family fails to be commensurable to the force of development. Not surprisingly, when characters value their families and loved one's over the pursuit of profit, like Alan values Miriam or like Nat values her aunt and uncle, they put themselves at the mercy of those who will develop whatever they can snatch from anyone too wrapped up in his own ideals to miss.

Entrepreneurship, then, is the boogeyman of Douglas's novels and, frequently, the source of evil in the construction of her villains. When entrepreneurial characters succeed, they do so because of what they steal, cheat, or extort from characters already weakened by other social forces, characters marginalized because of their age or their sex or their allegiance to dying social graces; they act out of a sense of entitlement to all money, anyone's money. Like Tweet says in *Can't Quit You, Baby*, “The devil thinks all the gold in the world suppose to belong to him” (44). Those characters who fail in business, like Charlie in *A Family's Affairs* or Aubrey in *Where the Dreams Cross*, do so because they remain one step behind the winners, not necessarily because they threaten a system predicated on greed. Greed is the cornerstone on which the Southern economy stands in Douglas's novels, and the entrepreneurs who drive that economy can be defined by the intensity of their greed and their correspondent failure to treat others charitably or equitably, all the while believing that their actions support the common good of development or progress. The next chapter will further explore Douglas's treatment of

unfair economic systems as she presents them through her depiction of hired help, the peculiarly Southern farm laborers and domestic workers whose exploitation enables those entrepreneurs and others in the privileged classes to live much more comfortably than they could in the North.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### Douglas's Harried Hired Help

#### *Introduction*

In Douglas's novels, the hired help—domestic and agricultural workers employed by families, not corporations—get paid very little money to do work that their employers could easily do themselves; the result is a job that is the opposite of a profession, a job without esoteric knowledge, and therefore without prestige, and with very little market value. If the hired laborer internalizes her work, defining herself according to her occupation, she would devalue herself. In Douglas's fiction, domestic and agricultural laborers explore a variety of strategies to resist the dehumanizing effect of their jobs, and although these strategies are often effective, they sometimes alienate the employee from the employer to the extent that the employee denies the employer's humanity. This alienation of wage-earner from wage-payer is further fraught, in Douglas's novels, with racial and gender tensions: the white male ideal of self-sovereignty could erode the self-worth of a black man working on a white man's land or in a white woman's house. Most of Douglas's domestic servants are black women, people already doubly marginalized in a segregated Southern patriarchy. These women struggle to maintain a sense of personal power without getting fired, constantly reevaluating the parameters of their relationships with their employers to try to reach an equilibrium that recognizes their intimacy without pretending equality.

Douglas's preoccupation with the political and social dynamics of the white employer-black employee relationship is typical of Southern literature. Patricia Yaeger

proposes that “Southern literature is most itself [. . .] when it examines genealogies of labor—foregrounding the extraordinary costs to African Americans of lives trapped between the spaces of domestic and agricultural labor” (12). Accordingly, the only novel that lacks domestic or farm workers is *A Lifetime Burning* (1982), the novel that could be most easily transposed onto any other American geographical space. Hired domestic workers were a peculiarly Southern phenomenon in the mid-twentieth century because, in the North, factories, hotels, and restaurants would have offered higher wages for labor considered to require few skills and no education; Northern women could not afford the sort of household help Southern women took for granted as part of their middle-class, white entitlement (Harris 9),

Hired help in the Southern, Jim Crow, twentieth-century capitalist economy were caught in a paradox: one must work less and earn less money to keep themselves employed, because if their labor cost too much, they would lose their jobs; at the same time, they had to work more and earn more money to make their non-working dependants less of a burden, allowing them to pursue educational opportunities that would afford them better economic stability in the future. According to Lyotard, in a capitalist system that demands efficiency and production, the laborers to work less and earn less money to keep production costs low, but they also must work more to make the non-workers less of a burden. The Marxist metanarrative dictates that this paradox would lead to revolution, but the lives of individual human workers show that the Marxist metanarrative does not reflect their realities (*Postmodern Condition* xxiv). Douglas’s novels present Socialist reform and unionization as misplaced movements in the South, illustrating their failure to take hold in the population that stood to gain the most from their implementation.

### *Labor, Religion, and Manhood*

Black labor is the ignored social context in which religious debates take place in the early twentieth century South as depicted in *A Family's Affairs* (1961). George, the man Ralph McGovern hires to handle the dogs on a hunting trip quotes the Bible in conversation with Ralph. In return, "Ralph looked sharply at him," and says that George sounds like a preacher (55). George says that he does, indeed, sometimes preach during the winter (55). Ralph's sharp look responds to George's scriptural literacy, knowledge that Ralph himself might consider more his purview than George's because of George's race and class. The rest of this scene is dominated by a conversation between Ralph and Dr. Bondurant, a Presbyterian elder who wants Ralph to fill a spot on the board of elders left vacant by a minister who preached "evolution and mongrelization and the social doctrine" (57). Black voices interrupt their conversation—first "two Negro cooks on their way to work" who quickly fall silent when they see the two white men talking (58), then George, who the narrator refers to as simply "the Negro," alerting Ralph to the approach of his hunting party (60). If 1920s Southern Presbyterian theology and Ralph's spirituality are the foreground of this scene, the racial division of labor is the background.

As a counterpoint to the religious dimension of black labor and servitude, Ralph's brother-in-law Alderan is the only white hired hand in any of Douglas's novels. Alderan's sins in the strict Presbyterian context of Ralph McGovern's household—his adultery and his theft—are, according to his brother-in-law Charlie, the result of the loss of pride resulting from working for Ralph. Alderan's situation is unique among Douglas's depictions of hired; here is a white man working for another white man. Charlie says that Alderan "hated it from the beginning," and that he probably began his

affair with a teenager “just to prove he was a man” (266). Charlie also speculates that Alderan stole from Ralph out of spite (266). The narrator does not directly report Alderan’s thoughts or words—everything comes through Charlie—so the novel shows that Charlie interprets Alderan’s actions based on his own white male sense of pride and propriety.

The white Southern male ego in Douglas’s novels cannot cope with the concept of being directly in another man’s employ. In *The Rock Cried Out* (1979), Alan tells Dallas about working in the sugar refinery in Boston. Dallas objects to the notion of being told what to do by a foreman rather than objecting to the unsafe factory conditions or the labor itself, saying “I wouldn’t work for no man” (76). Tellingly, Dallas says he would work for no man, rather than saying he would work for no one or nobody. He cannot even conceive of working for a woman, or of a woman participating in the male economy of labor.

Leila posits that men exclude (white) women from typically male labor, even when women are willing and able to do the work, because a woman’s success would expose a man’s failures. Leila tells Alan and Miriam that, after her divorce, she was unwilling to ask her ex-husband for alimony, and she first wanted to try to make a living on the family farm, “But Daddy was as bad as Uncle D. Neither of them wanted a working farm. [. . .] And, furthermore, they didn’t want a woman meddling in their business, finding out they were hopeless incompetents” (133). Leila believes that her father’s and uncle’s sexist refusal to let her work on the farm results from their own insecurities, their recognition of their lack of dedication to the farm. This lack of dedication is a serious threat to their sexuality in a culture that defines a man by his work.



*Can't Quit You, Baby* (1988) shows that the cultural definition of a man as a hard worker is independent of race. The black community defines Tweet's husband by his work ethic, and, simultaneously, defines him by his race, and, inversely, defines his race by that work ethic.

After the custom of the time and place, neither Julia nor her husband Philip are called by their names among their friends and relatives. Philip is called Nig (I reckon because he works like a nigger, Julia said, when she and Cornelia had got well enough acquainted for Cornelia to ask), and Julia is called Tweet. (6)

Tweet treats Nig's work ethic like a personality trait when she explains why she chose to marry him: "He was known around our part of the country as a steady man, a worker. Maybe not smart, but steady, quiet, always done the right thing. After my grandpa got feeble, he was one of the men would come around sometimes and lend us a hand" (59). Work ethic, stability, and morality are all Nig's characteristics that make him seem like a good husband, a masculine man according to cultural standards.

Cornelia refuses to call Julia or Philip by their nicknames, telling her husband and Tweet that she "certainly can't call him *Nig*" (6). Perhaps she refuses out of a sense of propriety, but she must feel uneasy about using any part of the word that, from the mouth of a white woman, is most commonly an insult. The word "nig" reappears when the narrator tells the story of Cornelia and John's early courtship. As they leave on a date, Cornelia's mother is flustered and alarmed by her daughter's burgeoning love affair with a man she considers to be "Shanty boat Irish!" (79). At that unfortunate moment, the maid slips and breaks a lamp, and Cornelia's mother's reaction is far out of proportion to the damage: "You're fired, she screamed. You clumsy. . . stupid. . . *nig*" (79-80). Cornelia's refusal to say "nig" is a rejection of her mother's racist, elitist mistreatment of

her black domestic servants, but Cornelia also rejects Tweet's husband's masculine identity, an identity formulated by his culture's praise of his exemplary, manly work ethic. This paradox is typical of Cornelia's discomfort with her cultural position as a white woman in a society that debases black men and women as it devalues their labor. Reform movements of the early twentieth century improved the economic and cultural positions of lower-income white laborers, but both unionization and socialism often failed to account for black Southern labor, an issue Douglas explores in *The Rock Cried Out*.

### *Labor and Identity in The Rock Cried Out*

Douglas's *The Rock Cried Out* dramatizes the failure of the Marxist metanarrative, and its incarnation in the socialist-influenced labor movement, to accurately describe the intricacies of human life and human identity. One of the main exposition devices in *The Rock Cried Out* is the transcript of an oral history, gathered as part of an investigation of the failure of the labor movement among Mississippi Delta tree cutters. When Alan, Miriam, and Lee record Calhoun Levitt's oral history, Levitt's little narrative, his own personal account of individual lives during the labor movement struggle and the Great Depression, trumps Lee's attempt to subsume Levitt's life and experience under the Marxist grand narrative. Lee directly asks Calhoun to tell him about pulpwood cutting and unionization, and Calhoun gives a short answer about the dangers of cutting pulpwood and the immorality of the pulpwood industry (204), but then he undermines Lee's approach, saying

Oh, there's a lot to talk about, a lot to talk about. But not about pulpwood or unions or the I.P. No, that's not important. We need to start way back during the Depression, because the truth is that your family is involved from then on. Everything that happened in my life after—let's see: 1933, I reckon—involved your family in a distant kind of way. That is, not that

they were around or that I saw them, but that certain things happened in connection with them that influenced the way my life went after that. (205)

Calhoun can only talk about his role in the labor and civil rights movements if he explains his motivations, and he can only explain his motivations by telling the story of Lee's grandparents—his grandfather, the itinerant preacher (213) and labor organizer (214) who was murdered for voicing his Communist Christian convictions (221)—and parents—his mother who sold information about her husband's Klan activities to the Anti-Defamation League and tried (and failed) to leave the money to a black congregation whose church the Klan burned (228-29). Calhoun has to go back two generations and explain the details of the little narratives that feed into his own narrative to trace the causality of his actions. The concept of alienated labor does not explain the meaning of the events Calhoun describes. The most descriptive, most accurate narrative is not the grand narrative, but the little personal narratives.

But when personal narratives conflict, the truth is more difficult to determine; the grand narrative insists on positivism and objectivity, and this artificial order can be comforting for its stability and certainty. An exchange between Alan and Miriam expresses this conflict: Miriam thinks that she and Alan should support and comfort Lee after he has heard Calhoun's "crazy story," because Lee needs "a world of objective reality for his work," to which Alan replies, "Fuck objective reality" (239).

Objective historical reality beyond the novel indicates that larger labor unions with the most bargaining power were not usually responsive to the needs of black workers; a project like Lee's would likely reveal many white union members' indifference or even hostility toward black laborers. Furthermore, black laborers, if they were unionized, would be unlikely to feel a sense of unity with white union members.

Labor struggles had long been racialized; for example, black members of the Brotherhood of Timber Workers in Louisiana in the early twentieth century were perfectly happy with a segregated union, but they wanted their own executive board (Kelley 26-27). Racial tensions in the labor movement intensified with the rise of the Civil Rights movement. White unionists fought against black civil rights in the 1950s, which “dramatized the profound difficulty with creating effective class-based action in a society that historically had accepted race as the primary social determinant” (Norrell 251). For example, blue-collar union men were a main buttress of support for George Wallace and his vehement segregationist politics (ibid). Exclusion from the symbolic brotherhood of fellow laborers would likely have had the effect of making black laborers even more alienated from their work.

The Daniels men are not union members; rather than feeling alienated from his labor, Sam seems to define himself as part of the land he works, despite the fact that the land is not his. Sam goes to prison for damaging the SPASURSTA and injuring the men who manage it after Leila leases the land Sam considers to be his, and while he is in prison, neither the McLaurin family nor Sam ever doubts that he will return to Chickasaw after his release; they all consider him to be a part of the place he works. As Alan explains, “Sam had ‘learned his lesson.’ They still needed him—no one they had hired to fill his place as caretaker, forester, and guardian had ‘worked out.’ As for Sam, he would never have thought of going anyplace else” (18). Sam’s identification with the land makes him vulnerable to exploitation because he does not own it; Leila can take it from him, and he will still always return to it. However, his commitment to the farm also

imbues his labor with purpose and ownership, empowering him because he chooses to live and work under those circumstances.

Commitment to the land and the family that owns it has afforded the Daniels family with more freedom of occupation than one might expect. The Danielses have made themselves indispensable for generations despite the rigidity of their pride because of the flexibility of their labor. According to Noah, ever since the Voice of God spoke to his grandfather, the Daniels men have made their living by bricklaying, preaching, nursing, sharecropping, beekeeping, and dancing (184-87). Every new member of the family chooses his expertise, giving himself the freedom to come and go as he pleases, although Sam and Noah choose to stay.

But the Danielses never move beyond the status of hired labor because they behave as if the money-makers play by their rules: they rely on promises, not contracts. Noah tells Alan, Miriam, and Lee that he had accepted a promise from Alan's old Uncle Dennison that Dennison would give Noah the revenue from any next oil well discovered on the farm, but Noah never asked for a contract, and Dennison never fulfills his word. Noah also says that Old Man Dennison had promised Noah's father sixty acres of the farm, but no one changed the will or the deed (189-91), so Leila is free to lease out some of the land Sam considers his. Sam reacts violently, and this reaction indicates the erosion of a traditional value among hired black workers: when the white employer lies, steals, or cheats, the employee would forbear.

Noah, Sam's father, explains why forbearance was a virtue for generations of black slave labor, if it is no longer. According to Noah's narrative account of his life, God told Noah's Ibo grandfather how he and his descendents must live and work:

And [the Voice] then say, “Regarding your seed, they shall be a stranger in a land ain’t theirs and shall serve them, yeah, wait on ‘em, and they shall afflict ‘em four hundred years, and *that nation*” (talking about your great-granddaddy and all, Alan) “*That nation, I’m gon’ judge ‘em.* And afterwards you gon’ come out with great substance. *Rich,*” he say, “*Rich.*” Talking about *us*, his children, his seed. (183)

For Noah, the slave had to forbear and labor, not to remain safe or to earn his way into heaven, but because forbearance will lead to later wealth, and that reversal of fortune will include hardships for those who formerly exploited their labor. Biblical language and a conviction of God’s involvement in his affairs lend Noah’s story its authority. Religion and theology are strong currents in the philosophy of labor among Douglas’s black male characters.

Some of Douglas’s white characters are aware of the religious or moral implications of their economic arrangement with black laborers, but white employers’ moral reckoning with an unfair system seldom results in more equitable treatment of their employees, economically or socially. Rather, when white characters consider their black employees, they simply feel uncomfortable. More often, the white employer avoids thinking about the black employee’s life beyond the kitchen or the field. The black employee, then, can respond to the white employer’s apparent apathy or lack of empathy through a variety of coping mechanisms ranging from outright hostility to more subtle tactics like time theft. This dysfunctional dynamic of white discomfort and black resistance characterizes the relationship between employer and employee in *Can’t Quit You, Baby*.

*Domestic Work in Can't Quit You, Baby*

Cornelia, the white employer, is uncomfortable with many aspects of her relationship with her black housekeeper; she seems to feel guilty for her privilege or for her power over Tweet. She invents reasons to ask for Tweet's help, rather than giving orders or even simply asking. As Tweet explains, Cornelia is "Always polite. Likes to cook. Makes an excuse if she ax you to wait on her" (102). The narrator uses Cornelia's words, or lack of words, to create a sense of her uneasiness with the imbalance of power between her and Tweet.

The post-bellum South followed similar labor arrangement patterns as the antebellum South, but use of the words "master" and "slave" are neither appropriate nor accurate after the passage of the fourteenth amendment. The Civil Rights movement of the mid-twentieth century further complicated labor terminology: what does the white housewife call the woman who cooks and cleans for small wages? The very self-conscious narrator of *Can't Quit You, Baby* expresses this confusion and discomfort:

But—servant? Mistress? They would be uneasy with these words, and so am I. The servant might quote the Bible: And the last shall be first, Lord. Yes. As for the mistress, the sexual connotation might drift across her mind—she's still happy to be her husband's lover, his only mistress. Of anything else she'd avoid the implications.

So, let's settle for housekeeper and employer. (5)

Admitting her position of power would be tantamount to admitting her oppression of the woman who cleans her house, so Cornelia cannot classify herself as Tweet's mistress. Likewise, if Tweet were to call herself a servant, she would have to somehow reckon with subservience.

Southern culture had not truly reckoned with a black woman's status as a white woman's paid servant because the actual strength of these women, historical and literary,

conflicts with the powerlessness of their labor. According to Trudier Harris, American society, through its politicians as much as through its literature, pigeonholes and thereby marginalizes black women by defining them according to types such as the mammy<sup>1</sup> or the unwed mother, but “one of the roles in which the black female character may be displayed in significant complexity—that of domestic, maid, or worker in the white woman’s house—is often missing from lists of types” (4). This complexity is the reason that the domestic servant is not a type, but the mammy is. A mammy character loves the white woman’s children as if they were her own, while the non-mammy maid or cook has her own family to support, like Tweet does. This sort of character would have conflicts to resolve: in her own home, she is a breadwinner and a contributor to her household, but at work, she is a servant and therefore a lesser being than the woman who pays her meager wages. Cultural recognition of this conflict would necessarily expose the moral implications of the economic system in which a woman like Cornelia only occupies the more prestigious, more comfortable class because a woman like Tweet is forced, economically, to condescend to dirty work.

The narrator explains the Southern institution of having household employees as part and parcel of the wealthier class. Of upper-class Southern women like Cornelia, the narrator says,

Their cooks lived in or came to fix breakfast before the husbands left for work, but after the housemen (often the cooks’ husbands) had slipped in at dawn while the family was still sleeping to lay and light the fires and carry out the ashes. This way of enjoying life was possible in smallish cities and towns in the South even for people of “moderate means” (as we used

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<sup>1</sup> In American literature and film, the mammy figure is an asexual, noisy, gruff, but affectionate and devoted servant in a white household. Her love for her employers and their children was meant to justify her subjugation. For a comprehensive history and evaluation of the mammy figure and other black stereotypes from their inception to the late twentieth century, see *Ethnic Notions: Black People in White Minds*, dir. Marlon T. Riggs, California Newsreel, 1987.



to say) until a few years ago, because black servants could be hired for sweatshop wages and because public schools were almost as exclusive as private schools. Blacks went to their own schools—and not for long. (12)

The former paragraph focuses on the convenience of this economic situation for the white employers, supporting this section's argument about Cornelia's uncommonly good fortune, the pleasant order of her privileged life. The latter paragraph, however, shifts the focus to the impact of this arrangement on the black employees. Cornelia only enjoys her privileged life because her own cook earns the most meager wages and because she lacks the opportunity for a quality education which could enable her to work at a more fairly-paid job, or even a highly-paid and stable profession. Theirs is a zero-sum game: Cornelia can only live richly because Tweet is poor, Cornelia has comfort because Tweet does not, and Cornelia's class and status only exist in contrast to Tweet's. And yet, Cornelia believes that Tweet depends on her; the narrator says that Cornelia believes that people like Tweet—"purveyors of services of one kind or another"—rely on Cornelia, "upon her direction, but often, too, on her advice, her justice, her generosity" (15). But once cannot be charitable to the successful. If Cornelia is just and generous, Cornelia's employees would have to be thankful, would have to recognize that she is a good white person who cares about their welfare even though they are beneath her station.

As a rule, a black domestic servant must be silent and self-effacing to make the white employer secure in her beneficence and comfortable with the presence of a black person in her otherwise segregated home and life; this silence is a lie of omission, so a domestic worker committed to the truth must not follow this rule. The narrator believes that Tweet recognizes what she must and must not talk about with her white employers,

but that Tweet does not care. She refuses to silence herself, even if her voice threatens her work:

It amazed me, for example, to hear her speak so openly of Wayne Jones's outrageous behavior. How could she be sure a white woman would listen tolerantly? The answer, I think, is that she did not care. She had her requirements of herself and of an employer: She *would* speak about certain matters. If she got fired, she got fired. She'd always been able to find a job when she needed one. (97)

For Tweet, the job is less important than the stories she tells. The moral imperative to tell the truth supersedes any culturally-mandated bowing and scraping. Tweet resists the dehumanizing effect of her menial work by following her own personal rules rather than the rules of her occupation.

The time Tweet spends telling stories is time she is not working, which further offsets the insult of her low wages. Robin Kelley argues that time theft, doing personal, non-work-related things during paid hours to “resist being totally subordinated to the needs of capital,” is one of the strategies black domestic workers used as retribution for low pay (20). These workers may not be unionized, but their methods of resistance demonstrate that they can resist exploitation in creative ways that simultaneously declare and defend their humanity.

Another method of creative resistance among domestic workers was theft. For decades, employers supplemented low wages by simply giving used household items and leftover food to household servants. According to Trudier Harris, “Custom and informal arrangements where old clothes or food sufficed instead of or in addition to wages was a generally accepted pattern in the South, one which extended to other parts of the country as black women moved there to work” (9). Therefore, domestic workers were accustomed to regard small items of the employer's property and their own small wages

as fungible, even when employers stopped giving these items to their employees.

According to Kelley, pan-toting, the practice of taking home leftovers, was considered stealing by many employers, but workers considered it part of the moral economy: their low wages and the excesses of their employers entitled them to it. Employers who thought it was stealing used pan-toting to justify paying lower wages, but other employers considered it charity (Kelley 19). This inability of Southern white women to come to a cultural consensus about the status of pan-toting demonstrates these women's discomfort with discussing the way they pay their hired help. If they could not talk about the wages they paid, they probably questioned the morality of the economic system that brought those servants into their employ in the first place.

A lack of open communication among employers and between employers and employees created, often, situations of mistrust, as employees sometimes stole to offset wages they considered low but employers may not have consciously thought about.

Trudier Harris expresses the tension between a domestic worker and her employers when the employer suspects the employee of theft:

When the mistress suspects or accuses the black woman of theft, it reveals more about her than she is aware. An accusation of theft from the white mistress presupposes her awareness of some injustice in the relationship between maid and employer. Only by putting herself in the place of the maid (if only temporarily) can the white woman really feel that unfairness and injustice and, therefore, gauge the potential for stealing that might result. (19-20)

Cornelia, accordingly, is extremely uncomfortable about accusing Tweet of stealing a gold barrette that Cornelia found in Tweet's house, and the narrator, who has also identified herself as a white woman (38), shares Cornelia's discomfort. After showing Cornelia with the gold barrette, the narrator takes procrastinates for five pages before

finally showing Cornelia confront Tweet about having stolen it (249-54). Once confronted, Tweet supports Harris and Kelley's contention that theft is a domestic worker's way of resisting her marginalization, but Tweet demonstrates that such resistance is difficult and complicated.

Tweet's theft is evidence of her hate and her love. She tells Cornelia that she stole her gold barrette to remind her that she hates Cornelia, "in case I forget. She laughs. Sometimes I forget, she says" (254). Tweet spends so much time with a conscientious, if self-absorbed, woman who genuinely, eventually, wants to treat Tweet as a friend and an equal, or even as a superior, stronger woman, a spirit guide. Linda Tate treats the stolen barrette as a symbol of Tweet's need to hate those who have oppressed her. When Cornelia returns the barrette to Tweet, she recognizes that she cannot "dissolve the barrier between them" (Tate 58). Tweet does steal the barrette to remind her to hate Cornelia, but the fact that she needs a reminder indicates that she also cares for Cornelia, and if the barrier between them is insoluble, so is the bond.

#### *Domestic Work in Where the Dreams Cross*

Douglas's second novel, *Where the Dreams Cross*, presents a domestic servant character whose personal definition of morality contributes to her ability to resist the dehumanizing effect of her work without needing to hate her employers or white people generally like Tweet does. Clakey of *Where the Dreams Cross* values her job cooking for Miss Louise because Miss Louise shares her high culinary standards, which enables her to ignore Louise's patronizing racism. When Clakey cannot ignore Louise, she laughs at her, using humor to diffuse hostility, but never to the extent that she might truly threaten Louise's position of power to the extent that she might lose her job.

Miss Louise does not respect Clakey, but she respects Clakey's work, which is why Clakey continues to tolerate Miss Louise and work as her cook. As Clakey tells Sarah, "One thing about Miss Louise, she is naturally the kind of woman a good cook likes to work for. She takes pleasure in my work and that's the truth. She likes the old-fashioned way I run my kitchen and she don't stint ingredients. If a recipe says butter, she ain't going to say, 'Use margarine.' In fact, she wouldn't have a stick of margarine in her icebox" (267). In order to keep her job in that kitchen, Clakey must find a way to cope with Louise's thoughtlessness and arrogance, at least paying lip service to the social expectation that a black woman, particularly a black domestic servant, should obey and respect her employers.

Clakey plays by the rule of subservience only to the extent necessary to maintain the social status quo; through humor, she successfully navigates the dangerous territory between dehumanized subservience and open hostility toward her employer. According to Trudier Harris, a domestic servant "understands how she must maneuver in the home of the white family in order to salvage what portion of dignity she can, to resist depersonalization and dehumanization, and to exert a small amount of control within her confined space" (13). The narrator reveals to the reader that Clakey accomplishes this maneuvering by being cheeky without belittling Miss Louise. When Nat's aunt Louise initially protests adopting Nat and Anne Farish, she says that "if the Lord had intended me to be a mother, He would have blessed me with children," to which Clakey mutters in reply, "Sometimes both you all act to me like you don't know where people git 'em" (34). Then, when Miss Louise asks Clakey to repeat herself, Clakey amends her response to say that she is glad the children came (34). Rather than explaining herself or keeping her

comments to herself, Clakey gives Louise the opportunity to enjoy a joke at her own expense, but when Louise rejects that opportunity, Clakey appeases Louise.

Louise's failure to hear Clakey is typical of her tendency to ignore anything she considers unpleasant, anything that might lead her to question her beliefs or trouble her conscience, and Clakey's humorous resistance strategy relies on Louise's willingness not to hear her. Miss Louise pretends that Clakey cannot hear her or does not understand her when she complains to Nat and Anne Farish about a new preacher's support of integration. Anne Farish scolds Aunt Lousie for talking about race relations in front of Clakey as if Clakey were invisible, but Nat proposes that Clakey guards against her invisibility by withdrawing. "I think Clakey's kind of like me," Nat said in a dreamy voice. "She's not always sure she's present" (125). Clakey, however, says "I know when I'm present and I know when I'm absent. And Miss Louise ain't going to hurt my feelings, Miss Anne Farish. We use to each other's ways. Can't teach a old dog new tricks, you know" (126). Despite the clever ambiguity of this last statement, Aunt Louise objects to being the dog in Clakey's metaphor. She is not, however, so offended that she drops the subject. She asks Clakey to affirm that she would not want to attend Aunt Louise's church. Clakey agrees that she would not want to, saying, "I don't want to be no Episcopalian. I'm a Christian," and she smiles at Nat (126). Clakey's evasion would have been typical of black domestic workers at that time: according to Susan Tucker's oral histories, black women considered the topic of race relations and desegregation to be taboo in conversations with white women (6). If the household is to remain pleasant and untroubled, the real problems of racism and segregation cannot enter anyone's conversation unless the employer assumes that the black employee is happy being

ostensibly separate from but equal to the white employer. The black employee who wants to keep her job but objects to the employer's assumption can either flirt with rebellion with jokes or follow the rules of her position through silence.

Because Clakey does care about her employer's family, particularly Nat, she struggles to follow the silence mandate. During the weeks when Floyd extorts sex from Nat, Clakey notices Nat's depression, but the rules of hired help require her obedience and respect, not her care or concern. Clakey tries to tell Miss Louise, "I'm worried about Nat. She ain't herself," but Miss Louise "absently" replies only, "*Miss Nat*," and continues to complain about Aubrey's failing business (256). Clakey repeats herself twice, and casts some aspersions on Floyd's character, ("Miss Louise, don't you know he's a bad man?") when Miss Louise explains that Nat has been out all night with him (257). As Clakey tells her friend Sarah, Nat eventually confides in Clakey about her arrangement with Floyd, and when Clakey tells Miss Louise about everything but the sex, Miss Louise says to her, "It's not your place to talk about Miss Nat's friends in that disrespectful way" (265-66), and later, "Cook, mind your kitchen" (266). But Clakey cannot "mind her kitchen" because, as she tells Sarah, she loves Nat and has loved her since she was a child (266). Clakey's affection for Nat demonstrates the impossibility of relational and emotional segregation when blacks live and work cheek-by-jowl with whites, often watching white children grow up into adulthood.

Clakey is torn between her mandated silence and her love for Nat; this silence is for her Louise's benefit as much as for Clakey's. Twice, Clakey nearly tells Miss Louise that Floyd is extorting sex from Nat in exchange for the model washing machine the General stole from Aubrey, but she cannot bring herself to do so because, as she tells

Sarah, “I still couldn’t come out and say it. Too many years I got the habit of saying to white people—even her, stupid as she is—what they want to hear” (266). Clakey tells white people what they want to hear, which means that she never offends them enough to lose a job or endanger herself, but guarding the status quo also protects white women from truths they may not be emotionally able to face about the evils of the society they implicitly trust and support.

The psychology of this protectionism is entangled with the larger social history of black women, white men, and rape in the Southern domestic economy. Susan Tucker explains her inquiries into this topic:

What I came to see was that white women, indeed, usually denied every hearing of sexual exploitation of black domestics, either within the white home or by the men in the household. They denied it so completely that it was consistently a subject on which I got only a one- or two-sentence response that usually focused on men called “poor white trash.” It is my feeling that such a complete denial is probably linked to the fact that most women, to some degree or other, fear rape. White women were told as children that black men were their potential rapists and that only in aligning themselves with white men could they be spared. Thus, they did not want to believe white men known to them, or similar to the white men known to them, capable of such acts. Black women, of course, could not so absolutely deny such a problem. (17)

The white women Tucker spoke to could only conceive of a white man’s rape of his black maid if those men were white trash, the socioeconomic Other hiding his trashiness behind the guise of his whiteness. In this way, they distinguished these white rapists from the white men they loved and trusted, so that they could continue to feel safe, when in reality, some of the men they trusted exploited or attacked the women already marginalized as servants in their own households.

Interestingly, although Douglas’s black domestics are multi-dimensional enough to erode social stereotypes, none of her black domestics ever experiences rape by a white



male employer. To do so would expose and undermine the myth of the safe white man, and undermining myths like these is typical of Douglas's novels. Perhaps such a situation would be too trite, too simple for Douglas; her antagonists, even Howie Snyder and Tweet's father, always have some redeeming characteristic or vulnerability that saves them from becoming melodramatic villains. A white man who rapes his maid would be difficult, if not impossible, to redeem. Or, perhaps Douglas is among those white women who choose not to confront the ugly possibility of the white man as a sexual threat. Douglas's motivations notwithstanding, no such character appears in her novels. Some characters do, however, come close. Howie Snyder sexually exploits Lucy, but he does not rape her, and she is not the maid. Tweet shocks Cornelia with her story of her experience working in a diner owned by a white man. Tweet's job in the diner would have been as economically and socially normal as her job in Cornelia's kitchen: the most common service occupation for black women in 1930 was domestic service; the second most common was waitressing (Katzman 282). Historically, black women would often have been directly supervised by white restaurant owner. In *Can't Quit You, Baby*, a white man on whom Tweet relies for employment tries to seduce her, which is similar to, but still substantially different from, a white man raping a black woman who works in the privacy of his home. In *Where the Dreams Cross*, a rape does occur when Floyd rapes Nat, but she is neither black nor an employee. Clakey can face the truth of this white sexual violence, but she cannot force Miss Louise to confront it because, as Clakey explains, she cannot tell a white woman something that she does not want to hear, and Miss Louise's entire social belief system would be destroyed by such a revelation. But Clakey is too close to Nat to ignore Floyd's mistreatment of her, and she is ultimately

driven to use her dual citizenship in the black and white worlds to follow the demands of her conscience.

Because of this proximity to white people, the black domestic servant in a white household can occupy a liminal social position, in both the black social world and the white social world. In the preface to her collection of black domestic servants' oral histories, Susan Tucker wonders "about the role of the black domestic as a go-between or interpreter for both races" because "black domestics were probably the only group of blacks who went daily into the private homes of whites" (5). Clakey chooses to be such an interpreter, and this choice catalyzes Nat's emancipation from Floyd. Douglas also creates a situation in which Clakey can engage in dialogue with a domestic servant who rejects the opportunity to occupy this liminal social space, a man who chooses, instead, to resist the dehumanizing effect of his job by hating his employers.

This man is Mr. Royal, a sort of informal chauffeur and butler for General Prewitt, but also a successful small-business owner and farmer with two children in college. Clakey and Wilburn's cook, Sarah, tell Mr. Royal about Nat's dilemma, and they ask for his help (269-70). Mr. Royal offers to pass on any information about the machine, but he also mocks Clakey for wanting to help Nat, for breaking the rule of hired help that prohibits the black employee from caring about the white employer:

"So you want to know what's been going on between Shotwell and The General," he said, and, lapsing into a kind of mock Negro dialect, "Ya'll wants to he'p yo' white folks. Ain't that *fine*!" He paused. "It's none of my business what kind of relations you *darkies* have with white people," he said, "but there's one thing I have to say. You'll be better off if you stay clear of that mess. Let 'em stew in that pot they're brewing up for themselves." (271)

Mr. Royal, like Sarah and Clakey, works for a white man, but he distinguishes himself from them, calling them “darkies” who care about their white folks, who can, as far as he is concerned, “white-folks yourselves into the grave” (272). Mr. Royal copes with his subordinate cultural position by adopting an attitude of extreme opposition to his white employer and to all white people. Clakey’s position is more moderate, a *via media* in which she allows herself to extend charity and empathy to a white women while recognizing immorality, cruelty, and arrogance among other white people, including her own employer. Douglas’s first novel, *A Family’s Affairs*, ironically depicts a position on the opposite end of the spectrum from the position Mr. Royal adopts, an attitude in which the hired servant blinds herself to injustice and insult by loving her employer and emotionally investing herself in the family she is paid to care for.

#### *Domestic Work in A Family’s Affairs*

Later twentieth-century unease with an employee’s emotional investment in an employer’s family likely stems from the early twentieth-century pretense that a hired domestic worker should care for, even love, her employers and their children. In *A Family’s Affairs*, Charlotte believes in the Mammy myth. In her version of the story of Will getting lost, the cook, Alice Major, tries to convince Kate not to punish Will for failing to answer when she calls for him. Charlotte says, “(Alice Major always took our part, especially Will’s. He was her favorite)” (96). Because it is parenthetical, this utterance is nonchalant, as if it goes without saying that a paid servant should love the little white children of the household; also, its parenthetical status makes it seem unimportant, as if Alice Major and her feelings are unworthy of anything but a parenthetical reference. The narrator, however, is the real source of these parentheses,

using them to deliberately call attention to Charlotte's assumption that her mother's former employee loved her mother's children. Also, in Charlotte's version of this story, Alice Major's love for the children is more important to her than obeying her employer, as she presumes to tell Kate how to discipline Will. For Charlotte, a black hired domestic servant is such a part of the family that she need not strictly observe her employer's authority.

Lizzie, the Anderson's housekeeper in later years, further illustrates the difficulty of employer authority over domestic help. Lizzie, like Kate Anderson's daughters, usually pretends that Kate is still capable and indispensable to the household, despite her failing eyesight and memory, but one day Kate insists on going alone to the grocery store, so Lizzie tries to accompany her. Lizzie says that "Miss Sis say I got to keep you company," but Kate argues that Lizzie is "supposed to be working for *me*. I'm the head of the house," to which Lizzie replies, "Yas'm" (351). But despite her assent, Lizzie does not leave Kate alone, so Kate fires Lizzie. Lizzie replies, "Now, Miss Kate, you fires me one way, Miss Sis skins me the other. What I'm going to do?" (352). Both these verbs, "fire" and "skin," are potently violent, reminiscent of roast and flaying, cooking or torturing. Lizzie cannot, but must, obey the ostensible matriarch of the house she keeps and the daughter who actually hired her. The power structure of the employer-employee relationship has been complicated by Kate's advanced age, which somewhat demotes her from the position of authority in which she formerly treated her domestic servants with as much kindness and grace as the economic arrangement and racist social norms would allow.

The easiest way for a white employer to be kind to her black employees without violating the strictures of Southern racism is to infantilize them; in this way, she can avoid being cruel without recognizing them as coequal adults. But when Kate's age and infirmity frustrate her to the point of lashing out, she lashes out most at the people closest to her, her family and the people they hire to take care of her:

She had been served all her life by Negroes. Her relations with them had been like those with her grandchildren, whom she threatened in accents of mock ferocity to "snatch baldheaded," but who were not expected to pay the least attention. She had quarreled with them, made unreasonable demands upon them, and in response to their tolerance, had made unreasonable demands upon herself in their behalf. But now she hated them all. She would scarcely let her Negro practical nurse touch her, and was so rude that one nurse followed another in rapid succession until she was well enough to need only Lizzie, who refused to be insulted, and treated her like a wayward child. (371-72)

Kate's age makes her bitter, and her bitterness causes her to lash out at her family and at any help they hire. Ironically, Lizzie, the only help left, manages to maintain her dignity by using the same strategies on Kate that Kate formerly used on all her black hired help: Lizzie infantilizes Kate.

Pseudo-familial affinity and economic exploitation create a tension that holds families together in Douglas's depictions of the early twentieth century; when the pull of economic concerns overwhelms any holdover affections for an employer's family, the elderly spill out into market institutions like hospitals and nursing homes. In a conversation among Mississippi authors printed in *Deep Delta*, Rubin argues that nursing homes like the one depicted in *Apostles of Light* only became a socially acceptable way of dealing with elderly family members because middle class families no longer employed domestic servants for slave wages. Douglas, however, argues that "You can

keep your Mama whether you're rich or poor": the problem is human, humanist, before it is economic, capitalist (31).

### *Domestic Work in Apostles of Light*

Douglas's *Apostles of Light* further illustrates the extent to which caring for the elderly is a human problem, not an economic problem, through Lucy, Harper's granddaughter, and rejection of domestic service. Lucy initially worked as Elizabeth's sitter before she died, feeding and changing her, doing the same work a licensed practical nurse would have done if Elizabeth had been getting professional care (36). Howie suggests that Lucy go to nursing school to get licensed as an LPN because she could earn more money (38). A licensed LPN does the same work that hired help previously did, but they earn more money. Regulation, then, can serve the aims of humanism by providing workers with more financial stability and with a higher social status, if those workers can navigate the institutional obstacles of higher education and licensing exams, and if they can forego the income they would be earning during the time they spend in school. Perhaps Lucy could have navigated those institutional obstacles, but instead, she relies on Howie to navigate them for her, and he does nothing. When she confronts him about his failure to get her enrolled in a nursing program in Vicksburg, he says, "I'm beginning to think you don't need to go to that nurses' school. You've already learned as much here, probably more, than you'd learn up there," to which Lucy replies, "But I hadn't got no certificate saying so" (141). Rather, the main obstacle that separates Lucy from the increased prestige of an LPN certificate is Howie, a man more interested in profits than Lucy's self-sufficiency. Although she performs the duties of a nurse, Lucy

continues to care for the elderly as a domestic servant, earning a servant's wages with all the socially-ascribed dignity of a domestic servant.

Lucy has learned her disdain for domestic service from Harper, her grandfather, who exhibits different strategies for resisting the dehumanizing effects of his job. Harper objectifies the people who give him orders, alienating himself from them but not from the tasks he performs. When Louisa, whose husband partially supports the household, tells him that the front walk needs to be swept, he agrees, "a slight smile of acquiescence on the wide firm lips, the eyes as neutral as if he were looking at a natural phenomenon—a stick to be moved out of the path or a vine to be tied up to the trellis" (7). If he focuses on the work, he can ignore the people for whom he works without seeming to defy them.

Harper's polished manners are among the ways he can simultaneously prevent white people from seeing him as a threat and keep a steady job without debasing himself. His speech is his primary method of maintaining his dignity as an intellectual man while still appealing to whites who employ him: in a parenthetical statement, the narrator distinguishes Harper's speech from Lucy's: "(Lucy affected her own style of speech, as if in defiance of her grandfather's precise butlerisms)" (36). Characterizing Lucy's speech as an affectation implies that Lucy is disingenuous, pretending to be more culturally oppositional than she was raised to be as an act of rebellion against her grandfather. Harper's speech, however, is just as much an affectation as Lucy's, or as much as anyone's speech is an affectation, it being always a learned behavior shaped first by the family and later by social expectations. Lucy's "black" speech might be pretension, but so, by contrast, is Harper's speech, which the narrator later defines as "white."

If Harper affects the speech and demeanor of the dominant white culture, he does not do so out of any feelings of racial inferiority. In fact, he is proud of those physical features and intellectual capacities that he identifies as Mandingo, inherited from his mother's grandfather (107). Nor are Harper's manners and speech a mask that he removes at the end of the workday. In a chapter entirely devoted to Harper and his philosophy of survival, the narrator explains that

He had not gone much to school until he had moved into Homochitto from the country when he was ten, but his mother was a house servant; she could read and figure, and she helped him with his lessons and, looking to his future, taught him the manners and customs and speech of white people.

He had cultivated from the time he was fifteen (big for his age and with his voice already deep in his chest) the formality of manner and precision of pronunciation that made white people have an unusual confidence in him. It was as if they felt he was born to be a butler. (108)

Harper's mother taught him to behave like white people so that he would be less visible, less offensive to members of a dominant culture that, too often, lynched, murdered, and imprisoned black men who were too visible, who failed to conform to white social conventions or to white expectations of black social conventions. Harper's white manners might have called too much attention to himself if he had used them to secure an advanced, formal education, and had become a lawyer, or a doctor, or a writer, but Harper is safe because he is a butler. He uses his white manners in the service of white households, and his presence in those houses ensures his safety.

Harper's manners would have inspired "an unusual confidence" in white people because his self-imposed aristocratic bearing raises the social esteem of the people for whom he works as it hides or excuses the oppression inherent in the master-servant employment system. In the mid-twentieth century, white employers often described their



servants as special, royal, or aristocratic; this is the semantic means by which white employers can excuse the degradation of domestic work, declare and maintain their own self-declared aristocratic social status, and account for those anomalous domestic workers who do not fit the stereotype of the ignorant, dirty, country, black servant (Tucker 52). The value of a domestic servant, then, is determined by his bearing, part of which can be ascribed to affectation and choice, but some of which is due to upbringing, a factor beyond personal control.

Harper purportedly downplays his control over his success at maintaining his dignity without drawing the ire of white employers; actually, the content of his speech reveals the extent to which he understands that he is playing a game, and playing it well, because of skills he develops deliberately. He tries to teach his grandchildren how to be lucky because luck has enabled his survival. The concept of luck denotes uncontrollable good fortune, like fate or destiny. What Harper describes as luck is actually a set of skills needed to succeed at the games he plays—the racial games and the working games. The fact that he says he can “teach” his grandchildren how to be lucky, and that he believes he was “taught” to be lucky, indicates that the individual must deliberately acquire what he calls luck (106), rather than hoping to win, like a gambler praying for a lucky roll of the dice that he could never learn to produce with practice. Harper succeeds for years because of the system of luck that he develops into a personal philosophy, but his system is static. He does not, therefore, adapt to the encroachment of the free market into his employer’s private home; privileging the tenants of his system over the actual suffering of the people around him exposes Harper when his ultimate goal is to remain hidden.

Harper also says that, to learn to be lucky, “We all need to have hiding places and we all need to learn how to disappear in this world” (107): he uses caves and hiding places as metaphors for self-effacement and obscurity, qualities he values because he is black; because his parents taught him to value those qualities (110); and because, as a hobby, he researches historical atrocities, and through his research he has formulated a complicated theory of violence and evil with a practical corollary. According to this corollary, men who celebrate life survive violence “by wit and wile and strength and caution and silence and cowardice and industry and luck and love [. . .]” (120). Caution, cowardice, and silence are the personality traits that enable him to follow the rule of self-effacement. He hides himself in his work. The narrator refers to his position in the Clarke household as “his first line of defense, his first ‘cave’” (126).

Part of hiding is minding one’s own business, and Harper intends to continue to focus only on his work and stay out of Golden Age’s intrigues because he intends to play his professional game by its rules. Despite Harper’s intentions, Mrs. Crawley tries to recruit Harper to help her prop up Howie’s regime against Lucas’s investigations and objections, but Harper claims that he does not understand Mrs. Crawley. He says, “I just go my way and do my job” (185). In an attempt to win over Harper, Mrs. Crawley tells him her life story, which becomes increasingly more sordid; Harper feels threatened by her attempts at friendship and intimacy because he fears that she might later resent his knowledge of her misdeeds (186). She continues, anyway, and she ends her monologue with a proposition for Harper: “The chief thing is to keep this place operating smoothly, to keep everybody *clean* and quiet [. . .] And to look out for the doc,” (192-93) and if he does so, she says that “You and Lucy are gonna have your place in this organization.

And we're all gonna make money" (193). Mrs. Crawley seems to take for granted that Harper has pledged his complicity, but he only ever says that he wants to look out for his children and grandchildren (192, 193). However, if Harper was only concerned with the welfare of his family, he would have left the job as soon as he identified the threat posed by the new proprietors of his long-time place of employment.

Ironically, the belief system Harper constructs to help him recognize a threat is, in part, responsible for his failure to leave his job. Harper's personal philosophy tells him that Howie and his Golden Age are celebrators of death. The celebrators of death are one category of people according to Harper's system, his personal philosophy by which he understands human behavior and which he uses to keep himself out of harm by dangerous people. After he learns about Lucy's complicity in Howie's plot to discredit Lucas, he starts to doubt his system: "How could it be that these people, instead of being engaged in their proper work of profiting from death, were (if one could trust one's sense) keeping people alive?" (255). As Lucy reminds Harper, he has been so fixated on his system that "you done forgot we're real" (256). Harper has derived the rules of his work-game from this metanarrative system he constructs to tell him when to run and when to hide from people who would harm him and his family, but in relying on the metanarrative to guide his judgment, he failed to really observe the idealistic opportunists running Golden Age.

Harper's system also inspires him to focus on the tasks, ignoring the social constructs surrounding his job and emphasizing the physical labor and its results. According to Harper, "the biggest part of luck" is the ability to care about the duties he performs, which "makes work play even when it wears you to the bone" (106). His personal investment in his work is one of the reasons he does not quit his job once the

Clarke household becomes Golden Age retirement home, because “here was his garden, his fern-dripping bayou bank, his fruit trees and his roses” (126). This emotional attachment to the things of the household, the plants and furniture and buildings of the Clarke estate, lead him to keep a job that increasingly poses a threat to himself, his family, his employer, and all the residents of Golden Age.

Harper does not try to help the residents in peril because he is less concerned with justice than survival. At first, Harper continues to play by the rules of his profession, doing what his employers want him to do to make himself inconspicuous. When Lucas tells Harper that Howie, Crawley, and Lucy have told Martha’s family that Lucas made senile sexual advances toward Lucy, Lucas urges Harper to extricate Lucy from the conspiracy against him, saying “People can’t live by lies, Harper, by using other people” (251). The narrator describes Harper’s withdrawal from Lucas and his insistence that lies might be the best way for Lucy to get through the situation as “Harper, scrambling for his caves” (250). Later, after confronting Lucy and learning that she intends to do and say whatever Howie wants her to do and say, Harper decides to help Martha and Lucas without going against Howie. Lucas protests, assuming that Harper cannot help him without telling the truth about the abuses at Golden Age, but Harper says “I don’t think the truth matters, [. . .] and *that’s* the truth” (274). Harper does eventually try to help Lucas and Martha escape, telling Lucas, “I find I can’t abandon you” (276), but Lucas rejects Harper’s plan as absurd and cowardly (280). Forever bound by the rules of his own system, Harper’s only solution is running and hiding, even when the chaotic human element of the problem resists this solution, even when social change necessitates taking a stand. Harper’s outmoded system of work-rules govern his moral behavior and prevent

him from acting in the interests of the marginalized; this is a postmodern reply to all systems that discourage the individual from seeking social justice.

In Douglas's novels, hired help work in just such an oppressive system; they earn their living, such as it is, by balancing the occupational requirements of obeisance and self-effacement with their own personal need to maintain their dignity and humanity. Characters like the Daniels men in *The Rock Cried Out* do not act like servants, nor do they act like second-class citizens; rather, they act as if they own the land they work, which makes them feel intensely wronged when Leila sells that land out from under them. Harper of *Apostles of Light* preserves his dignity in the opposite manner, by emotionally segregating himself from his employer and all other white people, but he does so at the expense of his own sense of moral agency. The domestic servants in Douglas's novels can be arranged in a continuum from those most distant from their employers to those with the warmest relationships: from Harper's cold professionalism to Tweet's intimate rage to Clakey's resistant affection to the rumored love and apparent devotion of Alice Major and Lizzie. But of course, these characters are not so simple. Alice Major's interactions with the family are distorted by the narrator's presentation of the family's hindsight, so the reader can never know if Alice Major loves the Andersons like her own children, only that the Andersons believe she does. Lizzie takes care of Kate despite Kate's tantrums and vitriol, but Lizzie's patience is part of a role reversal that places Kate in a subordinate position, the wayward invalid who willfully disobeys her keeper. Douglas creates complicated portraits of the various human adaptations to a demeaning working life; because of these characters are complex and very different from one another, Douglas avoids the artistic pitfall of inventing or perpetuating untrue stereotypes

of real domestic workers. The multifaceted and diverse depictions of hired help in her novels are another way that Douglas attempts to tell some truth through her fiction; the troubles of truth-telling through story-telling give rise to another category of workers, the artist characters.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### Douglas's Ambivalent, Ambiguous Authors and Artists

#### *Introduction*

For Douglas's doctors, entrepreneurs, and domestic workers, the nature of the work colors or taints the subject's identity. Douglas's later novels revolve around characters who make art. A real-life artist, Douglas keeps her work separate from herself as if in reaction against the power of an occupation to shape identity, so much so that she retains a pen name that no longer fools anyone. This unwillingness to merge her role as an author with her real-life identity parallels her fiction's ongoing struggle with presentations of the truth: by writing fiction, she can create a "true lie," but she will not mistake that lie for the truth ("I Have Found It" 13).

Accordingly, none of Douglas's writers or artists are autobiographical stand-ins for Douglas. They do, however, seem more like Douglas from novel to novel, although their increased proximity does not occur in traditionally autobiographical manner. Rather, these narrators evolve to reflect her role as an artist. Through these artist characters, Douglas does what Michel Foucault identifies as the purpose of his 1969 essay, "What Is an Author?" Foucault claims that he wants "to deal solely with the relationship between text and author and with the manner in which the text points to this 'figure' that, at least in appearance, is outside it and antecedes it" (365). Foucault does not engage in what he calls "the-man-and-his-work" criticism (365); and Douglas does not use her first-person narrators to reveal herself as a woman and the place of her work in her specific biographical details. In her three latest novels, particularly in *Can't Quit You, Baby*

(1988), she explores, in Foucault's terms, the extent to which the fact of the author's presence is always "marking off the edges of the text, revealing, or at least characterizing, its mode of being" (369); Foucault calls this delimiting, discursive power the author-function.

As Douglas develops her first-person narrators and author characters, she moves closer to a revelation of the author-function as a determiner of the text's mode of being, not a revelation of the biographical relationship of the fictional narrator to herself as the author. Her first character-narrator is a young man struggling to be a poet in *The Rock Cried Out* (1979). The next character-narrator more closely resembles Douglas in that she is a middle-aged English professor with an artist son, but *A Lifetime Burning* (1982) is far from autobiographical. But in *Can't Quit You Baby*, the narrator-writer self-consciously draws attention to the work of the writer behind the scenes, exposing the difficulties and dangers of constructing a narrative from parts of human lives. Douglas's work then evolves. She reveals that she, as author, has assembled her fictions from bits and pieces of Haxton's life; to take this next step in depicting the work of the artist, Douglas has to abandon the novel form entirely in *Truth* (1998), because, despite near-consensus among literary critics, Douglas's novels are not autobiographies, nor are the later novels traditionally autobiographical in that her first-person narrators and artist characters are not representations of Josephine Haxton. These narrators and artists demonstrate the work of creating art from life, and show that this work comes from a compulsion or obsession with making order from life's chaos.

For Douglas, creating art is absolutely work, not play, and it should only be pursued by those who feel a real need to do so. In a 1990 interview with Leslie Chriss,



Douglas discourages potential writers from writing, “unless you have to. If it’s an urge that’s so strong in you that you feel you have to do it and it’s the only thing you’re going to care about doing, then by all means do it” (F1). This work is intrinsically motivated by a need to understand and contextualize life, to assign a meaning to complicated events and emotions. In a 1980 interview, Douglas says, “I think that most writers write to come to terms with and to communicate their experience” (Jones 57). Obsessive and introspective, self-reflexive and self-reflective, the work of making stories is, for Douglas, intensely personal and largely internal.

Writing also, however, occurs in a cultural context, and because it is for and about people, art has moral implications. In the 1980 acceptance speech for the Mississippi Institute of Arts award for *The Rock Cried Out*, Douglas explains her beliefs about the responsibilities of a writer to her place and time:

For me, a writer, concerned with human character and human fate, to live a lifetime as a part of this particular world, to have to continue to understand it, to know myself cowardly with its cowardice, to hope that I may stand as a witness to its best impulses, is a gift as large as any writer need ask, and more than I could ever do justice to. (Wasson 15A)

Hers is a very personal statement of her own paradoxical role as a writer. She sees herself as a part of a morally flawed cultural moment, indebted to that moment and its flaws for giving her the people, places, and events that she weaves into her fiction, but also determined to expose the flaws in her culture that are inscribed on herself as a person and a writer. Hers is a mission with a humanistic mandate for understanding people and telling the truth about their world, even if she must tar herself with the same brush in the process.

Paradoxically, even though art can never perfectly reproduce life, good art is essentially truthful, presenting some truth about human experience. As Douglas says, “I think an artist has to look at the world (including himself) with a clear and ruthless eye if he hopes to produce anything worth reading—and that’s always difficult. We like to believe comfortable lies about ourselves” (Jones 59). An artist’s work requires a confrontation with the truth, and the truth is hard to find. As Douglas’s narrative voice and technique develop, as she develops the skills essential to her work, her novels increasingly rely on this confrontation with the truth, and the truth that generates these novels’ great artistic tension is the impossibility of locating and claiming any one Truth. According to Nancy Ellis,

That the storyteller has some buried connection with the lives she writes about and that in every tale there is truth to be uncovered are perhaps what has motivated the evolution of Douglas’s narrative technique from conventional and first-person narrators to intrusive narrators who are consciously concerned with objectivity and choice and who are aware of their listeners. (66)

Douglas’s later narrative technique, then, is the answer to a moral question. The conscientious artist does her work with transparency.

But, according to Douglas, the struggle to create morally responsible art is neither glamorous nor easy. Douglas describes writing, the creation of art, as a low-paying, thankless, difficult job associated with loneliness and obsession, and a writer can only succeed by devoting her time and her energies completely. In an interview with Christine Wilson, Douglas says, “Work is what makes writers. And the reason for doing the work is obsession. I think if one is obsessed with writing, one works at it and gets better” (18).

Douglas says that writing is difficult, but the disadvantage of writing she explains in the most numerical detail is the low paycheck: according to Douglas, the average

fiction writer makes \$5,000 a year, and must, therefore, have another job (Chriss F1). Problematically, however, Douglas also says that an “unbroken stretch of time” is “necessary to sustain the ongoing momentum of a novel,” momentum she could only achieve once her children were in school (Myers 6E). Only one of Douglas’s first-person narrators is in such a position; Corinne of *A Lifetime Burning* only begins to sort out her life on paper after her children are grown. Her chosen form is the diary, and according to Linda Hutcheon, feminism has impacted postmodern writing through the resurgence of forms such as diaries, letters, autobiographies, and biographies because these forms demonstrate that the personal life is also political history (*Politics* 160-61). Having a room, a stretch of time, and an income of one’s own is markedly political because professional writing seems restricted to the independently wealthy and the mother whose children are at school and whose husband pays the bills.

This time spent writing in solitude makes writing a lonely occupation. In the conversation with other Mississippi writers printed in *Deep Delta*, Douglas explains that writing in the South is a solitary profession. “In a sense, you’re a part of the community in that you’re a citizen and you have your friends, but the writing part of it is solitary and there isn’t any coterie or exchange of literary gossip or anything like that” (33). Oddly, however, the Haxtons moved to Greenville in its literary heyday of the mid-1940s. Kenneth Haxton’s book department employed Ben Wasson, literary agent of William Faulkner. Shelby Foote and Walker Percy were both part of the Haxton’s social circle. Josephine Haxton, however, was too focused on her new marriage and her new babies to write (Watts 42). By the time she started writing, when her children was in school, she was quite isolated. This isolation is ironic because art, particularly Douglas’s art, always

refers back to the human world, to human perception, human reception, or some aspect of the human experience; and yet, the actual creation, the art work, is antisocial.

Perhaps because of its antisocial process, in Douglas's mind, art is not a prestigious occupation. In a 1980 interview with John Griffin Jones, Douglas explains that she was raised in a social context that did not value the arts. According to Douglas, "I did not grow up in a society where the arts were important. Rather, insofar as my childhood was concerned, the church and religion were important; men were expected to enter professions or to be successful in business; and women were expected to be homemakers" (51). Writing did not conform to cultural norms for either men or women in Douglas's childhood, which explains why Douglas believes that writing must come from a source of internal motivation or obsession with understanding one's own experience. No extrinsic source of encouragement nor promise of fame or fortune drove her to her chosen profession.

Despite the low prestige associated with art as a profession, the artist must appeal to society's desire to create and maintain supposed high-water marks of its cultural productions, to legitimize her occupation; institutionally, she must turn to the university for her daily bread. As Bruce Robbins says, "without culture, early professional humanists would have been hard pressed to explain why society should pay their salaries" (17). The study of art, like the creation of art, does not yield tangible results in proportion to the apparent work that goes into it. Douglas's first novel with a character-narrator, *The Rock Cried Out*, explores the paradox of the artist's labor: one works to make a living, but artists make little money because, although their creations require

great expenditures of energy, they often leave little more than words on a page to offer the marketplace.

*An Artist's Impasses in The Rock Cried Out*

*The Rock Cried Out* explores the creation of art as a socially-constructed occupation. Alan, the would-be poet, has internalized a culturally-concocted notion of the artist as a passive recipient of inspiration, as a slave to his muse. He also believes the poet to be a pure instrument of truth and beauty, a man apart from the sordid details of industry, economy, and romance. Despite his self-appointed internal hermitage, he also believes that he needs conflict and crisis to invite his muse, although he is unwilling to truly deal with his emotional problems during this attempt to write poetry in the winter at Chickasaw. *The Rock Cried Out* exposes these beliefs as myths, lies the artist tells himself to justify neglecting his craft. Art requires work, labor, dedication, and action, as demonstrated by Leila, Alan's aunt. One of the few socially-constructed obstacles to creative activity that Alan overcomes is the artist's gender-dependent prestige, or lack of prestige. Art is a respectable occupation for a woman, but not for a man.

Traditional Southern concepts of masculinity devalue the artist's work in *The Rock Cried Out*. Calhoun Levitt reveals to Alan that he believes Alan's Great-Uncle Dennison would have been more concerned with Alan's chosen career as a poet than with Alan's violations of his gender role, his appearance, or his visit to the home of a black man. According to Calhoun's recollection of Dennison, Alan's chosen occupation is the greatest transgression of tradition: "Besides, he never was much concerned with conforming. But you can be sure he's wonder about you being a poet. 'Poet?' he'd say. 'Eh? Eh? But do you know how to train a bird dog? Can you tell a good mule from a

bad one? Or a skunk from a possum?” (199). Calhoun creates a speculative, fictional Dennison to set poetry against an agrarian way of life. In this dichotomy, poetry is not a part of the natural world over which men preside. Ironically, however, Alan decides to go to Chickasaw in winter because “At the time I believed I was a poet and was sure my brain was teeming with poems my ears couldn’t catch for the traffic noises outside my window in Roxbury and the roar of machinery at the Israel Putnam Sugar Company, Inc.” (9). He believes that he cannot do his art work in an urban, manmade setting because poetry flourishes in the natural world. But for Calhoun’s construction of Dennison, man’s discernment over his dominion has ultimate utility, while poetry is, in contrast, superfluous.

Alan eventually resolves this conflict about the utility of his occupation by learning a trade, then distinguishing between his profession and his identity. After he learns the truth of Dallas’s role in Phoebe’s death and tries to kill Dallas, he abandons any notions of poetic purity and decides to take up welding as his occupation. Then, on the topic of welding, he asks, “No occupation for a poet?” (295). He recognizes that he can be a poet with an occupation, rather than thinking that he can only be a poet. He also comes to think of welding as an art, saying of himself the welding poet and himself the narrator, “Because that’s what we like best of all about welding—making a design and taking a pile of scraps and making of it something useful and clean and pleasing to look at” (296). His emphasis here is on his actions, as he uses the verbs “taking” and (twice) “making” to describe welding. In a 1995 interview with Rhonda Watts, Douglas describes her writing process in terms similar to this description of Alan’s welding: Douglas says that “nothing is made of whole cloth, at least in my books. You take a

piece of this and a piece of that and try to make it come together and be a whole” (44). In contrast to Alan’s description of welding, his former descriptions of writing poetry focused not on action, but on a state of being, a passive reception of words brought to him. This absence of action explains why Alan succeeds as a welder but fails as a poet: in Douglas’s world, the artist has to work.

Before Alan turns to welding, he says that he had returned to Chickasaw to be alone so that he could write poetry, seeking “days and nights that would bring on the wings of February storms the poems he knew must be waiting to surface, if only he were quiet and patient enough to invite them” (53), but neither quiet nor patience creates poetry. Here, the poems are the active agents, while Alan is the passive recipient. The poems wait, and Alan waits, but the poems are the ones Alan expects to do something. They must surface. All he expects to have to do is invite them. He mentions writing poetry in passing, as part of the labor of tearing down the old house to build up the house he intends to live in: “I even wrote some poems about planks and nails and one about welding the bush hog, but I decided that they were no good. It was not a time to write poetry, I decided” (58). He can devote his energies to creating a house, but not to creating art, and he blames his failure to write on poor timing. Time is a factor beyond his control, so waiting for the right time justifies his passivity.

Leila’s physical, active engagement with her textile art, and her resulting success as a textile artist, provides a sharp contrast to Alan’s half-hearted, passive approach to writing poetry. Leila actually has a cultural advantage over Alan, as an artist, because art is socially appropriate for women in Leila’s familial and cultural context. Leila tells Alan that, when her father and uncle refused to let her work on the farm, she found an old loom

in the farmhouse attic and began to design fabric. She explains her male relatives' acceptance of her new occupation: "Of course, *that* was acceptable. Designing. Weaving. Women's work. No threat. They probably thought I would fail—wouldn't be able to support myself—which would have been even more satisfactory to Daddy and Uncle D" (134).

In myth, weaving is women's work, and men do better when women fail at it. Weaving is one of the more subversive arts in Western cultural history. Ulysses's wife Penelope used her art to avoid marriage, unweaving the day's work every night to postpone the end of her mourning. *The Rock Cried Out* invokes other weaving myths when Leila tells Alan that she considered murdering Sam when Sam ended their affair. She says, "Weave him a fiery mantle, hmm? Weave his hair into my loom" (140). In the sixteenth chapter of *Judges*, Delilah weaves Samson's hair into her loom because he says that doing so will rob him of his strength, but this was only the third in a series of lies about how she could control him. Weaving, then, is a way for women to exert control over their lives, their minds, and their sexuality.

For Leila, her work at the loom is as important as any spiritual, intellectual, or emotional passion; more important than cultural expectations of feminine beauty; and as physical and intense as sex. Alan describes Leila's late-night drunken tirades that begin as philosophical conversations, "and by two A.M., lecturing on politics or religion or her craft, she glows with energy," (84) indicating that Leila feels as intensely about her work as she does about politics and religion, two topics that typically generate the most passionate arguments. For Leila, her craft is equally important. Alan also explains Leila's tendency to remain slightly overweight by saying that "she needs weight and



strength for her work,” (ibid.) which demonstrates that Leila’s devotion to her art allows her to transcend American society’s preference for thin women. Further heightening a sense of her art’s visceral importance to her, Leila closely associates the act of artistic creation with the sex act. Leila began working at the loom around the same time she began her sexual relationship with Sam, and two passions blend together for her. She tells Alan, “I sank into a dream of sex [. . .] Even when I was at work at the loom, it was as if it were a sexual act” (138). Leila’s motivation to work at her art is intrinsic, as much a part of her as her mind, her body, and her sexuality. Alan, however, requires extrinsic motivation.

Like Leila, Alan recognizes that art comes, in part, from emotions, but unlike Leila, Alan proposes that an artist must exploit his emotional pain in order to create art, and he feels that he has to wait for emotional pain to come to him before he can do his work. When Miriam tells Alan that she has been having sex with Lee, Alan says that he was “excited. Some people, and I am one of them, tend to yearn for, to thrive on crisis. I used to say to myself that the artist requires crisis—that he has to have his emotions screwed up every so often to a certain pitch or he won’t receive those gifts from God, those precious insights so essential to his work” (177). Again, Alan demonstrates his belief that an artist is receptive and passive, not passionate and active. He does believe that his emotions, perhaps his passions, are a crucial part of writing poetry, but he uses the passive voice, saying that “he has to have his emotions screwed up,” relying on someone or something else to imbue him with the passion he needs to write.

But even when he is “screwed up,” he fails to use his new anguish to fuel any creative work; rather, he uses creative work to distance himself from the anguish he

thinks he needs to do the work. Despite his belief that an artist must experience emotional pain, Alan uses his self-appointed status as a poet to distract himself from the pain of Miriam's affair with Lee. The three of them drive together to record Calhoun Levitt's oral history, "So now we sat in the car and talked politely, my thigh against Miriam's warm right flank, Lee's against her warm left flank. I smiled like a sick clown and tried to observe my surroundings as carefully as a poet should," and he proceeds to describe, in detail, the flowering plants growing in Calhoun's small yard (195); by behaving "as a poet should," he alienates himself from his immediate situation in the name of his dubious career as a poet.

Observing his surroundings is one of the few actions of an artist that Alan actually engages in, and he feels conflicted when he realizes that art and business sometimes share a *modus operandi*: both occupations rely on observation, on exploiting other people's lives and experiences. In Lorene's church, watching Lee take pictures of the ecstatic worshipers, Alan thinks,

Do I want to be involved in this? With *him*? A damn magazine story about middle-class Jesus freaks? It's not at all, not at *all* what I want to be thinking about. Then: But I'm as much a voyeur as he is. I do the same thing, I just don't take pictures and I don't make any money.

Shit!

No! It's *not* the same thing. I'm a *poet*. (163)

But he never explains to himself, or to the reader, why the entrepreneur's voyeurism differs from his own emotional voyeurism, his need to use other people's passions and beliefs to generate his poetry, to do his art work for him.

But, in a broader sense, Alan does create a pleasing whole from parts and scraps, and not just as a welder: he positions himself as a narrator, creating a cohesive narrative from the tragedies of his history and the tensions of his time. Of course, in an even

broader sense, it is Douglas the author, not Alan the writer, who creates this narrative.

What is the true source of a story, and can a story tell the truth without reckoning with the storyteller? In her next novel, *A Lifetime Burning*, Douglas will move closer to such a reckoning by using her narrator-character to expose the process of creating a story from the scraps of a human life, showing the reader the nuts and bolts of art work.

### *The Artist's Work in A Lifetime Burning*

In *A Lifetime Burning*, the artist character, Corinne, equates writing with understanding. Professionally, she is an English professor, but she gradually diverts more of her time and energy from the university to the diary that is the novel. Her day job teaching literature cannot give her the catharsis of ordering her life as a narrative with a meaning and a purpose, but during the course of the novel, she questions the value of such an ordering, story-telling enterprise. She comes to realize that, rather than telling her story, she needs to try to tell the truth about her life, even if the real, whole objective truth is impossible to tell.

Corinne makes the physical act of the work, as much as the evasions in her narrative, her obstacle in understanding her life. In the first diary entry, dated 4 August, the narrator says she has put off “trying to understand. That’s what I tell myself I’ll do. I’ll sit down at my desk with a pen I like and a stack of the lined paper with five holes in the side like we used in high school, and...” (3). But in the next entry, she doubts this previously declared purpose of her work, saying “Even writing may be a way of putting off” (5).

This is not an artist possessed by her muse, working day and night to produce the narrative that will help the reader understand. This is a reluctant artist, forcing herself to

labor through the process of coping with her life and ascribing some meaning to it. She describes her efforts at procrastinating, considering exercise and yard work as ways to continue to put off the work of understanding: “If I can putter a little longer, the time I have allotted for writing will be over for today” (4). Douglas herself reports no such evasions in her own artistic process. In a 1990 interview with Leslie Chriss, Douglas claims that she cannot help but write, even when she tries not to (F1). The difference between Corinne’s foot-dragging and Douglas’s compulsion lies in the nature of their endeavors. Douglas, the author, writes fiction. Creating a “true lie” carries only some of the responsibility of telling the truth (“IHFI” 13). A storyteller does not need to be accurate and is free to tie up loose ends, right wrongs, and ascribe poetic meaning to events that, if they were real, would only seem chaotic. Corinne, the character, has set herself to the task of telling the truth. In truth, people can behave cruelly and suffer meaninglessly. To write the truth, she must resist the author’s urge to edit. But because she has an author’s urge, and later events in the novel show that she does, she is not willing or able to avoid the occasional true lie.

Through vacillation and flippancy, the narrator expresses ambivalence about her desire and capacity to tell the truth through her writing:

I would like to find a way to tell the truth.  
“Ye shall know the truth. . .” etc.  
“Oh what a tangled web we weave. . . .” etc.  
God knows that’s the truth. The problem is, how not to deceive—oneself, everyone.  
It doesn’t matter.  
It does matter.  
In any case I have begun. (11)

Here, she follows Scripture and Shakespeare with lazy ellipses and etceteras. In the verse that she quotes, John 8:32, Jesus tells the gathering crowd that they are in bondage to sin,

and that if they believe in his divinity and preach his gospel, they will be free from their bondage. Corinne, however, does not give this teleological text enough credence to finish the quote, and yet she says she wants to figure out how to tell this sort of truth in her art-work. She argues with herself, in the presence of the reader, as to whether or not she should even bother to try to solve this problem of truth and lies. Deborah Wilson describes Corinne's conflict as "apologetic frustration" due to her failure to write "as men do," in the form of a linear narrative; for Wilson, Corinne's frustration with and disapproval of her text makes the text seem transgressive (69). But the fact that Corinne persists to tell her story in circles, alternately claiming and disclaiming the truth, indicates that the role of the artist is not, primarily, to conform or transgress traditional generic forms.

For Corinne, the foremost rule of the artist seems to be that she makes art—that she continues past obstacles and impasses, whether or not she resolves this impasse. She vacillates, again, over the truth or validity or morality of her depiction of George's real lover, the young laboratory technician who looks like a muskrat. She asks,

Do you understand that my hatred of him is entirely unjustified? My view of his character questionable?

No, that's not true.

Yes, it is.

I have to go on. (73)

She does not state that she is subjective; she asks if the reader understands her subjectivity. But then she disagrees with her subjectivity, and then retracts her disagreement, as if she had made some affirmative statement. She never explicitly claims to be unreliably subjective or reliably objective, and she never decides whether or not her ability to tell an objective truth matters. She concludes only that she must continue.

Corinne continually vacillates between her desire to present the truth and her temptation to recreate herself through her writing. She says, “I want to say everything at once, to understand, to accept to stop striving. Also, I want to say—nothing. Or, to put it another way, I want to explain everything truthfully and at the same time to be always right, always charming, always lovable, always beautiful. Is that too much to ask? Especially when I’m doing the explaining” (5). Writing prevents her from understanding some external, eternal Truth of herself and her life; writing is a game in which she, as the writer, has the power to change her life and remake herself. But in warning the reader that she intends to make herself seem more just and likable than she really was, she shows the reader her hand, effectively unmaking that move and permitting the reader to stay one step ahead of her. By confession the vanity of her pretensions, she permits herself to tell stories even though she has set herself the task of telling the truth.

Truth-telling is far more difficult than story-telling because Corinne has an author’s compulsion for narrative. Corinne invents a story to explain the death of George’s great-grandmother. She presents the story in the form of a diary she initially claims she found while searching for letters written to George by his lover. In the diary entry following the diary of the great-grandmother, Corinne explains that the great-grandmother’s diary was her own invention, and she outlines a few of the facts on which she based her fiction (151-2). Douglas, here, provides a behind-the-scenes vantage of the creation of historiographic metafiction. According to Linda Hutcheon,

In most of the critical work on postmodernism, it is narrative—be it in literature, history, or theory—that has usually been the major focus of attention. Historiographic metafiction incorporates all three of these domains: that is, its theoretical self-awareness of history and fiction as human constructs (*historiographic metafiction*) is made the grounds for its rethinking and reworking of the forms and contents of the past. (*Poetics* 5)

Corinne writes a fiction based on the “forms and contents of the past,” (ibid.) such as the “Gothic tale of the two girls and the sadistic father in the woods” that she heard from her great-aunt (*ALB* 151). Corinne draws attention to the man-made quality of history when she admits that “She may have read it somewhere or made it up or it may indeed be true” (ibid). She takes this heavily constructed, generically Gothic piece of history and works it into the fiction that she initially claims is the grandmother’s diary, although she presents it as part of her own diary. More accurately, Douglas presents Corinne presenting it as part of her diary. These many layers of authorship create a densely self-aware text and illuminate the process of the creation of fiction from life.

Douglas presents the work of assembling fiction from history, but Corinne also describes writing as effortless. Although some aspects of the grandmother’s diary come from Corinne’s construction of the late nineteenth century, Corinne explains, “All the rest, all, I invented. It poured out of me like water from a spout. I did not think” (152). Creation of an art object is an engrossing occupation, so much so that it can proceed without conscious thought and, sometimes, without paying much heed to the world beyond the studio.

An artist who works continuously and ceaselessly can endanger life beyond the work, particularly when the artist has an opportunity for financial gain. Corinne’s son William is a professional musician, and he becomes so engrossed in his art-work that he neglects his roommate. His roommate, Janice, left her months-old infant and her husband to go to Los Angeles to follow a famous violinist she saw on the Johnny Carson show. As her obsession consumes her, her erratic behavior becomes dangerous, and one night she almost burns down the kitchen. William tells his mother, “I suppose it’s partly my

fault that I didn't notice anything unusual about her. [. . .] The music has been going well lately and I haven't thought about anything else. I've written ten new songs this month, Mama. Warner's is looking at a couple of them" (102). Then he tells his mother about the night Janice left a saucepan on the stove until it glowed red. She burned her hand and broke the saucepan trying to cool it off under the faucet. Corinne asks him why he has not asked Janice to move out, and he tells her that Janice wrote a song and gave it to him (104). Because Janice has contributed to his art-work, he overlooks the danger she poses to him and to herself. When he finally decides to move her into a hotel room, he returns to find that she has set his house on fire, and that the fire has destroyed all his recording equipment, including all his new songs (116-7). The gift of a song and the hope of professional advancement drive William too deep into creative absorption to notice that his house, literally and metaphorically, is on fire. In fact, the song Janice gives him would have contributed to a false sense of material safety because the song would have gone on the album that would have provided him with unusual financial security. The promise of money is important to the artist because art typically does not pay.

The low probability of reimbursement forces the artist out of the studio for more gainful supplementary employment. Corinne is a professor of literature; she only has time to write the diary that is the novel because she chooses not to teach during the second session of the summer semester (4). Later in the diary when the fall semester starts, she uses "the privilege of seniority" to teach only six hours with no early classes because "I don't intend to let work become another device for postponing" (51). Her work as a teacher need not interfere with the labor of writing; the institution that provides her with financial security also gives her the freedom to write.



She identifies herself as a teacher, not as a writer or an artist, and teaching provides her with financial freedom, although she still lacks emotional freedom to leave her unsatisfying marriage: “I thought it would be better to leave than to keep on living in that weird cheek-by-jowl strangeness. But to go where? Do what? Oh, I knew I could make a living. As I’ve said, I’m a teacher and I can always make a living. But step off into loneliness?” (13). The university, institutional haven for would-be artists, could provide the economic means for this narrator to leave her marriage, but nothing about her work as a teacher gives her the personal strength she needs to live alone or even to decide if such a life is possible; her nine-to-five job could sustain her need to “make a living,” but it does not enrich her life. As she writes, she devotes less time to teaching, writing “yes, I still have a professional life, although clearly at the moment I am devoting little of my energy and attention to it. Teaching, to me, like medicine to George, has come to seem a farcical profession” (71). A personal life in chaos would dwarf the imposed order of the educational institution. Earlier in her dissatisfaction with the Byzantine structure of the tenure track and the annual repetition of the semester cycle inspires Corinne to act out, seeking more passion and risking her family’s stability. When Corinne explains why she began her lesbian affair decades earlier, she cites the tedium of her teaching career: “My work seemed to me unbearably repetitive. Laboriously I made my way upward through the ranks of the faculty. I looked every year for the exceptional student—tried to reach out, to make some sort of contact. I rewrote my lectures. But even so, I was bored” (165). Teaching is not enough for personal fulfillment for Corinne, the stymied artist.

Ironically, Corinne describes the rules of teaching in terms similar to the rules of art-work: to teach, she has to reconcile seeming with meaning, appearance with truth. When George leaves town to visit his former lover, Corinne tries to convince George to admit that he has resumed the love affair. She says, "My attention all my life, my professional attention, has been on people's faces and on the relationship between what they say and what they mean. If it weren't, I couldn't survive in the teaching profession" (126). She must attend to her students' faces to figure out what goes on in their minds, like she must attend to her perception of events to represent those events truthfully, or accurately; and even when she cannot decide whether such representation is possible, she must attend to the paradox of its impossibility.

Because she writes and teaches, Corinne resembles Douglas, but *A Lifetime Burning* is a novel, not an autobiography. Susie's James's 1982 review of *A Lifetime Burning* parenthetically refers to an autobiographical element of this novel, a son in California whose house caught fire, but she does not go so far as to claim that Corinne is Douglas (6B), although critics will come to make such claims about the narrator of Douglas's next novel, *Can't Quit You, Baby*. From Alan to Corinne, Douglas's artist characters come to resemble the author, but this resemblance is the result of a growing proximity to Douglas's role, to her position as a subject, not to her specific and historic identity. In *Can't Quit You, Baby*, Douglas directly confronts the writer's work and the author's role by employing a self-reflexive narrator, giving the reader direct insight into the philosophical and moral difficulties inherent in depicting a world that looks very much like our own.

*Writing the Writing of Can't Quit You, Baby*

*Can't Quit You, Baby* begins by orienting the reader in a very real-world time and place, establishing the geometry, "The two women are sitting at right angles to each other," and the time, "on a sunny July morning in the nineteen-sixties," of the scene (3). The scene unfolds indistinctly because of the lack of quotation marks: the black woman's story of a white man's sexual impropriety, the white woman's uttered responses and internal reactions to the story, and the narrator's provision of background information and ancillary detail all run together as co-equal parts of the story, without hierarchy or ordering punctuation. In an interview with Elizabeth Tardieu, Douglas says that she omitted the quotation marks for aesthetic reasons—all the quotes within quotes within quotes cluttered the pages like scattered pepper—but the absence of quotation marks and clear attribution of reported speech has the effect of mingling the thoughts and speech of the characters, and further merging these utterances with the narrator's words (Tardieu 176-77). The narrator, as storyteller, has sunk herself into this novel; accordingly, she demonstrates her presence to the reader on the novel's third page through a first-person admission of discomfort with the terminology used to describe the black woman's job as a domestic worker in the white woman's household. Simultaneously, she implicates the reader in this scene through use of second-person pronouns, commands, and requests (5). This novel is Douglas's most straightforward presentation of an artist's work. Previous art-makers have been characters, so any presentation of their labor is more "lie" than "true," to preserve Douglas's explanation of fiction as a "true lie" ("I Have Found It" 13). In *Can't Quit You, Baby*, Douglas exposes the storyteller, permitting her to tell the truth of her role in the construction of a true lie.

But what, exactly, is this narrator? Should she be understood as a character, as the author, or only as the narrator? The narrator of *Can't Quit You, Baby* is an enigma because a speaker refers to the narrator in the third person. Some first-person speaker says that she feels "honor bound, I think, to call your attention to her," the narrator, who "You may have assumed is a white woman" (38). Either the writer is talking in first person about the narrator, or the narrator is talking about herself in the third person because doing so allows her to comment on her function without telling her own story. The narrator insists, in the third person, on a narrator's authority, asking, "Whose story will she choose to tell? It's her prerogative to decide" (38).

Literary criticism about *Can't Quit You, Baby* understandably orbits around the mystery of this novel's narrator: is she only the narrator, or is she also a character, or is she also the author? Can she be treated as a person with human motivations, or is she a composite function serving the novel's literary structure and thematic concerns? Linda Tate calls this narrator "almost a character in her own right" (52-53); then, she says that the narrator is "presumably a stand-in for the author herself" (53).

Leslie Petty calls this narrator "another important 'character' in the novel" (121). Petty also creates some additional confusion as to how many people are inside this book. The speaker using the third-person perspective to talk about the narrator as "she" is, according to Perry, a separate persona among the characters, the narrator, and the author, as Perry continually calls *CQYB* an autobiographical project (123). However, Perry concludes her essay by claiming "that all writing, on some level, is an autobiographical act" (128).

Charles Fister also equates the narrator with the author. At first, he argues that this novel's noisy storyteller gives Douglas and her characters an opportunity to liberate the reader from the narrator's control (99). Fister recognizes that this narrator frequently calls the reader's attention to gender and race issues among the characters, and also raises the question of her own subjective status, her own race and gender. He argues that this tactic is one of honesty and integrity; Douglas wants to avoid monolithic presentations of Tweet's experience and identity because she cannot speak for black women. According to Fister,

If [Douglas] is true to herself, she cannot represent a series of cultural stereotypes. The third-voice narrator enlarges our perception of the complexities (and self-doubts) faced by any artist who has put herself in the position of an author-ity on questions of Southern females and racial dynamics. *Can't Quit You, Baby* is partly the autobiographical confession of a Southern female (Josephine Haxton) who goes by the pen name, Ellen Douglas. (115)

This argument is logical, particularly in light of Douglas's earlier fiction: a Southern woman writes books about the cultural constructs that impact black and white identities in the South; these cultural constructs often impede acceptance of the truth behind the stories people tell each other about who they are, and the disconnect between the truth and the stories often drives the plots of her novels; in pursuit of the truth behind stories, Douglas creates narrators that increasingly question their right to tell stories; eventually, the narrator is not a named character acting in the plot; so that narrator must be Douglas, and that novel must be autobiographical.

However, if *Can't Quit You, Baby* were autobiographical, Douglas likely would have said so, having admitted to writing intimate parts of herself into previous novels. In "I Have Found It," a speech Douglas gave at a conference on autobiography, Douglas

says that the Anna of *A Family's Affairs* is named after her sister and based on her own childhood self, saying that “the events of her childhood and adolescence are transparently autobiographical—not about my sister, but about a fictional me” (7). Douglas feely admits to the autobiographical elements of this novel, but she simultaneously distances herself from the character, saying that Anna is a fictional version of herself. Anna is not, however, an idealization; she is an insecure girl who grows up to be a flawed young woman. Douglas does not present a perfect version of herself as a girl, which suggests that Douglas would not necessarily feel the need to distance herself from her narrator in *Can't Quit You, Baby*, if that narrator or if Cornelia were indeed fictional versions of herself. More likely, Douglas did not write herself into *Can't Quit You, Baby*. More specifically, Douglas did not write Haxton into this novel. Rather, Douglas exposed her function behind the scenes; she does not attempt to insert herself, her specific subjective self with all its complications and implications and psychology, but she does write in an author that occupies a specific subjective place as a storyteller.

The distinction between the woman and the woman-as-storyteller is linked to Douglas's own distinction between herself as Haxton and herself as Douglas. The Haxton-Douglas duality casts doubt on the idea that *Can't Quit You, Baby* is autobiographical, that Haxton is Cornelia is the narrator. According to a 1982 article about *A Lifetime Burning*, Douglas was continuing to use her pseudonym long after it concealed her identity. When asked why she used the pseudonym in the first place, Douglas answers, “Maybe I wanted to separate my private life from my public life. Maybe I was shy” (H1). Shyness would not explain the continued distinction of Douglas and Haxton, because anyone who cared about Douglas's identity would have already

known who the real-life Douglas was. Douglas, in an interview with Tardieu, also argues that she is not the narrator: “So I’m not saying that I, Josephine Haxton, shied away from [presenting Tweet the way she presented Cornelia because Tweet is black]. I’m saying that that novelist in that project shied away from it, so I think you need to make that distinction” (137-138). The lasting separation of the woman and the author is more likely due to a more permanent separation of her private self and her public self. In her novels, she does not share her life with her readers. She shares her fiction. The fiction is made from bits of the life, but the writer assigns an order and a meaning to those bits.

Creating a pleasing or instructive order from the chaos of human existence is, in Douglas’s novels, the work of the artist, and like her depiction of all other professions, the artist’s work is not exempt from the moral imperative to tell the truth, to deal fairly and openly with others. With the character-narrators, Alan and Corinne, the writer is beholden only to the other characters, but the narrator-as-narrator of *Can’t Quit You, Baby* must be truthful to the reader-as-reader. The development of these first-person narrators is evidence of Douglas’s intensifying obsession with the moral implications of her work, the greatest of which is telling the truth. As she feels she must truthfully present the social and economic disadvantages of domestic work, the consuming greed of entrepreneurship, and the sometimes corrosive prestige of the medical doctor, so she must not lie about her own work by giving her readers a lovely plot or a pleasantly traditional narrative structure, resisting the temptation to make a beautiful lie rather than a true lie. She resists temptation by exposing herself-as-writer, revealing that human fingers wrote this human story. This revelation of her working self is a gesture toward honesty and a

recognition that work brings disparate people together, so work is the primary means by which to act justly and honestly.



## CHAPTER SIX

### Conclusion

Fiction by other contemporary women writers also investigates the relationship between work and identity. Occupations are a common means of character development and scene-setting across gender, nation, and century divisions, from Herman Melville's long digressions into the whaling industry in *Moby Dick* (1851) to Ian McEwan's detailed descriptions of neurosurgery in *Saturday* (2005). Men have traditionally been expected, in the Western tradition, to work, and so, accordingly, men who write novels often write about jobs. For centuries, however, women with rooms of their own, with the space, time, and wherewithal to write, were not expected to work, and were routinely restricted from environments in which they could learn about others' occupations and the impact of those professions on their lives, personalities, and identities. When middle-class women, who traditionally did not work outside the home, entered the workforce in large numbers in the mid-twentieth century, their domestic restriction ended, and this new exposure to the world of work is reflected in women's writing.

Cultural criticism of women's writing tends to focus on gender and domesticity issues, but women's issues are much broader and much more varied than they were in the mid-twentieth century. American women have not been largely restricted to kitchens and classrooms for over fifty years, and furthermore, the definition of the American woman has come to encompass women from a variety of national, ethnic, regional, and social situation. Among fiction by American women writers, the relationship of the working self to the private self has become an identifiable trope. Perhaps because many American women worked only within their private homes for their own families for so long,

contemporary American fiction by women often focuses on the impact of a character's work on his place in the family. If American culture assigns a particular profession with high prestige, then individuals within that profession can insure stability and confer honor upon the rest of the family.

Douglas's doctor-characters, Lucas from *Apostles of Light* (1973) and George from *A Lifetime Burning* (1982), lost themselves to their professional roles in part because of the way American culture constructs its notion of the doctor. Doctors are respectable and trustworthy because we, as a society, have agreed to respect and trust them. The high prestige associated with the medical profession can even surmount issues of national origin, allowing an immigrant family access to the benefits of American society without requiring total cultural assimilation. Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake* (2003) depicts the complicated interaction of identity, profession, and nationality for an Indian-American family. In this novel, identity is provisional and context-dependent, as shown by the narrator's explanation of the Indian custom of pet names: "They are a reminder, too, that one is not all things to all people" (26). Most of the novel focuses on the context-dependent development of Gogol, the son of two Indian immigrants. Gogol vacillates between defining himself as an Indian and losing any vestiges of his Indian identity through assimilation into the dominant American culture. When Gogol is in college, by which point he has changed his name to Nikhil, his parents are not concerned that he has not declared a major. They assume that he will pursue medicine, engineering, law, or economics because "These are the fields that brought them to America" (105). Gogol, however, does not become a doctor. His deviation from their plans is one of the many ways Gogol-Nikhil rejects his family as a primary determiner of his identity.

Choice of profession violates social expectations, which can lead to liberation from culturally-constructed systems of oppression. In Douglas's *The Rock Cried Out* (1979), Leila pursues weaving, an artistic career that wins the approval of her father and uncle because they consider it to be women's work. However, Leila turns her craft into a business that she manages successfully; she also makes money selling some of the family's real estate. Her entrepreneurial endeavors are surreptitious, under the patriarchal radar, but they are enough to designate her as the master of her own economic fate after leaving her husband. In Alice Walker's epistolary novel *The Color Purple* (1982), Celie, one of the corresponding sisters, announces that she will leave her husband Albert, a man she refers to only as Mr.\_\_\_\_. Albert tries to convince her that she will eventually come back because she will be unable to find work; he says that because she is ugly, black, poor, skinny, and female, she could only possibly be her former lover's maid, or perhaps a farmer or a railroad worker (206). But Celie does leave, and she starts a business in which she only makes pants, for women and for men. She signs a letter "Folkspants, Unlimited," and she begins the following letter by saying, "I am happy. I got love, I got work, I got money, friends, and time" (214-215). Her success at entrepreneurship comes not from greed, but from providing consumers with a quality product they believe they need, and from working with people she values and respects. Controlling her own business permits her to control her own fate for the first time.

Work can liberate when it allows a woman to find her own way, but work can also imprison a woman and alienate her from her loved ones when it reinforces darker aspects of herself, like the overwhelming but often thwarted desire to impose order on chaos. Venting this impulse is a way for domestic workers to cope with their subservient

positions in white households. Clakey in Douglas's *Where the Dreams Cross* (1968) continues to work in Louise's kitchen, despite Louise's ignorant emotional cruelty, because Clakey agrees with the way Louise cooks, with the quality of ingredients and the high value she places on Clakey's labor. In Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* (1970), Pauline Breedlove takes a job with a wealthy white family, and she loves it: "More and more she neglected her home, her children, her man—they were like [. . .] the dark edges that made the daily life with the Fishers lighter, more delicate, more lovely" (127). The Breedlove family dissolves after Cholly goes to jail because, rather than find a new home in which she could care for her children, Pauline Breedlove goes to live with the white family for whom she works as a housekeeper (18). She prefers her professional position, characterized by its adherence to culturally-constructed notions of propriety and domestic beauty, to her own home and family, and her decision to forsake her daughter leads to the major crisis of the novel. In *The Bluest Eye*, defining the self by the occupation denies one's role in the family; it is a lie of omission.

Douglas's self-conscious narrators insist on honesty by exposing the author-function; these fictions are truthful, true lies, because they reveal the hand behind the pen, if not the woman behind the hand. These first-person narrators are obsessed with finding or telling the truth. The narrators of Amy Tan's *The Bonesetter's Daughter* (2001) also search for the truth, trying to solve the mystery of the elder narrator's heritage and the curse that plagued her mother. The younger narrator eventually comes to a conclusion opposite that of Douglas's first-person narrators. Douglas's narrators strive to present events as close to the way they happened as possible, and when they realize they cannot, they reveal the subjectivities that make the Truth impossible to tell. However, Tan's

younger narrator, Ruth determines that fiction can re-write events of the past; fiction redeems history. The epilogue of *The Bonesetter's Daughter* describes Ruth's writing as an opportunity to unite herself with her mother and grandmother, and through this unity, to reconstruct the tragedies of the past: "After all, Bao Bomu says, what is the past but what we choose to remember?" (403). Douglas's narrators have a moral obligation to show that they cannot accurately represent the past, while Tan's narrator feels morally obligated to actively reconstruct the past through her work. Doing so brings her family together and redeems it.

Work, in these contemporary American novels, determines part of the socially-constructed definition of the individual and her role in her family or in her community. Rather than disputing the fact that all professions are cultural constructs, and that all work must respond to moral obligations to the self, the family and the community, these novels make moral arguments about how the individual should define herself, about how workers should cope with or navigate their professions, or about how the individual's profession should or should not impact the family. Work, in twentieth-century women's fiction, brings the daughter, son, father, or mother from the private home into the public marketplace; the character's actions in the market are inseparable from the character's identity within the family and within herself. Each of these novels argues for the whole person, the individual in all his complexity, in each and in all of his roles. Presenting all apparent, and some hidden, aspects of the individual is the only way to tell a true lie.

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