

THE POOR WRETCHED CLEVER CHILD

'I was a frightfully mentally overdeveloped child... a poor wretched clever child'. So, Vivien defined herself in a diary entry written in 1934; and like any Biographical study, it is in childhood that we find the nucleus of personality, the germination of character.

There is no way of proving this, but common sense dictates, that when Eliot was, in the Autumn of 1921, strictly ordered to take three months off work to avoid a total nervous collapse, it was Vivien who suggested he holiday in Cliftonville, near Margate, for she had been at school here, a stone's throw from where we are standing now. In her early teens, she attended an institute just off Northdown Rd known as Dulwich House, an Academy for young ladies run by the redoubtable Miss Hurrell. Vivien was clever, with a distinct talent for English and languages- and later a gifted writer of short stories, for even her husband who largely despised women's writing, praised and published her work himself, and always respected her critical faculties. As a girl, she loved Swinburne and Hardy excelling in French and German, and attended Art classes when at home in Hampstead. Pretty, highly vivacious, she loved dancing and was given to theatrical gestures and dramatic, colourful clothing and all these characteristics we might view as positive attributes. But her Mother, Rose Haigh - Wood and brother Maurice were by no means impressed by their sensitive, unconventional female relative. Both were highly orthodox, conservative people, who found Vivien a wretched source of embarrassment and punished her with a repressive and cruel distaste. Moreover, since childhood Vivien had suffered from a series of debilitating physical and nervous illnesses, culminating in adolescence with a severe menstrual disorder. This combined with her Mother's determination to quash her daughter's peculiarities, with harsh medical treatments, involving bromides and repressive and primitive anodynes, did little to restore her daughter's equilibrium and dignity.

Thus, I have often wondered whether some of Vivien's neurosis and sense of self-hatred began here, at a time when she would have been grappling with bodily changes and social integration. Was it here, perhaps, when she started her obsessive secret habit of washing her bed sheets - as often as twice a day? A habit she cultivated even more zealously when travelling all over Europe with her fastidious and introverted spouse. Another educated guess perhaps- but one that seems entirely likely.