

THE DARK

S
I
S
T
E
R



"Fascinating and absorbing, as haunted as it is haunting...An ambitious exploration of sexual and literary politics."—*San Francisco Chronicle*

AMERICAN FICTION

REBECCA

GOLDSTEIN

AUTHOR OF *STRANGE ATTRACTORS*

REBECCA GOLDSTEIN



T h e

D a r k

S i s t e r



PENGUIN BOOKS

PENGUIN BOOKS

Published by the Penguin Group
Penguin Books USA Inc., 375 Hudson Street, New York,
New York 10014, U.S.A.
Penguin Books Ltd, 27 Wrights Lane,
London W8 5TZ, England
Penguin Books Australia Ltd, Ringwood, Victoria, Australia
Penguin Books Canada Ltd, 10 Alcorn Avenue,
Toronto, Ontario, Canada M4V 3B2
Penguin Books (N.Z.) Ltd, 182-190 Wairau Road,
Auckland 10, New Zealand

Penguin Books Ltd, Registered Offices: Harmondsworth,
Middlesex, England

First published in the United States of America by Viking Penguin,
a division of Penguin Books USA Inc., 1991
Published in Penguin Books 1993

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

Copyright © Rebecca Goldstein, 1991
All rights reserved

Grateful acknowledgment is made for permission to reprint
the following copyrighted works:

Lines from "Planetarium" from *Poems, Selected and New, 1950-1974* by Adrienne Rich. Reprinted by permission of the author and W. W. Norton & Company, Inc. Copyright © 1975, 1973, 1971, 1969, 1966 by W. W. Norton & Company, Inc. Copyright © 1967, 1963, 1962, 1961, 1960, 1959, 1958, 1957, 1956, 1955, 1954, 1953, 1952, 1951 by Adrienne Rich.

Selections from *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Third Edition, Revised*, American Psychiatric Association, Washington, D.C., 1987.

THE LIBRARY OF CONGRESS HAS CATALOGUED THE HARDCOVER
AS FOLLOWS:

Goldstein, Rebecca, 1950-
The dark sister / Rebecca Goldstein.

p. cm.

ISBN 0-670-83556-0 (hc.)

ISBN 0 14 01.7247 5 (pbk.)

I. Title.

PS3557.0398D37 1991

813'.54—dc20 90-50510

Printed in the United States of America
Set in Weiss
Designed by Kate Nichols

Except in the United States of America, this book is sold subject to the condition that it shall not, by way of trade or otherwise, be lent, re-sold, hired out, or otherwise circulated without the publisher's prior consent in any form of binding or cover other than that in which it is published and without a similar condition including this condition being imposed on the subsequent purchaser.

This book is for my daughters—
Yael and Danielle—
who have and give me light

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Hedda's appetite for the nineteenth-century novel at times makes her reproduce in her own writing the prose of her betters. In most instances her liberties amount to no more than a phrase or two; in several places they are more substantive. Among the sources of which I am aware are

Wilkie Collins:	<i>The Woman in White</i>
Dr. Charles Fayette Taylor:	<i>Theory and Practice of the Movement Cure</i>
Thomas Hardy:	<i>Two on a Tower</i>
Nathaniel Hawthorne:	<i>The Blithedale Romance</i>
Alice James:	<i>The Diary</i>
Henry James:	<i>Letters, Roderick Hudson, Washington Square, The Bostonians, The Portrait of a Lady, The Author of Beltrafio, The Wings of the Dove</i>

A C K N O W L E D G M E N T S

William James: *Letters; The Principles of
Psychology; The Varieties of
Religious Experience; Final
Impressions of a Psychical
Researcher*

Edgar Allan Poe: "For Annie"

R.G.

T H E D A R K S I S T E R

CONTENTS

<i>I</i>	Prologue	1
<i>II</i>	Hedda	6
<i>III</i>	Alice	29
<i>IV</i>	William	50
<i>V</i>	Vivianna	81
<i>VI</i>	Stella	100
<i>VII</i>	Henry	121
<i>VIII</i>	Mrs. Piper	133
<i>IX</i>	Catherine	159
<i>X</i>	The Ancient Jewess	171
<i>XI</i>	The Nolan	174

C O N T E N T S

XII	Roderick	181
XIII	The Princess	191
XIV	Bernie	204
XV	Bella	207
XVI	The Mother	254
XVII	Voiceless	261



Prologue

The pull of the family is irresistible. Even when oceans and years—even when death—intercede.

Action at a distance. Passion at a distance.

Like a closed astronomical system, only many-sunned. The women: dark moons, silently circling.

The cork-legged father, Henry James, Senior, dazzlingly eccentric; a disciple of Swedenborg, the mystic Swede, whose visions of good and evil overlay, too, the sights of Blake and Balzac, Yeats and Strindberg.

Tell them I'm a Lover of Books, a Student. Better yet, tell them I'm a Seeker of the Truth,

Henry Senior instructs his boys, when they are asked by their school chums what it is their father does for a living.

The study of Swedenborg ends, finally, the two years of psychic terror that were unloosed by what the family dubs his "vastation":

Suddenly and inexplicably seized with a perfectly insane and helpless terror, without ostensible cause, and only to be accounted for, to my perplexed imagination, by some damned shape squatting invisible to me within the precincts of the room, and raying out from this fetid personality influences fatal to life.

Henry Senior innocently regards the foul specter as a real external presence. His children, when their own vassations come, know better.

That shape am I. That shape am I, potentially. Nothing that I possess can defend me against that fate, if the hour for it should strike for me as it struck for him.

William James, declining the term favored by his younger colleague in Vienna, speaks not of the Unconscious, but of the Hidden, or Subliminal, Self.

The mother is Mary. She doesn't emerge very clearly within the starry constellation of the family. Others' words, not her own, provide her traces. She is deified as Virtuous Woman by the father. But that, of course, is how he sees Woman. He himself is in an infinitely more complicated, demanding, and altogether more fascinating position—being, in short:

. . . the arena of a hot conflict between heaven and hell engineered principally with a view to universal issues,

as he writes a similarly afflicted son. This is, of course, trying in the extreme; and yet—how could one deny it?—cosmically gratifying.

I should be however sometimes terribly tossed and wrenched between the combatants, if I were not a married man; that is if I were not able when the celestial powers were in force to lavish my infinite and exquisite interior tenderness and peace upon my wife and children, and when they were in flight to run to the bosom of your mother, the home of all truth and purity, and deafen my ears to everything but her spotless worth 'til the inflowing infamy has spent itself.

Was the mother as insipid as all that? A vapor, a fume? Noxious or life-supporting?

There are five children. Mary has charge of their prattling infancy, but they are their father's ever after.

William James, the eldest, is the strongest attractor. A shimmering orb, spilling light; phosphorescent, but burning with intensely human colors.

Henry James, Jr., is eighteen months younger, with an obscure hurt that keeps him out of the Civil War; an obscure hurt that keeps him out of life.

There are two brothers after Henry: Garth Wilkinson James (Wilkie) and Robertson James (Bob); shooting stars, leaving trails—like their mother's—of only others' words to indicate that they once had lived.

Henry Junior, writing from England to Edward Emerson, a boyhood friend and son of the Concord seer, mourns:

Poor Wilkie himself becomes to me, with the increase of the gulf, the most pathetic of dim ghosts. . . . I rejoice that you sometimes see William. He deals in ghosts, but is blessedly not one.

Ghosts. William is an active member of the American branch of the Society for Psychical Research, conscientiously attending séances, most especially those that feature the "manifestations" of a Mrs. Piper of Boston.

Henry too has a great affinity for the ghostly tale, gracefully ambiguous.

And the youngest child is a girl: Alice James. She too has the Jamesian heightened consciousness, its gift for making itself known to itself. But her gift does not show itself to that outside world, which her two eldest brothers transform into their own.

It is a short life, stunted by mysterious nervous ailments.

In some sense, she is the most haunting of them all, her pale face in the outside darkness pressed up against the lighted window.

I have seen so little that my memory is packed with little bits which have not been wiped out by great ones, so that it all seems like a reminiscence; and as I go along the childish impressions of lights and colors come crowding back into my mind, and with them the expectant, which then palpitated within me, lives for a ghostly moment.

FROM THE JOURNAL OF ALICE JAMES

P R O L O G U E

When I am gone pray don't simply think of me as a creature who might have been something else, had neurotic science been born.

ALICE JAMES, IN A LETTER TO WILLIAM JAMES

The extraordinary intensity of her will and personality really would have made the equal, the reciprocal life of a "well" person—in the usual world—almost impossible to her—so that her disastrous, her tragic health was in a manner the only solution for her of the practical problem of life.

HENRY JAMES, IN A LETTER TO WILLIAM JAMES



Hedda

"Alice," whispered Hedda into the mirror.

It had become a sort of ritual lately: she would write for one or two hours and then stand for another one or two, staring into the full-length mirror that stood on her floor and slanted unmounted against her bedroom wall.

In this way, the ideas came. Reluctant characters were coaxed forth from the preverbal murk, skewered on language, and forced to speak their lines. Her reflection, the lower half elongated by the angle at which the glass met the wall, was her conduit, for the time being, to the shadowy realm, metamorphosing the vapors into words.

Sometimes her own image held her attention, and the words she sought was for it.

She slipped easily out of her identity. It was, in a sense, her profession. She so rarely occupied her given self, these days, that were she altogether to misplace it, the loss would probably go unnoticed for some time. Perhaps this had already happened.

Her body, however, would be immediately missed.

Hedda could view her body as remotely as any other, but this in no way diminished its fascination. She was an astonishing creature. She, no less than others, stood in awe before that form that went beyond itself, signifying a content commanding interpretation, disturbing and deep.

In short, she was not merely unattractive. She was mysteriously, mythologically, grim.

Or was she deluding herself? Was it vanity, cunning and sthenic, that made her think her want of beauty as evocative, in its own way, as a more common comeliness? What, precisely, she evoked was forever fluid—more fluid, she believed, than all but the rarest shapes of loveliness.

There is a kind of haunted beauty, destined for an *interesting* unhappiness. There were times when she saw her homeliness as similarly haunted. A gossamer veil of tragedy seemed eloquently draped before it, woven of sighs, studded with tears. One could not help but be touched.

Nothing to wonder about there, the Ubiquitous Voice sneered. *That an ugly woman should be fated to suffer!*

Ah, but not necessarily to suffer interestingly.

And is your suffering so very interesting?

On other, fiercer, days she saw herself in more heroic terms. She wore her ugliness as a coat of mail. Armed against the insidious enslavement of her sex, she resisted (easily) the seductions of a sweetly deadly submission.

It was a supreme gesture of defiance, the prognathic jut of the jaw. She could almost bring herself to believe it the result of an active assertion of her vengeful will.

In short, she was not merely pissed. She was convulsively, orgasmically, unappeased. She felt, at times, that her anger

could not be contained within the precincts of her person, capacious as these were. She felt herself the repository of all the unowned anger of all the gently smiling females of all the unenlightened (that is, of all) times. And as she sopped up this floating feminine fury, it seemed to her that she grew still huger (for what else was it that had deformed her in the first place if not the unowned fury of her own grotesque mother, the Saint of West End Avenue?), until it seemed to her that, should she choose—and why not?—her shape might blot out the entire world.

Getting delusional, are we? put in the Ubiquitous Voice, who rarely let anything pass.

She had been a beautiful child, with glittering dark eyes; further proof of the maternal perfection; another charm dangling on the sterling chain of an ostentatiously displayed martyrdom. And just look at those two daughters of hers, Hedda and Stella. Did you ever see such girls? Jewels! Diamonds! How does she do it? And all by herself! Never complaining! A woman of valor! A paragon!

A monster.

"A woman in the shape of a monster / a monster in the shape of a woman / the skies are full of them," as in a poem by Adrienne Rich.

That shape am I, potentially.

Did she glorify the situation? Was it vanity?

She stood six feet two. There was nothing vaingloriously induced in that perception. It was a fact—by anybody's standard of factuality. Even a scientist couldn't quibble with the measurable. Also measurable: she weighed one hundred and forty-two pounds. Can't-pinch-an-inch gaunt. She was thirty-eight years old and was still waiting to need a bra.