Dawn Powell Returns to Lake Erie College
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Dawn Powell, playwright, short story writer, and novel-ist, grew up in Mount Gilead and Shelby, Ohio and attended Lake Erie College in Painesville, Ohio. The College, founded in 1856, is one of the several “daughter” colleges of Mount Holyoke and, when Dawn arrived in 1914, had recently metamorphosed from Lake Erie Female Seminary. By attending college, Dawn Powell began her own metamorphosis; unlike most of her classmates, she had a career in mind, for she knew that she wanted to be a writer. When she graduated in 1918, she headed east and went to work; soon she was in New York, where she remained for the rest of her life.

When I began teaching at Lake Erie College in 1956, I soon became aware that the College had graduated an eminent novelist. Dawn Powell had not, as far as I could discover, ever returned to the campus, and I determined to seek her out. I wrote to her that I would like to meet her. When I arrived in New York, I telephoned to fix a time; she welcomed the call and suggested that I come by that afternoon. She lived with her husband, recently retired, in the Madison Square Hotel. As I walked across the Square, I remembered Willa Cather’s My Mortal Enemy, which begins in that setting; it describes the poignant battle that a fully alive woman fights with death.

Dawn Powell lived on the tenth floor of the old building; the room we sat in was small and sparsely furnished, but had a pleasant outlook to the south and afternoon sun was pouring in. She introduced me to her husband, a quiet man who appeared older than she. He sat placidly while Dawn and I talked about Lake Erie College. As a faculty member in English, I was hoping that she would return to the campus to talk with students in the creative writing courses.

She was hesitant, expressing uncertainty about how she would talk to young women of the 1950’s, and she worried about her ability as a speaker or teacher, but she agreed to consider a visit to the campus. Her reservations, I felt, were the reflection of the privacy that writers cherish and of the shyness they sometimes feel—she was used to writing down what she had to say, not to speaking to an audience.

She turned the talk for several minutes to her habit of gleaning useful articles, even furniture, from the things that New Yorkers throw out, depositing them on the sidewalks to be carted away by the garbage men. She had recently found a sturdy armchair, upholstered in imitation leather, and proudly pointed out that her husband was sitting in it. He smoked imperturbably, moving slightly so that she could point out a small hole in the seat cushion, the only defect in an otherwise sound object. I realized that she delighted in finding uses for things that others throw away, seizing on bits of conversation even more readily than on pieces of furniture.

In the spring of 1960, Lake Erie College decided to honor its famous alumnna by giving her an honorary degree. Dawn, somewhat hesitantly, agreed to appear at commencement on Monday, June 13. She stayed at the Cleveland Statler, and her cousin, Jack Sherman, drove her out to the campus. She went through the excitement of the ceremony, the awarding of the degree and the subsequent reception and luncheon with her usual watchful, calm reserve.

I had been asked to write the citation, so I read through several of her novels as preparation. The second, She Walks in Beauty, is about a young woman growing up in a small Ohio town aware that she doesn’t quite fit in. She has a sister who does, however, and I wondered if both the girls were based on Dawn’s own experience. When I mentioned this idea to her, she at once agreed, saying that writers used various aspects of their experiences and personalities as the bases for their characters. She herself was both the girl who went away to fulfill her unusual destiny and the girl who stayed at home to lead a conventional life.

At a reception in Social Parlor after the ceremony, Eleanor Farnham, a journalist and Dawn’s classmate, thanked me for rediscovering Dawn Powell and bringing her back to the College. All I could think of to say was that she had been there all along. Dawn and Eleanor had dinner at Stouffer’s in Cleveland that evening and that fall Eleanor visited New York and called Dawn, whose husband had been in hospital for months.

The diary entry for November 1 describes the evening and demonstrates the precise observation that distinguishes her style. It begins, “E Farnham phoning at 7:30,” followed by a period; most writers, let alone diarists not accustomed to early rising, would succumb to an exclamation mark. Passages on her guest’s uneasiness, her use of a French word, her fuss over drinks and over money, are all reported deadpan. In the
restaurant, the meal finally ordered, Eleanor notices Dawn's new dress. Dawn begins, "(I thought my black new knit looked nice)" and records Eleanor's response: "frowning with distaste, 'Aren't you hot in that thing?'" Despite the awkwardness, Dawn records a rewarding conversation:

We talked happily for about 1/2 hour the inventions we had made of each other in years of absence (and thru our inventions of ourselves)—finally came on the real people—totally unsympathetic.

This passage is followed immediately by another in which Dawn allows herself an unusual, specific reaction:

she burst out how she wanted to help me, no money but she could at least clean up my apt—so it would be okay for Joe—(I was shocked!)—then said she could do it because she knew my room at college!—"You can’t let Joe come home to that," she cried (as if he would be glad to come home to her carefully coasted maple apt)

Dawn's "I was shocked" is unexpected and surprising. She had trained herself to observe, not to comment.

On March 2, 1961, Dawn wrote to me and sent a copy of her second play, Jig Saw, which had been presented by the Theatre Guild in 1934. In her letter she discusses not only the play but also her thinking about comedy, and indicates why she ceased writing for the theater:

I looked over the play for the first time in years and found it dated and didn't intend to send it. However I met Tom Prideau, a LIFE drama or film editor I'd once known, and was surprised to have him tell me he had read JIG SAW a hundred times as a sample of ideal comedy technique.

I remembered, then, that I had started this play as a rather scathing picture of the idle women spending their husbands' money or alimony in New York apartment hotels, shopping one day and taking the stuff back the next, hoping for Something or Other to fill in their days without their expending any energy themselves.

In the midst of this my other comedy, Big Night, was produced and criticized as too brutal, to real, so I thought it would be amusing to cast the new material in very exact French farce form.

As you know, Form can deaden your live material, but it can also protect it. Audiences can absorb as little meaning as they like so long as the function of comedy—to amuse—is fulfilled.

This does make playwriting a first rate game and I wish I were more of a gambler to enjoy it, instead of being battered by the fighting and selling aspects of the business.

Dawn's awareness of the demands and benefits of form, together with her skill in dialogue, were remarkable; it was unfortunate that the New York theater of the 30's discouraged her work in drama. Her continuing interest in the theater is demonstrated by her Diaries, which record constant play-going; in a letter written to her cousin, Jack Sherman, just before her death, she mentions her love of "our old English novelists," mentioning Trollope and adding "I was always crazy about Fielding—especially his plays—terribly witty." (22 October 1965)

The visit to Lake Erie College and the academic interests of Jack Sherman caused Dawn to reflect on the function of education and especially on the teaching of writing. Early in 1962, she wrote a diary passage defining her own ideas:

Curiosity is a rare gift particularly when combined with acute observation—i.e. understanding or perception. Not mere nosiness of the baffled ignorant who are only curious because it is different from their limited views. I am always surprised at how rare it is—for I can be with an intelligent friend and overhear a curious conversation & the person with me has not heard or seen the episode, not because it's "none of his business," but because the concerns of strangers do not concern him. He is not interested in life. Courses in art are called "Life" & if I taught it would be "Life" Courses where students talk & later report what they hear & see.

Her perception of the education of young women in the 1960's is recorded in her diary entry dated May 16, 1962. After reading the entry, I realized why it took some time to persuade her to return to the College again:

Thinking of modern education (such as Lake Erie) which is to instruct a person how to be unable to survive alone—exact opposite of original purpose. How to get along with the
community — how to mask your differences and to whittle off your superior gifts to level
down with the lowest — how to follow not to lead, how to be helpless without material
goods, how to run machinery — how to be a slave to your home & family, how to do with-
out thinking and how to let your individual talent atrophy or die aborning. Reading, Latin,
Greek, walking, etc. these give the greatest joys to a person without money, alone, sick, The
present education presupposes the person will never be old, sick, alone, poor or unpopu-
lar.

As Dawn’s own health declined in the ensuing years, her diary entries and her letters illustrate her own
proficiency in mastering adverse circumstances.

The next time I saw Dawn Powell, my wife and I were in New York and tele-
phoned to invite her to lunch. Her husband had died in February, 1962, and she was alone.
She chose a favorite restaurant on lower Fifth Avenue, and when we arrived the people at
the restaurant knew and welcomed her; she talked about the quality and the moderate
cost of the food, and in the course of the luncheon she agreed to consider returning to
Lake Erie College to meet with students. One of her hesitations had to do with her son; he
was severely handicapped and lived in an institution. Providing money for his care was a
burden, and she hesitated to be away for any length of time because she alone was now
responsible for him.

It was clear that she also hesitated to return because her years at Lake Erie had been strenuous. In a
September, 1964 letter to Jack Sherman, in which she enclosed a check, she remembered her own college
years:

Regard this dough as a present to myself — (I am thinking how eagerly I shook out enve-
lopes at L.E.C. and about once a year a $10 from Charlie + Effie or a $2 or $1 from some-
body would shake out & my day would be made (or my week.

As a student at Lake Erie College she had worked to support herself, doing various jobs, running the
elevator and in the dining room, and already she was writing steadily. She was more aware of the outside
world than many of the young women in what was still, in many ways, a genteel ladies seminary.

In 1958 she had written, at my request, a piece for Nota Bene, the College literary magazine. It de-
scribed her arrival at the College in 1914 and her growing sense of the great world beyond the campus and
beyond Ohio:

Letter from Dawn Powell

I arrived at Lake Erie College in September of 1914 with a delirious sensation of
having been shot from a cannon into a strange, wonderful planet. All summer long I had
been working for this great day. In the little factory town where I had lived I saved every
cent, working on the newspaper by day, ushering in a movie house by night, winding and
unwinding reels that featured Clara Kimball Young, Carlyle Blackwell, Pola Negri. Every-
body in town helped me gather proper equipment for this mighty project, so that my bor-
rrowed trunk would scarcely close over the made-over dresses, sheets and towels blotted
with my signature, tennis racket with limp strings, and a blue serge bathing suit in four
sections, 1900 model, contributed by a fat neighbor on the assumption that going to “Lake
Erie” meant I would be spending most of my time in the water.

A dear old lady had made me a fluffy yellow boudoir cap, something the factory
girls wore for Saturday night promenades, and just as I started for the train my grand-
mother handed me a bottle of a patent medicine called Vinol, urging me to take it faith-
fully to get some color in my cheeks.

Three days later, all settled in my room, tennis racket and boudoir cap jauntily
decorating the old pine dresser, I took the trouble to leaf through my rosy little room-
mate’s diary. (I wasn’t snooping, I merely wanted to check on her prose style.) It was a
shock to see this entry, “My room-mate’s name is Dawn. I think she is fast because she has
a boudoir cap and a bottle of wine.”

The world of girls seemed mysterious and infinite- ly fascinating after my town
full of factory men. It is a rich, illuminating experience to discover the thousand different
ways girls can be girls, and still be nothing like yourself. There were girls who cried from

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homesickness for a hometown twelve miles away, there were girls who sat up after hours fiercely arguing about the prophet Moses, girls who borrowed each other’s Housman or Leacock or Shaw to take on hikes, girls who fitted each other out for fine parties with sublime selflessness, a girl who wrote poetry brooding over her childhood memories of the bayous, a beaming happy girl who loved Bach and played the pipe organ in chapel.

“Do you know the marvelous thing that happened to me this morning?” she gasped one day, rushing into our room, her eyes like stars. “Miss Small came right up to me and said, ‘Sophie, you play the organ most acceptably!’ Most acceptably! Nobody ever said anything like that before in my whole life!”

There were girls who were slowly becoming conscious that they were not just girls, but part of a great world outside, a world of war and noble deeds waiting to be done. Five of us, linked by a common passion to break through to that outside world, marched down to the new dean’s chambers one night imploring an answer to our great question, as burning as it was vague. “Tell us what we can do,” we begged her. “Things are happening everywhere and we can’t just sit in classrooms. Tell us what to do.” The tiny little woman in her blue wool dressing-gown looked at us gravely and then opened her door wider. “Suppose you come in and tell me what you think,” she said. Whatever was said— we all talked at once— we tiptoed back to our rooms that night with the breathless conviction that we had received a revelation. I cannot remember what Miss Brownfield could have said to us, but I still remember the glorious sense of power she gave us. We were free. All roads were open to us. There was nothing we could not do and we would know the right moment when it came.

Such were the peaks from which we sought to soar.

After she graduated in 1918, Dawn Powell went to Pomfret, Connecticut, to contribute to the war effort by working on a farm. No one met her at the station, so she picked up her bags and started walking. At the end of the summer, she moved to New York and was briefly in the U.S. Naval Reserve, but World War I soon ended and she resumed writing. She married Joseph R. Gousha in 1920; her son was born in 1921. Her first novel was published in 1925.

When she came to the College for a week in May, 1964 to meet with students and to give a talk in Morley Music Building, she traveled, as she usually did, by train. The one she took from Grand Central did not stop in Painesville, so I had agreed to meet her in Ashtabula. I was a few minutes late, so she was waiting outside the wide, empty platform as I drove up. I felt guilty for keeping her waiting, her small figure motionless on the platform outside the silent, deserted station.

Just a few days earlier in New York, on May 20, she had received the Marjorie Peabody Waite Award from the American Academy of Arts and Letters; now she was back in Ohio. Packing for the trip, she had asked the reporter writing an article on her for the Herald Tribune, “How do you suppose they dress out there?” (3 July 1964). The question illustrates her style, deadpan and apparently innocent, but carrying several layers of meaning, at least one of them ironic amusement at herself.

I took her to the Matthews House, an historic Western Reserve home on the campus, where Mrs. Matthews welcomed her warmly and took her to the front upstairs bedroom to rest. The next morning Dawn told me that she had lain awake during a windstorm, watching the shadows of the tall old trees surrounding the house sweep across the windows and the walls of the room. She said that she felt the presence of generations of the family in the house as it moved and creaked in the wind.

Her appearance at a convocation in Morley was greeted with the generous enthusiasm typical of students in those days. The hall was crowded, and the applause when she was introduced by President Paul Weaver was prolonged— enough to startle or disconcert a timid person. Dawn stood quietly, half hidden by the tall podium, looking out into the ornate auditorium.

When she began to talk, her voice, low but clear, soon claimed attention for what she was saying, not who she was. I wondered if she were husbanding her energy, for she had mentioned that she suffered from what she and her doctor called anemia, but it was cancer, a word often avoided at the time. She talked about herself as a writer and mentioned her experiences growing up in the Western Reserve and attending Lake Erie College; she encouraged the students to observe their own lives as objectively as possible and to observe the world around them. Her own summary of the speech in her Diary reveals her habitual irony and amused objectivity:
Speech. Harold Fink, head of Fine Arts, played Pavane for a Dead Princess while I tried to figure what to say. Finally told seniors not to use minds in making decisions (save them for making excuses)—experience had told me women can’t get down to their real work till the man thing is settled—not for material urge or status—just possession. Own a man, but learn a trade on the side. Beware of waiting—leap before you look—you learn by leaping—if you look first you never leap. Don’t wait till wisdom sets in—wisdom is ruin—. Someday these happy happy days will seem pretty miserable to you. Girls cheered & were delighted. Said later it was just what they wanted to hear & what they’d been saying.

When the talk ended, the students burst into sustained applause. A few stood, clapping vigorously, and in a moment everyone in the auditorium had risen, welcoming and acclaiming the most distinguished writer the College had ever graduated.

Surprisingly, Dawn Powell’s achievement had been somewhat neglected by the critics, even though novel after novel was well received and favorably reviewed. Her last novel, *The Golden Spur* (1962), was especially successful in its witty combination of an ancient theme—the son searching for his father—with a setting in the artificial world of the New York galleries. Somehow her reputation, though always substantial, did not accumulate with her work. She once remarked that Kenneth Tynan, the English drama critic then living in New York and writing for *The New Yorker*, had told her that he considered her the most neglected novelist of her time, that her work was not accorded the recognition it deserved. Gore Vidal, also her champion, later wrote an essay on the same theme.

An interview with her, printed in the Cleveland Plain Dealer (26 May 1964; 22) discussed her return to the College and summarized her advice to young writers: "Listen more.... Listen to conversations on buses, trains, planes. Then write it down for later." Her understated irony and wit were evident as she walked slowly across the campus and responded to a question: "This place hasn’t changed. It’s just totally different." Posing for a photograph with students, she encouraged one of them, "Act as if you’re going to college."

She wrote twice after her visit. Her first letter was from Canton, Ohio "where nieces pop up like Jason’s teeth, all of them china or old chair collectors which frightens me back to simple old New York where a chair is a chair is a chair." She called her week "instructive and stimulating."

Her second letter (22 July 1964) followed the publication in July of *The Lake Erie College Bulletin*, which contained a note about Dawn that I had written to introduce her story "You Should Have Brought Your Mink." She joked about the note: "Everyone who reads it—I leave it casually on the table or their lap—says it sounds exactly true to life (if that’s good)." She described her reaction to the film of *Tom Jones* and commented on old friends, including Max Eastman, whom she met at the bank, where he reminisced about a long-ago affair with a woman Dawn had met during her week at the College. The passage concludes: "He kissed me tenderly in front of the second teller and we took our money and parted."

Her fullest comment was on a visit with Dos Passos:

[he] took me to the World’s Fair which is very tawdry & tiresome, but he has more energy than other people. The same day he was flying out to the Cow Palace to cover the dreary events [the Republican National Convention in San Francisco] for National Review! What happens to people! I wonder if this excessive Conservatism is due to his having been illegitimate.

Her question about the change in Dos Passos from the liberal enthusiasms of his youth and early novels to the conservatism of his later years shows that she valued consistency in point of view. She herself was one of those people of integrity; when she was about twelve she fled her home and her unsympathetic stepmother, telling the story that her flight was motivated by the burning of her notebooks and stories; she found refuge with Auntie May Steinbrueck. But she deserted Shelby and Auntie May to reestablish herself at Lake Erie College, and, finally, left the College and Ohio to settle in New York. Her series of novels set in Ohio were succeeded by others set in New York, but where she was remained secondary in her life to what she was—a writer.

Dawn Powell responded generously to requests from Lake Erie College; she not only wrote the essay describing her arrival at college and her response to the cataclysm of World War I, but also told us that we could reprint in the annual literary magazine any work of hers that we chose. We selected "Here Today, Gone Tomorrow," a story which describes a teacher of history in a women’s college who leaves the adula-
tion of students and admiration of colleagues to move to a New York hotel; the first sentence reads, "Increasingly the world she had left became desirable." Unlike the professor, Dawn was truly independent of place and applause; she saw too clearly what happened to those who could not or would not leave whatever home they had found.

Her own chosen role, observant and amused chronicler, made her avoid fixed ideas and ideologies. She remained extraordinarily open to new experiences, people and ideas. Firmly rooted in her culture, she was nevertheless open to change. Listening to Lewis Mumford talk at the American Academy in May, 1965, she notes: "realized I had gotten as chicken as the rest of America because what he said— we had no more right in Vietnam than Russia had in Cuba— was true but I did not think he should use his position to declaim this." But then she adds, "Later I saw the only way to accomplish anything is by 'abusing' your power." Had she lived, she would have approved of the protests against the war in Vietnam.

After her visit to the College, Dawn Powell continued to think about her education there and about teaching. In July, 1964, she responded to a letter from Jack Sherman, who was beginning graduate work at the University of Chicago. He enclosed several of his papers, and she thought that they had been marked unsympathetically:

God knows in any English class most of the lugs/stu- dents are utterly unimaginative. In the L.E.C. classes and other short story contests I have been judge in— the kids were at best completely literal minded— this is How My Canoe Upset that Summer Afternoon.

In the same letter she recalled her first uncomfortable months at Lake Erie College:

I came across old college diaries and papers that usually nauseate me with their whiny teenage woes but now I am old enough to feel no identity with the Young Jerk, but some interest & even sympathy. For instance I complained in my first few months at college that the English teacher (Miss DeMent, then, a very affected snotty dame who must have felt she shouldn't give good grades to poor students)— anyway why, I snivelled, did she always read my themes aloud to the class con brio (how about that, kid!) then give me C-, where the rich girls got H C+ (the highest grade) for some piece they could barely spell out. Fortunately second term put me in a young Boston woman's class (Louise Bray was her name) who thought I was a genius & had me send things to magazines and help her write news of college for all the papers (which was her job).

On May 13, 1965, in another letter to Jack Sherman, she asked him, “How about teaching at Lake Erie? (I wouldn’t but then I loathe the idea of teaching unless it would be to avid, eager learners like yourself.” She also advised him:

For Xist's sake don't take any teaching courses which as you know keep you from learning anything yourself. The best teachers anyway don't follow methods but are richly informed and widely interested and interesting themselves.

In October, a month before her death, she returned to the subject, responding to his comments on his graduate courses:

I am a great Chaucerian lover (required course in Anglo-Saxon)— in spite of hating the course— but I really love the Greek & Latin poets— I wish I had taken more, tho maybe it's the translations that give the zest. Right now I am reading my favorite Petronius in a paperback marvelous translation by one Wm. Arrowsmith but I am bragging as I last only about 1/2 hr reading these days.

At the end of the letter, referring to Jack Sherman's account of his studies at the University of Chicago, she asks:

Do you ever think of how Auntie May would really be baffled that anyone could want to leave Shelby or a job in a Shelby firm?... I recall that when I thought of college she hastily spoke to Scott? about a job in the telephone office for me.

Dawn Powell's childhood and youth in Ohio and her education at Lake Erie College provided an anchor, stable and reliable, which held through the swirling currents, the winds and tides of her long career. As her work, her diaries and her letters demonstrate, she benefitted from her education. It was, after all, something that she could take with her as she went on being what she was, a writer, until she died.