

# West Texas wind, Dorothy Scarborough's *The Wind* and madness

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“You must go through at least a year of it to have some notion”.

Ken Kesey, *Sometimes a Great Notion*<sup>1</sup>

I grew up in Dallas during a period in which we never experienced a dust storm. There blue northers (sudden strong winds from the north accompanied by radical drops in temperature) were not threats but harbingers of gingerbread and cocoa (with marshmallows) in front of the fireplace. Only later, when I lived for two years in Las Cruces, New Mexico, did I learn about dust storms that pitted or completely removed paint from cars and first frazzled your nerves, then gradually drove you crazy. Consequently I recognized the emotional truths that are demonstrated in Dorothy Scarborough's novel *The Wind*<sup>2</sup> and the 1927 silent film based on the novel (directed by Victor Seastrom and starring Lillian Gish).

Hurricanes have frequently been used in fiction and film to emphasize plots in which innocent people fall victim to the violence of criminals or psychotics, for example in *Key Largo*, *Cape Fear*, and *The Mean Season*. In contrast, powerful winds, such as the mistrals of Provence, France; the soroccos of northern Africa; and the mariahs of Montana and the western United States<sup>3</sup> are often associated with mental turmoil or even madness.

The dust storms and blue northers of West Texas, according to Barbara Quissell, “are comparable to the mistral of southern France and the sirocco of northern Africa, other violent winds which are said to drive individuals to extreme and uncharacteristic actions”<sup>4</sup>. As Joe R. Eagleman<sup>5</sup> points out, “continued drought can change the landscape... The dust storms of the 1930s covered fences with mounds of dust; a dust storm 500 km in diameter can carry 100 million tons of dust.”

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<sup>1</sup> What is said about the fictional Wakonda, Oregon is equally true of West Texas, especially in the era when it was being settled by pioneers and cattlemen who lived in isolation, separated from their nearest neighbor by many miles.

<sup>2</sup> Austin, Texas: University of Texas Press, 1925. Rpt. 1979.

<sup>3</sup> These winds are the subject of the song “They Call the Wind Mariah” from *Paint Your Wagon*.

<sup>4</sup> “Dorothy Scarborough's Critique of the Frontier Experience in *The Wind*,” *Women, Women Writers, and The Wind*, (Troy, NY: Whitson, 1979), 179-180.

<sup>5</sup> *Severe and Unusual Weather*, 2nd ed. (Lenexa, KS: Trimedia Publishing Co., 1990).

Likewise, “[a] norther may reach a speed of 40 knots, and... often produces clouds of dust”<sup>6</sup>. Although in this century the dust storms that produced the dust bowl and contributed to the Great Depression are well known, the winds and dust storms of the West Texas drought of 1885-86 – the period in which *The Wind* was set – were far more severe. Scarborough’s representations of the wind in her novel are not exaggerated. As Carole Slade points out, “Numerous types of destructive winds, including cyclones, tornadoes, and northers... did continually threaten the lives and property of pioneers on unprotected Texas ranges” (86). Eagleman explains that in an “intense longwave cyclone... strong winds [can] pick up considerable dust from the dry soil in eastern Colorado, New Mexico, Oklahoma, and Texas” (34) and can create extreme-nightlike-darkness (35).

Similarly extreme are the blue northers of Texas, which, according to Bresenham and Puentes, sometimes bring in “enough cold air to drop the temperature from 90° to 30° in less than an hour”<sup>7</sup>. These northers get their name not only from their temperature but also because of “the dark blue haze [that is] created by the advancing cold current against the warmer southern wind” *Texas Almanac: 1958-1959*, 163). The storm can be darker still if it has picked up dust. In Scarborough’s novel, Letty describes one blue norther that begins as “a puny, cloud, slight and fragile, touching the prairie’s rim” but which “grew and darkened. Swiftly it spread over the sky until it blotted out the blue, till it hung, a black pall, over the wide heavens. It happened so quickly... that Letty could scarcely believe it” (171). She describes “the icy chill of a sudden (171) drop in temperature” and explains that “night was on them almost immediately, for the clouds had blotted out the daylight, wiping out even the [usual] brief wintry dusk” (172).

Scarborough’s novel shows the effect that the hardships of pioneer homesteading had on women, most of whom came from places whose landscape and weather were benign or even luxurious. Scarborough’s novel demonstrates the erosion that the combination of wind and isolation can cause to a person’s sanity. In the course of the novel, Letty is orphaned at eighteen with no relatives to take care of her in her native Virginia. She is persuaded by her pastor to travel to Sweetwater, Texas to live with her cousin, who is a rancher there. As the train carries her westward, she becomes more and more depressed by the landscape – by its desiccation, by its emptiness, by the skeletons of dead cattle she sees along the way, and most of all, by its fierce winds. The wind drives her first to marry a man she cannot love; second, to have an affair with a man she cannot trust; third, to murder him with a typical West Texas weapon – a rifle; fourth, to bury him only to have his body gradually unearthed by the wind; and finally, to go completely mad and rush out across the prairie in a windstorm to her death.

Of the very few critics who have discussed *The Wind*, two utilize feminist viewpoints. Barbara Quissel presents a brief biography of Scarborough, focuses on the realism and historical accuracy of the novel’s presentation of the Western pioneer experience, and argues that the “feminist viewpoint [of the novel] is a secondary theme” (187). She compares the novel with the 1927 Victor Seastrom silent film, and considers the significance of the fact that the point of view is that of “the interior mind” (191). Carol Slade argues that the wind in the novel represents a patriarchal society; she interprets the powerful and pervasive wind as a symbol of “the masculine force... [that] can incapacitate a woman for authorship” (Slade 86)<sup>8</sup>.

Certainly Scarborough distinguishes between men’s and women’s ability to deal with the wind: Gram’ma Powers explains to Letty that the wind is “the hardest thing a woman is up against on the plains. Men don’t know what it means to us. Their nerves ain’t like ours” (194). In Scarborough’s introduction to the novel she says, “The winds were cruel to women that came under their tyranny. They were at them ceaselessly, buffeting them with icy blasts in winter, parching their skins and roughening their hair, and trying to wear down their nerves by attrition, and drive them away” (3).

As an extremely sensitive eighteen-year-old, Letty is vulnerable to suggestions and predisposed to internalize what Roddy, the stranger she meets on the train to Sweetwater, tells her. He states that

<sup>6</sup> *Encyclopedia Americana*.

<sup>7</sup> Karolyn Patterson Bresenham and Nancy O’Bryant Puentes. *Texas Stars: A Legend of Texas Quilts, 1936-1986*. Vol. I. (Austin, Texas: U Texas Press, 1986), 70.

<sup>8</sup> “Authorship and Authority in Dorothy Scarborough’s *The Wind*,” *Studies in American Fiction* 14 (1986).

“the wind is the worse thing,” and that “it’s ruination to a woman’s looks and nerves pretty often. It dries up her skin till it gets brown and tough as leather. It near ‘bout puts her eyes out with the sand it blows in ‘em all day. It gets on her nerves with its constant blowing – makes her irritable and jumpy” (21). (I might have thought this description excessive had I not experienced West Texas dust storms.) He tells her how dangerous tornadoes are. Roddy also plants the idea that will encompass Letty: that the wind is “a devil” (24). She immediately assimilates these ideas, conceiving of the wind as “a terror that might pass by day or night, to leave death and devastation in its path! It the day, when you could see its frightfulness – or in the night when you could only hear it roaring, and imagine!” (26). When she detains in Sweetwater she feels that “the wind swooped at her like a mad malevolence” (37) and admits that “the wind got on my nerves” (44). Instead of recognizing the beauty in seeing “incredible distances in all directions(?),” she “feels queer to be out in the open with so much space about” (53). She is also susceptible to Lige Hightower’s assertion that “I reckon there are folks that’d go loco for lonesomeness” (54).

Letty becomes obsessed with what she considers the “demonic wind” (105), a wind that “roared like a thousand demons let loose from the pit” (172). She personifies it as “a demon steed, racing like a black shadow across the plain, a lonely, terrible figure, neighing in the night” (155), and believes it is determined to destroy her. She intensifies her fear by incanting again and again a song she had learned in Virginia: “Lord, I don’t want to die in a storm” (156). She begins to think in the kind of teleological causality that schizophrenics use, i.e., they believe that “every act, every event occurs because it is willed or wanted either by [a] person... or by something that has become personified” (Arieti, 241) – in Letty’s case, the wind. Arieti even states “If a storm occurs, if the wind blows it is *solely* because someone wants it to” (242, italics Arieti’s).

Letty not only blames all her suffering on the malevolent wind, but develops irrational beliefs about it that gradually become obsessive hallucinations. She believes:

the wind was a demon that had driven them all crazy; that had put false thoughts in Cora’s [her cousin’s wife, who hated Letty] mind, making her stir up... trouble... The wind was determined to destroy her, because she feared it so! It was after her, and she couldn’t escape it!

She saw the wind as a black stallion with mane a-stream, and hoofs of fire, speeding across the trackless plains, deathless, defiant!... A phantom, riderless horse, whom no mortal would ever ride – that no lariat flung by human hands could capture! His proud neck arching, his eyes glancing flames, he raced toward her across the sand – supernatural, satanic, the wind of the North! (175).

At a later point in the novel she describes the wind differently, as “whirling curtains of dust, veils that writhed and twisted, hung like cloth of gold from the heavens, as high as she could see. The wind was no longer naked and invisible. It had clothed itself with those swirling veils that revealed its obscene antics, its horrific gestures. It was a thing unbearable to *see* the wind!” (197, italics Scarborough’s). Letty believes that “no human being, no wild beast even, could be so tricky and so crafty and so cruel as the wind and the sand” (198), and that “it [would] laugh and shriek at you” (199). She believes that she has angered the wind because she can read its mind (334), and that “the wind knew what... [her] thoughts were” (335).

Letty demonstrates a major symptom of schizophrenia, adualism, which Arieti defines as “[the] lack of the ability to distinguish between the two realities, that of the mind and that of the external world” (Arieti, 278). The fact that she says that she “held long dialogues with persons imagined or actual” (208), and that she imagines mirages of “green trees and still lakes” (260) shows that she can no longer distinguish between a hallucination and the real, a major symptom of schizophrenia, according to Arieti. She also demonstrates another symptom of schizophrenia, “an increased acuity of perception” (Arieti, 279), as she becomes “acutely aware of all that went on around her” (Scarborough, 261). Her observations match Arieti’s analysis, that “in many... cases of acute schizophrenia the patient experiences an increased acuity of perception” (279).

Additionally, Letty experiences another basic symptom of schizophrenia, a sense of separation and alienation from his or her own body. Emotionally healthy persons usually feel their bodies to be “alive, real, and substantial.” and feel themselves to be “alive, real, and substantial” (Laing, 68)<sup>9</sup>. They perceive themselves as “embodied” (Laing 68). In contrast, schizophrenics experience themselves as “unembodied” (Laing, 68). Unlike “those ‘ordinary’ people who feel in moments of stress partially dissociated from their bodies,” they “go through life... detached from their bodies” (Laing, 68). To them, “the body is felt more as one object among other objects in the world” or as “a false self which a detached, disembodied, ‘inner,’ ‘true’ self looks on... with tenderness, amusement, or hatred.” Letty experiences “a queer remoteness from reality, as if only her body were there, and she herself were far away” (181). She also exhibits symptoms of bipolar illness in that she alternatively experiences “despondency so profound that it seemed she could never climb up to spiritual peace” and moments of “unreasonable exhilaration” in which her “spirit would walk on rainbow clouds, [and] her whole body would tingle with joy”. She admits that her alternations of emotion frightened her (270).

At the novel’s climax and conclusion, after she has murdered Wirt Roddy and unsuccessfully buried him because the wind blew away the sand that covered his body, “with a laugh that strangled on a scream, the woman sped to the door, flung it open and rushed out. She fled across the prairies like a leaf blown in a gale, borne along in the force of the wind that was at last to have its way with her” (337). At this point, having allowed herself to be driven completely mad by the wind, Letty goes out into the storm and to her death.

Certainly the living conditions, deprivations, and hardships that Scarborough describes throughout her novel were no exaggeration. Bresenham explains that “farms and ranches were... sometimes more than a day’s rid from civilization” (1836-1936, 19), and “their lives were... reduced to the bare essentials of their environment – the rattlesnake, the Texas sun, the windmill, the log cabin, the schoolhouse” (1836-1936, 17). Likewise, the women who lived “in the Panhandle or the plains, ... watched the Dust Bowl [of the 1930s] blow away the hopes and dreams that lay in the topsoil the wind swept away into black clouds as high as mountains” (1936-1986, 11), just as it had during previous droughts. A pioneer woman had to try to make a home, as did Letty, in a log cabin that was “just a box-house... [s]et up in makeshift fashion with a rock at each corner, and an occasional one along the walls,” in a yard with “no flowers, no grass” (182), and whose interior walls were papered with newspapers (190).

It is hardly surprising that such living conditions and climate drove some women mad.

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<sup>9</sup> R. D. Laing. *The Divided Self* (London: Penguin, 1965).