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Sensation and the Subconscious within a Nightmare in *The Eye in the Door*

In Pat Barker's 1994 novel *The Eye in the Door*, Lieutenant Billy Prior has recently returned to London from the front lines of France during World War I. Declared unfit for duty and sent home because of "asthma" – one of the physical excuses used to send mentally damaged soldiers back to England – Billy knows that it is the subconscious wounds more deeply entrenched that keep him out of the front lines. In a society that casts censure and blame on any young man back on the Homefront with no visible wounds, Billy attempts and eventually fails to hide his profound mental injuries from both the public and those closer to him: his girlfriend Sarah and his psychologist, Dr. Rivers. He suffers from "shell-shock", later to be known as PTSD, in which his own consciousness fights against him, reminding him constantly of the war in both his waking and sleeping hours through the use of an "eye in the door"; a symbol that confronts him both literally in the door of a women's prison, and figuratively in the sleeping state of his own mind. It is particularly in sleep that Billy's nightmares and loss of reality plague him through acute sensory imagery exacerbated by his own vision and interpretation of "the eye", which alters his awareness of consciousness and creates a sense of duality within both his nightmares and himself.

Billy Prior comes to a state of near-awakening from a nightmare in a cold sweat, a feeling that will linger and increase as he fights a personal battle against his own mind. The chilled sensations that he experiences consistently bring him almost to the point of returning to reality,

but the presence of visual terrors trap him in a dream state. The sensory feeling of touch is one that causes some level of focus, and brings him back to a plane of reality, even if he is not aware of that reality in his own mind. Billy finds that “the cold half woke him” (Barker 58), and it is this first sensory realization that leads him into a false sense of security, believing that his mind is giving him a reprieve from the nightmares. However, as shocking as the cold is, Billy quickly realizes that he is still dreaming, “in sleep that (was) light” (58), and that to escape further torture, he must exit the dream. He repeatedly uses sensory sensations to ground himself: the cold of his body turns to a state that is contrastingly “sweating and clammy”, and then to one of exhaustion and chill once again. Billy physically reflects the strife produced by his own mental imaginings of “the eye watching him” (58), and this stress makes him unable to distinguish between nightmare and reality.

The struggle of touch versus vision forces Billy to waver between states of consciousness as the non-reality of his sight with its lack of genuine clarity battles with his body’s physical desire to wake up. Touch offers him a sense of truth he cannot access with vision, as his own eyes deceive him through mental imagery of what would be nonexistent in a state of conscious reality – a literal eye in the door of his bedroom. Within his dream, Billy “turned and saw the eye watching him, an eye not painted but very much alive”, and by sheer willpower pulls himself briefly away from it. Reaching for the comfort of a physical object, a cigarette, Billy turns again at the sound of a chuckle, to find the eye watching him still (58). He reaches for a paper-knife, and it is that movement that begins to bring him back to reality; as he stabs the eye, it is the sound of his own sobbing and the feeling of “whitish fluid [...] quickly chilled” (58) which wake him up. The sense of sound finally frees Billy; the sobbing that simultaneously connects the two worlds of his conscious and subconscious releases him from the nightmare. The sensory imagery

that assaults Billy makes it possible for him to be physically moving in both the mental and physical world. Since his mind cannot consistently distinguish between truth and dream, he is able to slip into both simultaneously. This loss of self and reality suggests an effect from his war experiences in France, where soldiers could not operate both as humans and as creatures capable of killing without distancing themselves on some level from reality.

Billy's vision is the sense most predominantly featured in his dreams, and it is what keeps him caged in his own subconscious. The ability of humans to innately believe what they see causes Billy to doubt what is genuine and what is his own subconscious working against him. With such a strong emphasis on vision and mental sight, combined with the other senses of touch and sound, it is nearly impossible for him to escape the nightmares caused by his experiences in the trenches of France. The most prominent of his visions is that of the eye, the white of which "glittered in the moonlight" (58), a pale, glowing, revealing light that brings out one side of his true personality – a violent side which he fears. The auditory sensations, "The same noise of emptiness he'd heard in France had followed him into the cell" (58), deepens his terror, with "the cell" being the confines of his own mind in its subconscious state likened to a prison. Billy's feelings of panic at being snared in the space of his mind give him enough willpower to briefly break a layer of the nightmare, and he emerges groping for a cigarette, trying to instinctively counter the imaginary with the physical comfort of a familiar item. He is in the dark again, and finds comfort in a place where no eye can find him, and no moonlight can reveal his secrets. Billy is safe in ignorance: without light, the eye cannot seek him out, and he does not have to face his own mental injuries: "He got up and felt his way along, not wanting to switch on the light because the horror of the nightmare was heavy on him, and he was afraid of what the glare

might reveal” (58), which would be fear of himself, fear of the war, and the paranoia caused by the surveillance state in which he lives.

The fear originally inspired by the eye turns rapidly to violence when Billy, presuming himself safe in the dark hears a chuckle and turns to see that “the eye was watching him from the door” (58). The personification of the eye confirms that Billy cannot separate it in his mind from reality: he thinks of it as “very much alive”, a being that can “chuckle”, which directs the thought that the eye is a representation of his own person facing a division of self that stems from his experiences in the trenches. Upon seeing the eye, he simultaneously shrinks back in fear and reaches for the paper-knife, unable to decide which reaction, fear or violence, is most appropriate to confront this situation. The fear versus anger becomes anger versus sexual reaction, as he goes to assault the eye in the door, “stabbing the eye again and again, his naked body spattered with blood and some thick whitish fluid that did not drip but clung to his belly and quickly chilled” (58). The inability of Billy to distinguish between dream and reality to the point that he uses severe violence to escape suggests that his subconscious is merging rapidly with his conscious. He is also incapable of separating his physical and emotional reactions: he feels fear, pain, violence, and sexuality simultaneously, and that sense of his own “Id” being brought out by nightmares to take over his body deeply shames and scares him. When he is finally released from the nightmare, he pulls himself up, “feeling a wetness in his groin, and [...] his splayed fingers touch(ing) the knife” (59). Realizing that his reactions in the dream have manifested physically in reality, he sends the knife away from himself with a “spasm of revulsion”, revealing the genuine disgust and terror that he feels at not being able to control his own body and mind, and the constant feelings of paranoia that incite such a reaction in him.

The illuminating nature of Billy's subconscious vision duels with the shadowy safety that he seeks out in the darkness of his dreams. The contrast between the white light that glares into him and the half-darkness of anonymity within his subconscious suggests that Billy is deeply divided as a person. The two sides he seems to exist in are the darkened one that he is comfortable in, and the shocking, revealing light side that displays his paranoia, fear, and hidden but strong violent tendencies. The clarity and recurrence of the eye in his mind implies that it is the symbol that most influences him in life. Its near constant presence in some form within his nightmare indicates the deep mental injuries that plague him from the war, and may not be just a figurative representation of Billy's paranoia, but could represent a physical eye in the real world that he fears. The nightmare where the eye and its revealing nature exists forces Billy to examine his own character and bring to light his fears and subconscious violent and sexual urges. Contrastingly, it is only in reality after the nightmare ends that he is able to shut out the eye in his head, finding disgust in the knife and his involuntary emission instead of accepting it as a part of his psyche, damaged as it is. There is duality in the responses of Billy's subconscious and conscious states, which insinuate a deeply divided character and a lack of ability to control his reactions, stemming from his experiences in the context of the suffocating nature of the trench warfare of World War I.

Billy's character is revealed in true form through the nightmares that he suffers. The face shown to the outside world, one which finds disgust in the fear that is revealed by a dream, is torn down by the genuine terror revealed to the observer by the nightmare he experiences. Just as the eye inspires fear and illuminates his own dueling natures to Billy, insight into his nightmare offers a revealing glance at both sides of Billy as a whole person. By being given a deeper look into his psyche by an objective narrator, the true desperation and division that defines the tone of

the passage also serves to signify the separation and secret fears of Billy's own character.

Surrounded by paranoia and fighting off complex sensory confusion, Billy's innermost self is stripped bare to the eye of the observer.

Works Cited

Barker, Pat. *The Eye in the Door*. Plume, 2014