ELIZABETH BOWEN: IMPRESSIONISM AND CHARACTERIZATION

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A Thesis

Submitted to the School of Graduate Studies

In Partial Fulfilment of the Requirements

for the Degree

Master of Arts

McMaster University

February 1984

MASTER OF ARTS (1984)
(English)

McMASTER UNIVERSITY
Hamilton, Ontario

TITLE: Elizabeth Bowen: Impressionism and Characterization

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NUMBER OF PAGES: v, 118

ABSTRACT

Elizabeth Bowen's merit as a writer lies in her style. She depicts people and places and British upper middle class life impressionistically. The impressionistic quality of her characterization and description is the central concern of this thesis.

Bowen's use of the subject of love and marriage as a theme is explored and is approached by dividing the broad topic into certain more specific themes. The author's use of death as an impressionistic tool, her description of environment, and the uniqueness of her language, provide additional topics for investigation.

Although the small body of criticism on Elizabeth Bowen deals extensively with her treatment of character and her descriptive style, nothing to my knowledge has been said about how her impressionistic technique relies on a sense of isolation. The way characters, author, and reader function in isolation from each other is a consideration that underlies this dissertation's examination of Bowen's fiction.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to take this opportunity to express my gratitude to my supervisor Professor A. Berland for his patience and advice and to my mentor Dr. Gabriele Erasmi who inspired and encouraged me.

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INTRODUCTION

In George Eliot's Middlemarch,[1] Sir James Chettam arrives on the scene accompanied by setters. The similarities between the average setter and James Chettam are striking. He has "sleekly waving blond hair" (p. 22). He is well- bred and "amiable" (p. 22). He even walks by Dorothea's side ". . . at the rather brisk pace" (p. 22) that she sets. The good- natured faithfulness toward Dorothea that will later become so apparent in him is already being implied. He says, "You have your own opinion about everything, Miss Brooke, and it is always a good opinion." (p. 22). When James offers to execute her pet scheme, that of building cottages, she regards him with her "best temper" (p. 23), in effect patting him on the head. He reacts to this treatment by coming away with ". . . a complacent sense that he was making great progress in Miss Brooke's good opinion" (p. 23). Notwithstanding our heroine's initial irritation with Chettam, the reader cannot but look kindly upon this man, who, metaphorically speaking, puts his head on her lap and gazes benignly at her with setter dog eyes.

So now we know Sir James completely and comfortably. He is knowable both as a character in the sense of an artistic creation, and as a person; he can be placed. In the

tradition of the Victorian novel (of which Middlemarch is typical), reality is seen as being objective and therefore definable. Characters are created in the same way: as packets of life full of the necessary details and neatly bound up by direct description. The move away from this kind of realism towards the impressionism of Elizabeth Bowen was probably initiated by writers like Joseph Conrad or Henry James to whom Bowen is often compared. "Impressionists Ford Madox Ford, Joseph Conrad, and Henry James create the illusion of reality by combining description of an objective, material world with its effect on the material perceiver."[2] Hermione Lee, in her critical study of Elizabeth Bowen, adds that "Elizabeth Bowen is an exceptional English novelist because she fuses two traditions -- that of Anglo-Irish literature and history, and that of a European modernism indebted to Flaubert and James."[3]

This fusion is exemplified by Bowen's description of her family house in Ireland. Like her fictional houses, it acts as a referent to its inhabitants:

> The land around Bowen's Court, even under its windows, has an unhumanized air the house does nothing to change. Here are, even, no natural features, view or valley, to which the house may be felt to relate itself. . . . Like Flaubert's ideal book about nothing it sustains itself on itself by the inner force of style.[4]

Isolation invites subjectivity. The Elizabeth Bowen gallery of characters seem to spend their time alone in a

crowd. They are mostly of the British upper middle class, and even when they are not, they seem to move in or be affected by that society. These characters are not only isolated from each other but from the reader as well. The manner in which Bowen draws her characters seems highly impressionistic. The reader may be able to acquire a great deal from inference but cannot really know the character in the same way that one can never really know people in life.

Themes of love, marriage, the home, and the struggle for self-awareness are central to her works and I will be exploring her characterizations as they are expressed in these themes. With an eye to the subject of characterization, I will also examine her treatment of environment, her use of death as an impressionistic tool, and the quality of her language.

A woman of letters, Elizabeth Bowen wrote, among other pieces, ten novels and over eighty short stories. The novels which interest me are the earlier ones: The Hotel (1927),[5] The Last September (1929),[6] To the North (1932),[7] The House in Paris (1935),[8] which are her first, second, fourth, and fifth respectively. Her third novel, Friends and Relations (1931)[9] is considered by most critics to be a minor work and I will deal with it only in passing.[10] I will also occasionally refer to a number of her short stories.

The novels which I will be dealing with focus on young and youngish heroines. These women have enough in

common that one can make from them a definition of what one might term "the Bowen woman." Such a woman is young, pretty, intelligent, intellectual, and to varying degrees, monied. Bowen's female child characters are similar, though at a more embryonic stage.

While not always terribly discontented, these women suffer subtly nonetheless. They, as does the reader, struggle to catch a foothold of some absolute understanding in a subjective world. It is not some larger truth which they seek, but rather something for or about themselves: to do the right thing in a blurry world of no absolutes.

Lois (in The Last September) and Sydney (in The Hotel) are the very young women not yet independent of their elders. Cecilia (of To the North), and Marda (in The Last September), are the slightly older women of some experience, as is Emmeline (To the North), although in some ways she falls roughly between the two groups. Pauline (To the North) and Henrietta (The House in Paris) are the young girls who might become such women, and Karen, in the structural experiment with time that Bowen attempts in The House in Paris, is shown to us in two stages of life.

For every major female character there are other female characters, major and minor, against whom the central one is reflected. While no character is portrayed as existing in a vacuum, it is the women who seem to populate the scene as variable mirrors of each other, more so than do the men.

For example: for Sydney, there are women who represent what she might become, what she is more likely to become, and even women set up to represent what she is not. The man with whom she is paired, the Rev. Milton, does not have a large group of male characters around him who are significant in his characterization to the same degree as are the women who surround Sidney. There are other men who have a bearing on his existence, but in Sidney's case, the other women represent actual permutations of herself.

At the same time the supporting characters are often interesting studies in themselves. Some are, among other things, amusing; for instance, Lady Waters, whose pastime is teaching people how unhappy they are, even if they originally thought otherwise. Some, like Marda, Mrs. Montmorency, and Karen's dying aunt, are examples of sensitivity and wisdom in the face of real suffering.

In the four novels which I will deal with, the fullest portrayals of both major and secondary characters are those of women. Bowen does not give the men equal artistic consideration. They exist more as natural obstacles to be dealt with in the lives of women. The novels are about women: women faced with questions which necessarily implicate men, -- love, marriage and the making of a home.

Less obvious is the theme around the struggle for self-awareness. As the women try to define themselves, their society identifies them according to the men they match them-

selves with, and so the women must define themselves within this system of pairing. Cecilia ultimately marries Julian because it is the thing to do; Sidney narrowly escapes that fate, doing so out of conscious choice unlike Lois who escapes only by chance. The women feel the social pressure to mate in order to fit into the scheme of the world they see while at the same time they are trying to grasp a hint of a larger scheme and how one should fit into it. They wonder if there is a larger scheme at all. The reader is led to wonder the same thing. "If she did not exist for Mrs. Kerr as a tennis player, in this most ordinary, popular of her aspects, had she reason to feel she existed at all?" (The Hotel, p. 17).

Bowen refrains from telling; instead she shows a world and characters and leaves the exercise of judgement to the reader. Waugh portrayed his characters externally. As he put it to Elizabeth Bowen when she remarked that he never told his characters' thoughts: "I do not think I have any idea what they are thinking; I merely see them and show them."[11] Of course Waugh is suggesting the presence of more artistic control than is immediately obvious from such a statement. Similarly, Bowen gives us a basket of observations about each character, some given by her, and some given by the other characters, and we are left to judge for ourselves. That which is given to us by the surrounding characters may be the author's once removed, but even the

narrator's voice is not authoritative. "The general took one long look at Cecilia, then put up The Times between them" (in To the North, p. 1).

In Wuthering Heights the narrator is a character and must be treated accordingly. This is not the case in Bowen's writing. Here the narrator is the author but is not overtly omniscient, and not even detached. The authorial voice in Bowen makes much commentary but not in the intrusive manner of say, George Eliot. Sometimes there is an opinion directly stated: ". . . neither Cecilia nor Markie had nice characters; all the same, this encounter presents them in an unfair light" (in To the North, p. 7). But more often than not, Bowen makes the statement by speaking with the author's voice while using the manner of the character. Mrs. Michaelis' opinion of Max is described in the third person:

> She liked his intellect; you could feel his ability. Though she found him nice rather than exactly attractive, no doubt many people would find him attractive too. Though it was nice for the Fishers that he was marrying Naomi, he could, she thought, have done better if he had wished. But his unambitious marriage showed a good heart (in The House in Paris, p. 114).

This mimicking sways our judgement without actually telling us what to think. So, although the narrator is not neutral, neither does she take the reader by the hand. As do the other characters, the author merely holds up another piece of the broken mirror in which a fragment of the

character in question is being reflected, only a fragment and only from a certain angle. The view is a limited one as from the window of James's house of fiction. Bowen shifts from window to window yet still without giving the whole picture, simply because there cannot be one. Because a life is a moving, many-dimensioned thing, it cannot be contained for effective description. Direct description freezes the life, making it not life at all, only an artifact.

The author who assumes omniscience limits the depths and dimensions of the characters by limiting the reader's participation and by assuming that characters or people are that knowable. The more the author gives, the more frozen, the more limited, becomes the character. The less the author gives, the more the character is freed to live, but the risk of being misunderstood is greater because what there is to infer becomes proportionately greater.

Any description is confining, but if it is offered as merely being a limited, undefinitive, possibly fallible opinion, the reader is left free to judge for himself, free even to judge wrongly.

In all four novels the first impression is that of motion. The House in Paris opens with Henrietta "In a taxi skidding away . . .;" (p. 3) in To the North "the north wind blew cold down Milan platforms" (p. 1) as Cecilia prepared to board a train; The Last September begins with "the sound

of a motor, collected out of the whole country and narrowed under the trees of the avenue" (p. 3); in The Hotel "Miss Fitzgerald hurried out of the Hotel into the road" (p. 11).

This initial impression of people in motion can indicate much: for instance, the instability of the lives in question. An impression is also given of the motion which is intrinsic to life itself. When a train hurls by, one cannot capture all the details of it, but one is nevertheless left with some impression of that train. As the characters move by each other, the other characters gather a collection of ideas about them to form impressions which are imparted to the reader. The characters also move by the reader, from incident to incident, mood to mood, displaying only some parts of themselves for observation, and all the while they are changing.

The House in Paris, which is in effect two related stories, one taking place in the present, the other in the past, the latter as an interjection to explain the former, consequently has two beginnings. In the second of the three parts of the book, the one entitled "The Past," after a few introductory paragraphs functioning to bridge the space leaped backwards in time, Bowen begins that story with Karen on a ship "steaming up the tidal river to Cork" (p. 61). Typical of the Bowen woman, she is in flux. She is young, engaged, but not yet married. Her life until now has

been moving forward in an apparently correct manner. In her world to have married is to have arrived. "She had been born and was making her marriage inside that class that in England changes least of all" (p. 62). Her placid, predictable journey, however, is interrupted by her involvement with Max and her course is altered. Even before her affair with him, she is already moving away from her family's values with "That unconscious sereneness behind their living" (p. 63). She is searching for something. "She was not married yet: at the same time, she had no right to be still looking about; she had to stop herself asking: 'What next? What next?' She had firm ground under her feet, but the world shrank; perhaps she was missing the margin of uncertainty" (p. 62).

She is going to Cork to visit her Aunt Violet who has also deviated from the family values: ". . . the idea of Aunt Violet in Ireland made them uncomfortable; it seemed insecure and pointless, as though she had chosen to settle on a raft" (p. 69). The idea of a raft which gets tossed about unpredictably by natural forces is distasteful to these people who nurture order. The changelessness of their world, their routine, is the result of the imposition of rules and forms on life, thereby making life clearly definable or knowable.

Having left the conventional path, not only does Karen change, she also begins to become aware of the nature of change. She sees that life is not a series of tidy,

definable, packages of existence, that you do not simply move from girlhood into a married state, leaving behind the one state to assume the other with all the pieces falling into place according to a neat plan. "She was startled to find how unwilling she was to arrive: she had thought of the journey as, simply, going away. But you never get quite away" (p. 65).

Karen is becoming more aware of herself as an individual rather than as a cog in the social machinery. By doing this, she is isolating herself from her family and their world. "She found she had come to hope everything of change" (p. 121).

Isolation is a function of being an individual in that each individual is trapped alone inside his mind and body and can never completely know another individual, as he himself can never be known. There is a triangular relationship between self, isolation, and impressionism. The self is in isolation and its relationship with the external world is one of impressions. The self receives impressions and conveys meaning to others by communicating impressions. One self can never have complete communication with another because of the isolation of minds. Communication, more specifically, artistic communication, is like a telephone conversation; the two parties try to express themselves to each other but they are limited by their separation. We are seen and see others externally. We can only make assumptions

about the internal person, and all assumptions about others are coloured by the limitations and prejudices present in the self:

> Her character was not in her look (she had learnt before she was twelve). She looked at people at once vaguely and boldly; for years she had learnt from other eyes what hers did. This makes any lover or friend a narcissus pool; you do not want anyone else once you have learnt what you are; there is no more to learn (in The House in Paris, p. 66).

Bowen presents the external in such a way as to imply the internal: a series of impressions for the reader to interpret by his own knowledge of self.

Working together to form a thematic umbrella under which the Elizabeth Bowen novels are organized, are the subjects of love, marriage, the home, and the labour of self-awareness.

The Hotel, her first novel, contains most of the elements which Bowen would later, to varying degrees, separate and focus upon in her later novels as well as short stories. In The Hotel Elizabeth Bowen deals with relationships between people of different generations, the divisions of class, and various forms of courtship. There is even a portrait of childhood in the person of the young Cordelia.

It seems odd to say that a story taking place in a hotel could have much to do with the home, but indirectly this book does. The hotel itself is in Italy and is occupied by upper middle class English people. Rather than mixing in the foreign environment, these people prefer to isolate themselves in a hotel which caters to their Englishness. In other words, they have not left home.

Miss Pym discovers tht there is to be a new arrival at the hotel, "a Rev. J. D. L. Milton -- John?" (p. 12). An item of his mail had been forwarded from an address she knew in Derbyshire. The narrator, in Miss Pym's tone comments: "Gratifying how one's intimate world contracted itself, how one's friends wove themselves in! Society was fascinating, so like a jigsaw puzzle!" (p. 12).

The society within the hotel is quite like a jigsaw puzzle. The guests all directly or indirectly interact with each other but not with any society outside the hotel, and of course gossip is rampant. In the drawing-room (in the chapter of that name), seven women "all embroidering something unpractical and therefore permissible" (p. 83), discuss Sydney's relationship with an older woman Mrs. Kerr. "'I have known other cases,' said somebody else, looking about for her scissors, 'of these very violent friendships. One didn't feel those others were quite healthy'" (p. 84).

When Mrs. Kerr's son Ronald arrives, her attention is diverted from Sydney, and the younger woman reacts by accepting the advances of the middle aged Rev. Milton.

The hotel is a close environment and so matches, and more to the point, mismatches, are made within it. Besides Sydney, the other young modern girls, as they are referred to in the book, are the Lawrence sisters. They are in competition with each other for the attentions of a young man about whom the only quality to recommend him is that he is the only young Englishman of a certain class within their little environment:

> The Lawrences had appropriated for general use the principal young man of the Hotel, young Mr. Ammering, who, having been unable to find a job since the war, was said to be suffering from nervous depression in consequence and had come out here for a rest with his father and mother (p, 33).

Veronica Lawrence, who is wise in a hard and simple way (she has that "unchippable glaze" of Henrietta's older sister in The House in Paris (p. 46)), is soon engaged to Victor Ammering because, as she says, "You see, I do like Victor, and we do seem to be rather involved -- which comes, of course, from having nothing to do here" (p. 158). Even though Sydney looks "fearfully grim" (p. 158) at such an admission, her acceptance of Milton is not so different. Veronica enters Sydney's room for the purpose of intimate conversation. In no time she brings the talk around to the subject of Victor. "'By the way,' she added after a pause in

which two more feathers had been extracted, 'what is your absolutely candid opinion of the man Victor?'" (p. 153) Sydney maintains a certain superiority or detachment. "I do envy you for being so fearfully clever, Sydney: it's kept you young for your age" (p. 154), says Veronica. But when the subject of Milton arises, Sydney is equally interested, though less honest about it. Beginning with Veronica, the conversation goes like this:

> "He's got a tremendous vocabulary: he said you were 'clear cut.'"
> "Oh! How amusing. Does he talk about me?"
> "Of course he does; he's fearfully keen on you."
> "Oh! How amusing . . ." (p. 154).

And so it goes on in this hotel which is an obvious microcosm of English upper middle class society, a society which, especially in terms of love and marriage, is as closed and limiting as is this little hotel in Italy. As Karen's future sister-in-law (in The House in Paris) tells her: "But after all, there *is* only one way to be nice. Nothing unlike oneself in people really is not a pity. It's better to inbreed than marry outside one's class. Even in talk, I think. Do let us be particular while we can" (p. 123).

The Last September is the only Bowen novel that focuses on Anglo-Irish concerns. Although not entirely autobiographical, the author does draw on her own memories of youth in the "Big House" during "The Troubles". Bowen writes in the preface of the 1952 edition:

> I am the daughter of the house from which Danielstown was drawn. In real life the house has survived; it is now our home. But so often, during the Troubled Times, did I in my agonised mind's eye see it burn that that terrible final page of The Last September is for me, also, something I have lived through. Yes the scene of the novel is real, and the month has its place in history. Lois derives from, but is not, myself at nineteen. All the rest of the characters are imaginary, and the story, though it could have been true, is not (p. xi).

It is also the only Bowen novel set in a former time. She writes: "The mood and cast of my characters, and their actions, were to reflect the glow of a finished time. 'All this,' I willed the reader to know, 'is over.' Yet I wished him to feel: 'But see, our story begins!'" (in The Last September, p. vii).

The book evolves around Lois, her pursuit of love and marriage, and her growth into self-knowledge. Also important, practically a character in itself, and always felt as a presence, is the Big House Danielstown. As Lois stands looking out from the top of the steps, "above, the large facade of the house stared coldly over its mounting lawns" (pp. 3-4). Lois, as the author points out in the preface, "was niece only, not the child of that house" (p. xi). Danielstown is not a home to her but it traps and contains her nonetheless. Mr. and Mrs. Montmorency, with whose arrival the story begins, are rootless people who crave to belong to this house. When Marda (as much a guest as they are) arrives, she comments about them: "They seem very much

here -- faintly resentful: I expect it must be horrible for them" (p. 110).

"The Last September," writes Bowen, "takes its pitch from that lovely, too mortal month which gives the novel its name" (in The Last September, p. vi). The story of the house and the collection of people grouped under its roof takes place in "that September of 1920" (p. vii) when in Ireland the Troubles raged. Written in 1928,[12] a story about love and death in a war context, The Last September can be seen as a precursor to Bowen's World War II novel The Heat of the Day written twenty years later (1948).[13] Understated, unsensational, both books make the reader uncomfortably aware of the insane violence, more felt than seen, always present in the background. George Wickes quotes Elizabeth Bowen from her postscript to The Demon Lover (1945), her collection of wartime short stories. She writes: "I do not feel I 'invented' anything I wrote. It seems to me that during the war the overcharged subconsciousnesses of everybody overflowed and merged. It is because the general subconscious saturates these stories that they have an authority nothing to do with me."[14] This comment is I think applicable to The Last September as well. The workings of the subconsciousness, impressionistically shown in fragments from without, is an ingredient of all of Bowen's fiction.

To the North is reminiscent of Women in Love: two women, practically sisters, are involved with two contrasting

men. (Bowen's Markie resembles very much Lawrence's Gerald). With its preoccupation with houses and homes, it can be likened to Forster's Howards End, another book about the relationships between men and women in a British upper middle class setting. The problem of the clash between the human world of emotions and the public world of business is common to the three books.

The House in Paris is another of Bowen's early novels containing most of those subjects which concern the author. The book is divided into three sections: "The Present", "The Past", and again "The Present". Later, among her short stories from the war years is the one entitled "Ivy Gripped the Steps"[46] in which Bowen makes the same kinds of divisions.

The first and last sections of The House in Paris gives us the world as it is being experienced by two children. Portrayal of children is a Bowen specialty. Sympathetic without being sentimental about the subject, she shows the childrens' world as being their own, although it is greatly infringed upon by the world of adults.

In The House in Paris love crosses the boundaries of society, propriety, as well as the English Channel. The result is a child with no parents, no home, and no country truly to belong to. The notion of having nowhere to belong is stated, often explicitly, in much of Bowen's fiction and it is finely focused in the character of the child Leopold.

Much of what we learn about him is the perception of the other child, Henrietta. Henrietta is a product of that closed society which rejects Leopold's very existence. "No one knew about Leopold. The husk of silence around him was complete" (p. 47 in The House in Paris). Yet by virtue of their similarity of age, she is able to come close enough to him to afford us some insight into his situation and his suffering. We see him as he is filtered through Henrietta's prejudices of her class as well as her "childish" self-centredness. She is not always sympathetic towards this tragic little boy. What she sees and understands of the situation is limited, but she sees Leopold, whereas Naomi and Mme Fisher look for and see his dead father.

Leopold is a kind of living, many dimensioned, puzzle. He is the key and the centre piece of the story. What he means to them, and how the other characters react to him, gives us the meaning of the whole story. But this meaning is cryptic. What exactly the reader is supposed to make of Leopold is not clear. We are offered many fragmented and prejudiced views of this little boy who is symbolic of many things. To understand the book one must understand Leopold. That Leopold is not wholly understandable is part of the point of the book. Indeed, such unknowability in the characters typifies Elizabeth Bowen's portrayal of them.

CHAPTER I

THEMES OF LOVE AND MARRIAGE

"When a Man has Married a Wife, he finds out whether / Her knees & elbows are only glewed together," wrote William Blake.[16] What knowledge there is to be gained by marriage is characterized in Bowen's novels by the tension between the reality of marriage, and society's view of it. The women marry because they must, the men because they are gallant or flattered. They are all impelled by the clear patterns promoted by the society. Love is an attendant formality like the flowers at the Studdart-Tilney wedding:

> "You might hold your lilies," said Mrs. Studdart, who had discovered the sheaf on a hall table specially cleared for the top hats.
> "Oh Mother, I can't; they're heavy."
> "But don't you think it would be nice, Edward, if she were to hold her lilies?"
> "I don't know," said Edward. "Do people generally?" (in Friends and Relations. p. 15).

Markie (To the North) and Max (The House in Paris) who turn away from the marriages which would be appropriate to their situations are therefore frowned upon by "nice" society.

From a social standpoint marriage, and the prospect of it, serves to join two people who (in turn), as a couple

then are embraced by the social structure as respectable members come to take their respected places. What happens instead to the Bowen characters is that they become more isolated within their own minds. Trapped between public approval (or disapproval) and private self-questioning, they thrash about in a mire of introspection which is often as baffling to the reader as it is to them. However, sometimes the reader is able to see through a character, especially the more comical ones whose motivations and actions are slightly exaggerated in their manifestation. These characters are more knowable to the reader. Usually we can place them and usually we can gather some indication of how to place our sympathies. For example, we have Mrs. Lee-Mittison (in _The Hotel_) who, hen-like, gathers her self-important and silly husband Herbert's happiness, "all his little plans for the day, for protection under her feathers" (p. 61). Proud and at the same time protective of her husband, she would sacrifice her own dignity to salvage his:

> Mr. Lee-Mittison began the story, which was about Malay. He raised his voice, drew out his words and was emphatic. One by one the girls returned their eyes to his face reluctantly. The more suggestible among them took their cues from Mrs. Lee-Mittison and echoed her small exclamations. Herbert's wife, with tightly folded hands, was leaning forward eagerly. It could not have been thought possible that she had heard this story before were it not for the glance around with which at the approach of any salient point she would gather up the attention of the circle, and the dissyllabic titter with which she anticipated the humorous passages. Once she gripped a Bransome's hand convulsively -- "Isn't it exciting?" (p. 65).

Understanding the major characters is not simple, nor is it required. We do not need to understand in order to sympathize or react; more is to be inferred rather than understood. Does Cecilia (in To the North) really want to marry Julian all along, or is she bullied into it by her society? She often avoids and is certainly critical of those "chats" which Lady Waters loves to hold in order to inferfere in other people's lives. At the same time, Cecilia finds that she has a weakness for those sessions and occasionally, rather masochistically, seeks Lady Waters out herself. Lady Waters, a respectable member of society and a good gauge of its values, is a bully. She outlasted her first husband (did she wear him out?) and she dominates her second. She ruthlessly interferes in and re-arranges the romantic and marital affairs of others, gleefully creating problems where there were none before:

> Lady Waters was quick to detect situations that did not exist. Living comfortably in Rutland Gate with her second husband, Sir Robert, she enlarged her own life into ripples of apprehension on everybody's behalf. Upon meeting, her very remarkable eyes sought one's own for those first intimations of crisis she was all tuned up to receive; she entered one's house on a current that set the furniture bobbing; at Rutland Gate destiny shadowed her tea-table. Her smallest clock struck portentously, her telephone trilled from the heart, her dinner-gong boomed a warning. When she performed introductions, drama's whole precedent made the encounter momentous. . . . Only Sir Robert, who spent much of his time at his club, remained unaware of this atmosphere (p. 10).

Would Julian really prefer to marry Emmeline? He meets Cecilia's sister-in-law at a party. "Her thin arms, blue-veined inside the elbow, were crossed on her knee; the fingers curled idly up. He tried to say something to bring back her eyes to his own, to command her mild interest and lovely attentive face" (p. 27). And gentle passive Emmeline; what is the quality of her love for Markie?

> Markie helped her off with her coat; they smiled at each other and said nothing. Markie folded the white fur coat and put it down, liking the silent intimacy of her arrival. Misty with short-sight, her eyes dwelt anxiously on his face, as though there were someone here that she did not recognise. Something slipped from her, on the instant, like a bright cloak, leaving her colder (p. 82).

Whatever it is that slipped from her seems to slip on and off throughout this important evening early in their relationship. Usually Emmeline is described as cool, as during that party at which Julian meets her and she is sipping ice-tea all evening. This evening with Markie in his apartment, she fluctuates between hot and cold as does the mood of their intercourse. Markie seems to be a source of heat to which Emmeline gravitates. He alternately accepts and repels her meek advances. When she enters, her hand is still "chilly from driving" (p. 82). In Markie's room the curtains are drawn against the cold. "One stepped back from summer, late light in squares and gardens, into the seasonless glare of festivity" (p. 82). Emmeline feels threatened by the room itself. Markie takes her coat and she feels

colder. He offers and she accepts sherry. When he compliments her, "Emmeline, like a tall crystal lamp in which the flame springs up, at these words shone taller and brighter" (p. 83). I think that the image of "Emmeline's cool bare arms held out to the fire" (p. 83), captures the nature of this scene between them and, indeed, the nature of the whole affair. Like a moth, Emmeline is being drawn towards the fire which will consume her. At the end, in the violent culmination of their relationship, this image is repeated. "Head-on, magnetised up the heart of the fan of approaching brightness, the little car, strung on speed, held unswerving way. . . . Markie dragged their wheel left: like gnats the two hung in the glare with unmoving faces (p. 306).

Markie often calls Emmeline "Angel" (p. 86), and the narrator states that she rather looks like one (p.13). If she is a moth, she is also an angel drawn down to the destructive flames. Similarly, Cecilia is drawn to the destructive influence of Lady Waters. One of the few bonds that link these two very different young women is the man Henry who made them sisters-in-law, and this bond was rather strangely created as the result of his death: "One might say that [Emmeline] and Cecilia had had hardly time to take stock of each other before their eyes met across a grave" (p. 11).

Yet there is nothing morbid or unhealthy about Emmeline and Cecilia or about how they conduct their lives. There is not even a slight "tendency to hysteria" (p. 62) as

there is in Gerda Bligh, "an honest girl of about Emmeline's age" (p. 62) and foil to Emmeline.

Intelligent and to varying degrees worldly, the two "sisters", virtually opposite to each other in every way, are full of opposing tendencies within themselves as well, not the least example being in their choice of men. Cecilia picks a man according to his class and social prestige; Emmeline blindly (or near-sightedly) follows her heart. Cecilia would be far more suitable as a match for Markie, while Julian, who is possibly in love with her anyway, would probably be more appropriate and certainly more compassionate to Emmeline.

Having her own thriving business and driving her own car immediately sets Emmeline apart from the mass of women of her time. Were she as aggressive as such a description would suggest, it would explain her attraction to Markie who is one of the "coming young men [who] . . . lives hard and works hard" (p. 138). Instead, she is more as the Vicar sees her: "this thin girl with the social passivity of an angel, pouring out tea with her left hand unsteadily, gracefully under the lime tree" (p. 77). This slightly romantic vision held by the Vicar is in fact rather revealing of Emmeline. Socially she is passive; witness her behavior at Lady Waters' gatherings or even with her own secretary. Like everyone else, the Vicar (whose business I suppose it is to know these things), finds her angelic. Not in fact domestic as her foil

Gerda is, her pouring of the tea suggests that she is. "'I had no idea,'" says Markie later "rather slightly, 'you were domestic'" (p. 84). Her left-handedness indicates her apartness. Her unsteadiness coupled with gracefulness typifies the contradictions in Emmeline, and the image of her under the lime tree, even as she is perfectly suited for it, is at odds with her choice to live and work in the city. So although she is everything the Vicar feels her to be, at the same time she is not.

Bowen records a multitude of contradictory impressions of Emmeline the sum of which is a destructive and self-destructive personality. Her potential for destruction lies dormant until she falls in love and the antithetic aspects of her nature begin to smolder in reaction against each other. She is a gently ticking bomb.

Love and Marriage: Innocence

Another gently destructive woman is Naomi Fisher (in _The House in Paris_). With her, too, love of a man is the catalyst. Somehow _her_ goodness is more sinister and insidious than is Emmeline's. Cecilia finds Emmeline "a shade perverse: she mistook theory for principle" (_To the North_, p. 13). But the cause of the perversity is near-sightedness, metaphoric and literal. "Her spectacles, which from an independence that would rather blunder than be directed she seldom wore . . ." (p. 13). Naomi sees life

clearly, coldly and engages in it with the perversity of a martyr. The other characters, as well as the reader, cannot be sure whether she is to be pitied or feared. Likewise, her almost always being in black gives an ambiguous message about how she is to be taken:

> She wore black gloves with white-stitched seams that twisted round on her fingers, and black furs that gave out a camphory smell. At the Gare du Nord, as she stood under the lamps, her hat had cast a deep shadow, in which her eyes in dark sockets moved, melancholy and anxious. Her olive-green coat and skirt, absorbing what light there was, had looked black (in The House in Paris, p. 4).

The mention, often repeated, of the smell of camphor, is disturbing. Is she the one who holds the past as she does her mother and prevents it from dying naturally, or is she the one being kept in camphor? Is she victim or victimized? Henrietta feels "victimized" (p. 26) by Naomi but then again "Henrietta's character . . . was a mosaic of all possible kinds of prejudice" (p. 12). Henrietta's opinion is only one of many which we are offered for consideration. Henrietta "had come to associate prejudice with identity" (p. 12). Dependent on formulas in this way, Henrietta finds that she cannot "place" (p. 9) the street of the Fishers' house. The house, which Naomi will not leave (even after her marriage she was to stay in it with her mother), is in many ways associated with and symbolic of her; consequently, from a rigidly conventional point of view (as a view being held by an adolescent is likely to be) Naomi and the affairs of her

heart are difficult to "place": "Henrietta knew of the heart as an organ; she privately saw it covered in red plush and believed that it could not break, though it might tear. But Miss Fisher's heart had been brittle, it _had_ broken. No wonder she'd looked so odd at the Gare du Nord" (p. 43).

Surely Naomi is deserving of sympathy for her role in the tragedy of the triangle between her, Max and Karen, especially as she is as much a victim of her mother's perverted power as is Max and more subtly Karen. But somehow Naomi leaves a bad taste in the mouth while her mother is somehow almost splendid in the manner of a predator: Mme Fisher's eyes were "like an old lion's" (p. 204). Hermione Lee groups Naomi with Emmeline and Portia as "one of Elizabeth Bowen's lethal, exalted innocents".[17] In _The Death of the Heart_ (the story in which Portia is the heroine), Elizabeth Bowen describes the innocents. Part of what she says about them is that:

> They exist alone; when they try to enter into relations they compromise falsifyingly -- through anxiety, through desire to impart and feel warmth. The system of our affections is too corrupt for them. They are bound to blunder, then to be told they cheat. In love, the sweetness and violence they have to offer involves a thousand betrayals for the less innocent. Incurable strangers to the world, they never cease to exact a heroic happiness. Their singleness, their ruthlessness, their one continuous wish makes them bound to be cruel, and to suffer cruelty.[18]

Naomi is an innocent as is Emmeline but the latter is a sympathetic character if simply because she is an angel who strayed and got lost: "She looked bewildered -- like a gentle foreigner at Victoria, not knowing where to offer her ticket, to whom if, at all, her passport, uncertain even whether she has arrived . . ." (in To the North, p. 85). Naomi is different from Emmeline in that she is not bewildered or metaphorically nearsighted; on the contrary, Naomi sees very clearly. When Naomi becomes engaged to Max, she insists, against Karen's protestations, that Karen meet him again (Karen has not seen him since she was eighteen). Naomi knows better than they do of Max's and Karen's feelings for each other. She wants them to meet, even at the risk of losing Max for herself, in order to give the truth a chance to come out. The truth is that Karen and Max love only each other. In a way, Max's and Karen's affair, followed by Max's suicide, Leopold's birth, and Karen's breakdown, were all initiated by this meeting, a meeting which Karen feared and resisted. This truth that Naomi unearths is one which no one wanted or needed to have revealed; it is a dangerous and damaging truth and Naomi is alone in actively seeking it. Naomi cannot compromise as Max and Karen wish to in pursuing their respective marriages, and by not compromising in her pursuit of truth she cruelly pushes Karen and Max together so that in turn they must, by having their affair, be cruel to her. She betrays them more than they her in that she brings

them together even while she can see better than they what the meeting could result in. She is innocent because she can see the truth but cannot see it as everyone else does, as unacceptable and unwanted knowledge that is better left buried.

It is isolation that Emmeline and Naomi have most in common. Of course all the characters are isolated, but these two are even more so in that their innocence causes them to seem to be removed from this world. Hermione Lee writes that:

> Unlike her sister-in-law, Emmeline is not quite of this world. She is ethereal, angelic, "pale and clear," "more than half transparent materially." When Julian first meets her she is drinking iced tea, dressed in silver, and sitting in an alcove "alarmingly flooded with white light." She is repeatedly described as short-sighted and thus disconnected from her surroundings; "a curious distant look, not like a woman's" is apt to come across her face in conversation. Her work, the charming eccentric travel agency, partly serves to make her substantial by giving her pragmatic, competent qualities, but also sustains the ideas of distance and aerial aloofness, suggesting that she is always on the point of no return. Before she meets Markie, she is the unwanted ice maiden. the unfallen angel: "nothing could be as dear as the circle of reading light round her solitary pillow."[19]

Naomi's innocence isolates her because in her pursuit of what is right she turns people against her. Her own mother has no sympathy for her and treats her badly; Karen and Max are made to conspire against her by meeting secretly. Everyone uses her badly. Her mother had always used her to serve the

American girls who were boarders in their house. Later she opposes her daughter's marriage and would keep Max for herself rather than give her daughter the chance for happiness with him. Afterwards, she cruelly makes fun of Naomi's broken heart. Karen takes Max away from her friend and years later places the responsibility of the illegitimate child's welfare in Naomi's hands. When Naomi placed Leopold with the Americans, Mme Fisher had no doubt that these foster parents "took the child to be Naomi's" (in The House in Paris, p. 209). We usually see Bowen's characters from the view that other characters take of them. Mrs. Michaelis, who is the same kind of indicator of the social values as is Lady Waters (in To the North), states concisely why Naomi is a misfit. She finds Naomi "odd" (p. 114) and feels that "Naomi is so good -- perhaps that's what's trying about her" (p. 114).

Initially love brings Emmeline and Naomi happiness. Emmeline: ". . . was so happy that she could have kissed the sundial; everything seemed to be printed on glass with a light behind. She smiled at the glint of sun on poor Gerald's hair: grief was a language she did not know." (in To the North, p. 64). Max seems to bring Naomi down to earth, to give her life meaning and reality:

> Perhaps it was his exactness that had such a calming effect and made her sit back quietly on her heels. He never went rocketing off -- so she would check in mid-air and come quietly down again. . . . She touched no object without sympathy; Max's touch had given all others nature. She threw herself into the day's business for him (in The House in Paris, p. 109).

For Naomi and Emmeline it is their love and their being denied marriage that damns them. For most of the other Bowen characters marriage is itself destructive, but for these two it is necessary to bring them down from their ethereal plane and into the community of society. Karen's marriage to Ray does not save her because she (unlike Naomi and Emmeline) is a part of that society. She tried unsuccessfully and perhaps a shade unwillingly to escape that world and finds when she returns to it by returning to Ray, she is a changed person. She is welcomed into the community of society under false pretenses as no one knows about Leopold. She is isolated, alone in a crowd of supportive well-wishers. Society, not knowing the truth, holds up her marriage with Ray as a perfect one. While society applauds Karen's apparent success in life, she secretly suffers and finally breaks down.

Naomi is isolated because she is innocent and a misfit, Emmeline because she is innocent and nearsighted; she lacks even Naomi's ability to see people and understand their passions. Karen isolates herself by stepping away from the shelter of the society which accepts her, (the same society that does not accept Naomi.) Even in her youth Karen had

"friends she had made for herself, at the school of art and elsewhere" who held for her family and her family's society "a writhing antagonism" (p. 63). Yet Karen never has the courage to leave the society that allows her (though on the surface only) to be so successful. Max tells her that she gets on nicely: "'You should be glad,' said Max, 'I wish I got on as well.' She saw him glance at the ring on her hand on the grass without comment in his dark eyes . . ." (p. 111).

All three women, Naomi, Emmeline, and Karen, are isolated from the reader as well as from the people around them. Because we get our information about them from the other characters, we can never have a definitive description of them as the other characters' views vary and cannot be considered entirely reliable. The best example of a character isolated from the reader because he is isolated from the other characters is Max. The reference to the lack of comment in his eyes when he glances at Karen's engagement ring is ambiguous and Max is an ambiguous character.

If the eyes are the windows to the soul, his are shuttered. We know of Max's passion and frustration, that is fairly obviously stated, but what is inside him is a mystery. He would have married Karen, but just as in his decision to marry Naomi, money is a factor. Is he merely mercenary? Still it is Naomi that he would prefer to marry because he can be with her while not being conscious of her. He says:

The boyishness of Ronald kicking the side of the rock with his heels as the chapter ends is comically contrasted with the appearance of James Milton in the opening of the next chapter. After climbing the hills on the approach to where Sydney and Ronald are sitting, the older man finds that he must stop to lean against a tree. He is considering the letters that he has written to his family to announce his engagement. He knows that these letters have "just enough manly glow about them and just enough boyish reticence" (p. 224). Ronald attempts maturity, while the mature man attempts "boyishness." Milton's maturity expresses itself in "his consciousness that these letters, so bound to strike a note of sincerity, were in intention sincere" (p. 224). Ronald is sincere when he is not conscious. Sydney, in years and maturity, is between Milton who is older, bland and sincere, and Ronald who is younger, aggressive and pretentious. Milton comes on purpose to meet Sydney in the valley and along the way he consciously and conscientiously considers his engagement. Like the unposted letters, his actions are "in his own control" (p. 225). Ronald, quiet and unaware of Sydney's presence, comes upon her quite suddenly and then gazes "for some moments at her apparent unconsciousness" (p. 216). If lack of consciousness is a mark of childhood and consciousness one of maturity, the ambiguousness of the reference to Sydney as having "apparent unconsciousness",

is appropriate. Sydney's position in terms of maturity is a transitional and therefore ambiguous one.

The turning point in Sydney's development of self-awareness occurs in the chapter entitled "Next Corner". At this time in the story -- as a young woman about to be married -- she is the centre of attention. The situation is an automobile excursion on which she is accompanied by those three older people who have bearing on her life at the hotel: her guardian Tessa, Milton, and Mrs. Kerr:

> Sydney took no notice of what was being said: she did not seem as though she had heard. She stood between Tessa and Mrs. Kerr as inanimate and objective as a young girl in a story told by a man, incapable of a thought or a feeling that was not attributed to her, with no personality of her own outside their three projections upon her: Milton's fiancée, Tessa's young cousin, Mrs. Kerr's protégée, lately her friend (p. 242).

This almost death-like numbness of Sydney's consciousness is broken only by the wish for death itself: "She sat back quietly and began to concentrate her whole will and imagination. 'If it could be the next corner, she thought, 'we should go over clean -- there is that clear drop. Let it be the next corner . . .'" (pp. 242-43). Her narrow-mindedness in seeking this form of escape is childish because it is selfish: "There would be nobody really to suffer except poor Anthony, out in Malay" (p. 243). Her further justification for wishing such an end are childish too. She feels that Mrs. Kerr's death would be good for

Ronald. Then her fantasy becomes theatrical, and melodramatic, in the manner of Tom Sawyer:

> "We mustn't go over too quickly," she thought, "there must be time to say something." Under the rug her hand found out Mrs. Kerr's sleeve and rested there ever so slightly. She racked her brain for all there would be to say, then relinquished the effort. At all events there would be a moment to look at each other, just to look at each other: that would be best (p. 243).

Then she becomes really silly: "I don't want to look at James -- there is always that question of the future. I should be very much embarrassed" (p. 243).

They survive their driver's wild and reckless manoeuvres and after they stop it is the shock of life that jolts Sydney into awareness: "life as keen as death to bite upon the consciousness" (p. 245), and it is out of this consciousness that Sydney can say to Milton that their marriage is "quite impossible" (p. 246).

Lois's views on love and marriage, as they develop and change, pave the way for her on her journey of self-awareness. As she is exposed to the possibilities of love and marriage in herself and in the other inhabitants of Danielstown, she grows closer to understanding herself. Early on in the novel Mr. Montmorency knocks over a vase of geraniums which Lois, before the couple's arrival, had arranged on the dressing-table. "'Confusion,' said Hugo,

shaking water out of the brush, 'on all who put vases on dressing-tables!" (in The Last September, p. 21).

Lois *is* confused. She does not know herself and she does not know how or what she should be. She assesses life from a sheltered point of view, and (much like little Henrietta) collects rules of conduct: "She laughed and glanced at her fingernails -- the only part of one's person, she had observed, of which it was possible to be conscious socially"(p. 8). Another time she mentions that "Naturally one is expected to be amusing" (p. 11). Lois strives for what she perceives to be proper conduct but has the occasional lapse: for one thing, she is forever yawning and once she dances on the avenue with Gerald while another man walks after them carrying the gramophone. We have a sense of Lois trying to escape the very thing that she is trying to emulate: the hot-house existence of her class.

The most obvious mark of Lois' desire to escape is in her engagement to Gerald. She meets resistance in Lady Naylor who would try to prevent the marriage because Gerald is English and of a lower class. Lady Naylor stands for and guards the values of the Big House: "When I was your age I never thought of marriage at all. I didn't intend to marry. I remember, when I was nineteen I was reading Schiller" (pp. 245-46). Lois lives under the influence of these values but at the same time feels their inadequacy. After a violent attack on the English barracks Lois says to Gerald:

> Do you know that while that was going on, eight miles off, I was cutting a dress out, a voile that I didn't even need, and playing the gramophone. . . . How is it that in this country that ought to be full of such violent realness there seems nothing for me but clothes and what people say? I might as well be in some kind of cocoon (p. 66).

It is not so much that Lois loves Gerald, as she loves the idea of marriage, or so it appears from her conversation with Marda: "'I like to be in a pattern.' She traced a pink frond with her finger. 'I like to be related; to have to be what I am. Just to be is so intransitive, so lonely.' 'Then you will like to be a wife and mother'" p. 142). Marda's opinion is coloured by the motives behind her own engagement: "I need Leslie. Dinner-services don't matter. If you never need anyone as much you will be fortunate. I don't know for myself what is worth while. I'm sick of all this trial and error. Will you find a book or something? Don't go" (p. 146).

By clinging to Lois, she is clinging to her own independence and youth which by her marriage she must unwillingly put behind her. Still, Marda's opinion is not to be dismissed. Beside the quasi-comical, if not at times pathetic comportment of the other married or engaged characters, her independence, worldliness, and sense of humour lend her views credibility. Lois admires Marda to the point of infatuation. Lois is similar to this woman whom she wishes to emulate. She thinks for a time that she is in love with Mr. Montmorency but he finds her too young.

Mr. Montmorency was, however, at one time in love with Lois' mother (whom she resembles) and now he falls in love with Marda. Marda (Hermione Lee calls her a professional house guest) is just as homeless as Lois who is an orphan, and as Bowen points out only a niece of Danielstown (in The Last September, p. xi). Later, when the burning of Danielstown sets her free, Lois is even less rooted. Like Marda, Lois' impatience to marry comes out of need, not love. ("Lois again realized that no one had come for her, after all. She thought: 'I must marry Gerald'" (p. 141).)

Lois is alone at Danielstown. She has a friend in England to whom she writes and against whose experience she measures her own. Friends from England are not allowed to visit her in Ireland because of the danger of the Troubles. Her cousin Laurence is effete and cynical but at least she can talk freely to him because she knows he is not listening and does not care about anyone or anything. Mrs. Montmorency is too sympathetic and Lady Naylor not sympathetic enough. Mr. Montmorency is not interested in her and feels uncomfortable in her presence. Sir Richard lives in his own world of memories and Marda soon leaves Danielstown and Lois to pursue her own life. The only friend Lois has of her own age is Livvy. I think it is significant that Livvy who also plans to marry an English subaltern, also happens to be a boor.

So these are the models against which Lois must define herself and her views on love and marriage. She finds

them all inadequate. She feels that she must escape to be herself. She tries on Marda's coat, the coat of a woman of experience:

> "Oh, the escape!" she thought pressing her chin down, fading, dying into the rich heaviness. "Oh, the escape in other people's clothes!" And she paced round the hall with new movement: a dark, rare, rather wistful woman, elusive with jasmine. "No?" she said on an upward note: the voice startled her, experience was behind it (p. 109).

But even Marda proves to be a disappointment: "Even Marda -- nothing we said to each other mattered, it hasn't stayed, she goes off to get married in a mechanical sort of way. She thinks herself so damned funny -- it's cheap really" (p. 281).

Lois is alone. Whomever she has offered her heart to, Mr. Montmorency, Gerald, Marda, has ultimately left her cold. When Gerald dies, her private eulogy is simple: "He loved me, he believed in the British Empire" (p. 299).

The Montmorencys make a particularly relevant example of marriage for Lois to consider. Mr. Montmorency might have married her mother Laura. Lois is not unconscious of "the road not taken" which, in a sense, would have made him her father. At the same time she wonders if she herself is in love with him. He is between generations: ten years younger than the Naylors and his wife Francie and twenty years older than Lois. Hermione Lee finds that: "The most interesting of the disabused characters is Hugo Montmorency, an early

vision of those malcontent Jamesian spectators, wearily conscious of their impotence, whom Elizabeth Bowen will introduce again, especially into her Irish stories."[22]

Francie Montmorency is a sensitive woman of delicate health who suffers heroically and quietly. She is all the more heroic because her life with Hugo has nothing of "the compulsion of tragedy" (in The Last September, p. 15) to lend prestige to her suffering. Instead, "Their life, through which they went forward uncertainly . . . was a net of small complications" (p. 15).

The narrator states that Hugo "had expected little of life" (p. 13). He even seems to seek failure: the affair with Laura, the selling of his home in order to make a life in Canada, then failing to go there at all. Therefore, his having accomplished little should not have irked him; he does not admit that it does. However, it must be with vengeance that he abuses his wife with gentle attention. He exercises a small tyranny upon her: he flatters her into making the strenuous drive to Danielstown though she knows beforehand that it will be too much for her and then upon arriving she is afraid that he should notice how exhausted she is. He unpacks and lays out her clothes for her. He leaves his friends when she has to go to the south of France for her health and gives up Canada for the same reason. Repeatedly, throughout the novel, it is noted that he brushes her hair in the evenings. He performs all these services ostensibly for

her benefit although "she had tried, but had not been able, to keep him . . . from doing them" (p. 20):

> Francie got her dressing-gown out of a trunk and lay down on the sofa. She had just relaxed there when Hugo said that the sofa did not look comfortable and she had better lie on the bed. He made a valley for her head between the two pillows -- he did not believe it rested anybody to lie with their head high -- and she lay down on the bed with her head in the valley. "Oh, but I don't think I ought to lie on this lovely quilt," she soon protested.
>
> "They're not fussy here," returned Hugo, "do lie and be still" (p. 19).

Lady Naylor treats Francie in much the same way: "They rose, she took Francie's arm and led her as far as her door. Francie felt like something being put back in its box" (p. 82).

Although Lois is not so fragile and therefore not so easily victimized as is Francie, Lady Naylor tries to dominate her in much the same way. If Lois had succeeded romantically with Mr. Montmorency, he most likely would have tried to undermine her will as he does with his wife. Lois is saved by the ultimate failure of romance with both Mr. Montmorency and Gerald.

As the shock of life thrusts Sydney into self-awareness, it is the real death of Gerald that marks the arrival of self-awareness to Lois. Although his death saves her from having to make the kind of decision Sydney makes with regards to her engagement, it is clear that Lois knows

that she does not love the English soldier and could not have married him. She feels grief for him but not the grief of a lover. That she can admit these feelings to herself shows the progress that she has made from the time when she was convinced she was in love and not aware of her motives behind this self-deception. Just before his sudden death when Mrs. Vermont asks Lois if she has any message for Gerald, Lois knows that she ought to blush, but she does not. This occurs after that confrontation with him (after Lady Naylor's talk with him) and Lois is aware of how the nature of their relationship has changed. She has become analytical, dispassionate: "Lois saw, with interest, a ripple of light down their dresses . . ." (p. 291). When Daventry arrives to announce Gerald's death, Lois expecting Gerald,is the first to meet him. Thinking that he is Gerald "Lois came out slowly, dumb with all she must begin to say . . ." (p. 295). Because the author never lets us find out what it is that Lois means to say, we are left to assume. "I think he's left her" (p. 291), says Betty Vermont on the occasion of Lois' failure to blush. The relationship between Lois and Gerald is obviously over. What Lois had to say to him is less important to us than is the knowledge of a change in her position, from at one time being (as Mrs. Vermont put it) "vague" (p. 46), to knowing what she has to say.

In the beginning when she believes that she is in love with Gerald, she finds that she cannot describe him to

Viola. Over the space of several pages, the narrator relates Lois' indecision. All that she could do was become "so very general in her references that Viola was suspicious" (p. 69). The only specific response that she has to him that she can describe is a physical one, "to his beauty" (p. 70). In the end, when she thinks to herself that he loved her and that he believed in the British Empire, she is summing up the situation with a clarity and conciseness that she did not previously possess.

Lois and Sydney move from having a nebulous idea of society's expectations of love and marriage, to being able to put the considerations of society aside with a clearer vision of their own needs.

CHAPTER II

DEATH

If in his life man is isolated within his own mind and body, unable to convey a complete understanding of himself to others, or completely to know others, then the ultimate isolation is in dying.

Patrice Mersault dies "A Happy Death;"[23] his feelings of the process of dying are described to us, but Camus, not having yet died himself, could only guess at death, could not render an artistic interpretation of the idea as did Michelangelo in showing us the arm of God. Death is the most unknowable aspect of life, at the same time the most certain and inextricable. In literature, the mere mention of it is rich in connotations. As a concept, its sheer unknowability makes it a powerful and delicate tool for impressionism.

Hugo's reaction to Marda's brush with the gunman makes Lois think "how the very suggestion of death brought this awful unprivacy" (in The Last September. p. 185). Bowen uses death to define being alive and by extension to define the characters. The "unprivacy" is like an undressing to show what is underneath. Underneath the social dressing characterized by endless patter is that which is elemental.

The people at Danielstown live with the danger of death and yet they concern themselves outwardly with tennis parties and raspberries. These concerns are, again, dressing. The characters' individual postures in the face of death indicate something about their individual personalities.

Bowen describes characters indirectly but there is also a complementary direct description. Lady Naylor, from a superficial observation of her speeches thoughts, and actions, is merely a snob and a gossip. This is the overhead, two-dimensional representation of a person on paper. The indirect definition of her is one which takes into account how she displaces the time and space in her world.

As we see from the comments of the wife of one of the British soldiers, Lady Naylor's world is one of death:

> Mrs. Vermont remarked, in passing, to Captain Carmichael that this was a country where the most extraordinary people died. "Well, I mean," she said, "who would have expected that of a piano-tuner? There was a house where I went for tennis; they had had a parlour-maid there who died. And last week I went for some little cakes to Fitzgerald's and they were all the plain ones. I asked for some fancies and they said the woman who did the icing had been taken, God rest her soul! Really, there's something grizzly about that cake shop."
>
> "In the midst of life we are in death, if you know what I mean," said Captain Carmichael (in The Last September, pp. 103-104).

The impression of Lady Naylor that we get from the direct observation is one of a person untouched by the threat of death, untouched by what is real and important in her world.

Her world can be seen as one highlighted by tennis parties and having guests for lunch, but the larger world, the world of the Troubles is there and does not in fact go unfelt by her. The Troubles are directly affecting her friends and neighbors and Lady Naylor hears of what is happening to them. She knows of the violent events but cannot deal with them directly. She has to incorporate her knowledge of the Troubles into the patterns of genteel sociability that she has always lived by. A raid on her neighbor's home becomes just another item on a list of petty worries:

> "Laurence!" called Lady Naylor from the end of the gallery. "Where are you? What about Marda's letters? . . . They can't go now," she went on, approaching. "Timothy waited ten minutes, and now he has got to run all the way but he will certainly miss the post. . . . Oh, you are all here?"
>
> She looked at her nephew and niece disparagingly and sat down on the bed. "It is an extraordinary thing," she said generally, "the way nobody in this house can be trusted to remember messages. . . . It has been a tiring day," she added. "Nobody could be nicer than that young Mr. Lesworth, but certainly he is not intelligent. And since then they have all been running down the avenue with umbrellas. And oh, what do you think? They have been raided for arms at Castle Trent. They think the whole thing must have been organised by their gardener's cousin. They took some boots away (p. 150).

Similarly, as readers of this book set in the time of the Irish Troubles, we see comparatively little of this central subject of the book. We get snatches of the events often third hand (from the postman, for example). We get our information with no authorial comment to assure its accuracy.

We have no objective source to turn to tell us "What is." Impressions are bounced about as if between broken bits of mirror of various sizes and thus we construct our impression of the reality. This is somewhat how the impressionist considers we get our knowledge of life and this is how we get our knowledge of Bowen's characters.

Death is one of the pieces of mirror and a portion of each character is reflected off this small piece. Of course Bowen never gives the whole mirror assembled in order because the reflection would be merely two-dimensional and easily dismissable as is Lady Naylor from a superficial observation. Only when the mirror, the world in its various aspects, is broken up can the impression of depth and dimension be created.

William Heath on the Bowen novels writes that:

> Lois recognizes that Gerald's literal-mindedness does not allow him to know what she is like, and that she can only understand him when she imagines him as an object rather than as a person. Like Sydney who prefers people as "painted images," Lois can look directly at Gerald only when "she saw him as though he were dead." The change of vocabulary, though, is significant. An overt contrast between art object and man is clear enough, but must remain an explicit simile. If, however, the distinction is made between a living man and a dead one, static simile gives way to metaphor. "Death" can be both stasis and dramatic event.[24]

Heath also writes that "like love, death can test a heroine's sense of the existence of minds other than her own."[25] A case in point is Lois' vision of Gerald: "She saw him as

though for the first, with a quick response to his beauty; she saw him as though he were dead, as though she had lost him, with the pang of an evocation" (p. 707).

It is not only his mind that she is probing for, but also for her own feelings about him, gauging her love for him against the pain she might feel should he die. Although the moment is a tender one, we must be aware that since her love for him is not a certainty, the loss she speaks of is not so much of him but of the possibility of escape that he represents for her.

This game that she plays with love and death reflects her uncertainty about her love; more than that, she is expressing the larger picture that the novel deals with. She is evoking an image of the Anglo-Irish ascendancy losing the source of their power, that source being the British Empire which Gerald stands for and believes in.

Young British soldiers stood a good chance of dying during their patrols in Ireland. Gerald is one of the many but the possibility of his death is only a romantic fantasy for Lois in which she, not Gerald, is the tragic figure. Lois is not above such indulgences in the melodramatic. At the party Lois goes to where Mrs. Vermont sings "Melisande" ("-- All alone, Mel-lisand, all alone" (p. 90), the love song sends "every girl there into a trance of self-pity; it was so clearly written about oneself" (p. 90)). Later, during the drive home in which "the strong rain stung their noses, then

numbed them" (p. 91) Livvy praises the song but "Something stiffened in Lois: she said she thought it was sentimental" (p. 91). The very real, stinging rain seems to make something harden in Lois. She swings from one emotional extreme to another; she seems to become callous. Similarly, not long after her toying with the romance of the possibility of Gerald's death, Hugo suggests that Gerald does risk being shot. Lois answers him entirely without any romanticism: "Gerald is so matter-of fact. Nothing could make him into a tragedy" (p. 78).

The predisposition to shy away from or stiffen at being sentimental or romantic in the face of tragedy is not only a trait of Lois', it is present generally in the Anglo-Irish Society of the story. Mrs. Fogerty, who, it is pointed out, is a Catholic, is sentimental enough to have a drawing-room full of photographs of young men who, over the years, had been garrisoned in the area, many of which "had been killed in that dreadful War" (p. 87). In this section of the book the narrator assumes a chatty tone, that of one Anglo-Irish guest at Mrs. Fogarty's to another ("that dreadful War"), and tells us that: "You could not stoop to put down a cup on one of the little tables without a twinge of regret and embarrassment, meeting the candid eyes of some dead young man" (p. 87).

This discomfort with the sentimentality surrounding death, translates to a wish to avoid confronting the issue at

the emotional level. Bowen writes in the preface to The Last September that:

> During the Troubles, the position of such Anglo-Irish land-owning Protestant families as the Naylors, of Danielstown, was not only ambiguous but was more nearly heartbreaking than they could bear to show. Inherited loyalty to England -- where their sons went to school, in whose wars their sons were killed, and to whom they owed in the first place their lands and power -- pulled them one way; their own latent blood-and-bone "Irishness," the other (p. xi).

The duality of the position of the Anglo-Irish in the death-charged atmosphere of the Troubles, creates a duality in their attitude. This condition of attitude is exemplified in the contradictory reactions on Lois' part regarding the possibility of Gerald's death: on one hand romantic and admitting to the presence of death and heartbreak, on the other hand stoically unsentimental.

Bearing in mind Elizabeth Bowen's interest as a writer in the problems of love and marriage one can see how, with its difficulties and affections, the relationship between the English and the Anglo-Irish in this novel is like a traditional marriage between two opposite personalities bound together by the pledge "till death do us part." In their case death is driving a wedge between them. England is the male, protecting and possessive. The Anglo-Irish represent the woman, supportive and taken care of, obliged to stand by her husband's opinions, her social position created and maintained by her marriage. In this marriage death (with

a nod to the seventeenth century, significantly the time of Cromwell), is substituted for the sexual act. Lois, the Anglo-Irish girl engaged to the British soldier, seems to connect death to a kind of sexual experience. Gerald says to Lois:

> "You know I'd die for you."
> They looked at each other. The words had a solemn echo, as though among high dark arches in a church where they were standing and being married. She thought of death and glanced at his body, quick, lovely, present and yet destructable. Something passed sensation and touched her consciousness with a kind of weight and warmth; she glimpsed a quiet beyond experience, as though for many nights he had been sleeping beside her (p. 110).

In Bowen's first novel, The Hotel, death is merely used to convey the power of the will for life. When in The Last September Lois imagines Gerald's death, she does so for a variety of complex reasons that are not immediately obvious. When Sydney imagines that Tessa is dead, the author tells us too explicitly why Sydney does this ("to heighten a sense of her real security") (in The Hotel, p. 196) and therefore limits the expectation of finding something more in the action. When Sydney is in despair she wishes that the car would crash, killing herself and the other passengers. When they actually do come close to crashing, the shock frightens her out of the foolish fantasy. She sees that, like everyone else, she would rather live. After this confrontation with death she sees how she must put petty jealousy and social gain aside and break her engagement with

Milton. In Bowen's second novel, The Last September, death is used more creatively. As Heath indicates, death expands into the role of metaphor.

In his discussion of Bowen's symbolism for the submission of the romantic will, Heath explains that the image of the tomb in The House in Paris, To the North, and The Death of the Heart. "suggests cold indomitable fact, external circumstances, objective reality" (p. 26). We see then, that death as a metaphor has been expanded further.

In Bowen's works, death is almost always linked with death of innocence but perhaps most especially in To the North. Emmeline is the embodiment of innocence. Her accumulation of experience, her jarring exposure to the cruel realities of Markie's world, spell her death.

When Cecilia first meets Markie on the train, the scenery "looked distraught but perpetual like an afterworld" (p. 3). With his "greedy, intelligent mouth and the impassive bright quick-lidded eyes of an agreeable reptile" (p. 3), Markie is close to the ground in the manner of a serpent. The association with the serpent has its biblical implications of worldliness, knowledge, and mortality and also emphasizes the unsavouriness of one who is cold-blooded and lives on the ground. Emmeline by contrast is repeatedly referred to as an angel. Cecilia is a young widow. The death of her husband, after a very brief marriage, marked the death of her innocence. Surviving this death, she becomes

almost as worldly as is Markie: "And in the after-world, she might deserve just such a companion, glancing at her -- if any shreds of the form still clung to the spirit -- without sympathy, with just such a cold material knowingness" (p. 4).

The book opens with the meeting on the train; both Markie and Cecilia are experienced travellers. The association of death with this sort of travel is explicit: ". . . she sent one wild comprehensive glance around her fellow travellers, as though less happy than cattle, conscious, they were all going to execution" (p. 2). The train is sinister and invites claustrophobia, causing "suffocation and boredom" (p. 2). It can be likened to the tomb, especially if you consider that when "they stopped dead" at Chiasso, "it appeared forever" (p. 1). The idea of travel, with its overtones of worldliness and experience, is portrayed with that sensitivity towards the horrific that Elizabeth Bowen (especially in such ghost stories as "The Demon Lover") is a specialist in: "On a long journey, the heart hangs dull in the shaken body, nerves ache, senses quicken, the brain like a horrified cat leaps clawing from object to object, the earth whisked by at such speed looks ephemeral, trashy . . ." (in To the North, pp. 7-8).

The opposite of the earthbound train that Markie and Cecilia ride together is the plane on which Markie is uncomfortable but Emmeline is in her element. Although the

plane is as confining as a train, it does not confine Emmeline. "No noise, no glass, no upholstery boxed her up from the extraordinary" (p. 141). Emmeline is part of the extraordinary and in going to the sky she seems to be returning to it. "Her hat off, her hair caught light from the sky all round . . . her face appeared transparent" (pp. 141-42). The flight suggesting an ascent to heaven foreshadows her death: "Emmeline gave up the earth" (p. 141). This trip to Paris will be markedly the occasion of Emmeline's first night with Markie. Emmeline will not, on this occasion of the violation of her innocence, become worldly like Cecilia, but will become a sort of martyr. The plane, a "tiny cruciform shadow" (p. 143) carried her to this fate.

Once on the ground, "Paris, approached by its macabre north" (p. 145) is like death, or some huge charnel house:

> Here were those facades brittle with balconies, awnings shedding hot dusk. . . . As they shot through the elegant quarters towards the river, some high white form of a fountain or fretted gloom of the chestnuts looked solider than the buildings, which creamy-grey in the sunshine were frail as plaster: odd echoes and silences ran along the arcades. The streets had been watered, the trees were already rusty and stale with summer . . . (p. 145).

Emmeline's night in Paris with Markie, rather than reducing her to human baseness, elevates her as does the suffering of a martyr: "The passionless entirety of her surrender, the volition of her entire wish to be his had sent her a good way

past him: involuntarily, the manner of her abandonment had avenged her innocence" (p. 147).

The death of Cecilia's innocence results in her becoming adept and able to flourish in the best manner possible for her society. Emmeline's loss of innocence results in her actual death. When she was in the world, she was not of it; being an "angel" she could not live in a fallen state.

For Leopold (in The House in Paris), death of innocence comes early. Brought up in an extremely sheltered environment by an American couple in Italy ("We do not consider him ripe for direct sex-instruction yet, though my husband is working towards this through botany and mythology" (p. 33)), he learns about his illegitimacy and the painful circumstances surrounding it from Mme Fisher. As in To the North, images of death and the tomb abound in this book. The difference is that the loss of innocence in To the North carries with it either destruction or resignation, while in The House in Paris, those who can survive the loss are strengthened by it.

Max dies. Karen survives only to live in sorrow, a kind of death. Still, her kind of death is not necessarily final. Their child Leopold is strong enough to live. (His comically over-protective adoptive parents consider him delicate in every way. In light of their exaggerated views one cannot but disbelieve them.) Although the ending of the book is not explicit in its message, the tone implies hope

for the future and the language is suggestive of vitality, not death or compromise:

> Here, at the end of the ramp, they stood at a commanding, heroic height above the level of Paris, which they saw. Leopold said: "Is it illuminated?" The copper-dark night sky went glassy over the city crowned with signs and starting alight with windows, the wet square like a lake at the foot of the station ramp (p. 245).

Leopold is able to see corruption and survive to rise heroically above it.

What characterizes the metaphor of death in The Last September, To the North, and The House in Paris, is the sense of isolation that accompanies it. As Emmeline leaves the house to drive Markie home that last time, she has already distanced herself from her life: ". . . Emmeline went down past Cecilia, whom she did not see: Cecilia, helpless, stood back against the wall. They had not parted like this before" (in To the North, p. 248).

In the final moments before the crash, Markie's separation from Emmeline is complete:

> "Look out --" he began: and stopped at her glittering look that while so intently fixing him showed in its absence of object a fixed vacancy. She looked into his eyes without consciousness, as though in at the windows of an empty house. His throat tightened, the roof of his mouth went dry: she was not there, he was alone. Little more than his memory ruled her still animate body, so peacefully empty as not to be even haunted (p. 258).

The separateness against which they had been straining during their affair is crystalized in these last moments of impending death and only cracked at the very last, "Shocked by the moment, Emmeline saw what was past averting. She said 'Sorry,' shutting her eyes" (p. 259).

Max's was a lonely death; he did not even know about the existence of his child. His life was lonely too, not completely accepted by society and cut off from his family. The xenophobia of which he is the object enforces his isolation by distancing the other characters from him. We get most of our information about characters from other characters whose objectivity cannot be assured. In Max's case most of the characters do not understand him; each report about him is confusing and contradictory. For example, over lunch Karen finds that he has a "nervous, rather forbidding stillness" (in The House in Paris. p. 259) about him. Over the same lunch she also sees him as "dependable, solid, shyish . . . [a] domestic man" (p. 108). Karen's confusion is passed on to the reader and when Max dies, the reader is left uncertain as whether to see him as tragic or ignoble. Nobody, not even Mme Fisher, directly killed him; he took his own life. Is he to be pitied and admired or is he to be dismissed as weak for allowing himself to be victimized by this woman's influence over him? He does not live long enough after his affair with Karen to follow through his plans for the future, thereby erasing any possibility of his

character being revealed. By dying, a character removes himself from direct observation, making all description of him coloured with emotion and more importantly, lacking immediacy.

"But a thing can't be final," said Lois, "not while one's alive" (in The Last September, p. 212). The changing impressions that one receives about a character, become, upon that character's death, fixed. Lois was unable to describe Gerald when he was alive, but once dead and no longer able to contradict and confound, he is easily reduced by Lois to two simple statements.

Max is a more complicated personality and Karen's confusion about him carries even after his death as is indicated in the "unspoken dialogue" (p. 216) between her and Ray: "He: 'Perhaps you did not know him?' She: 'Yes. No. I don't remember. I never remember'" (pp. 216-17). However uncertain Karen is about knowing Max she is not capable of placing or defining him in her emotions. She is certain that she loved him and that he loved her. Looking back over that relationship we cannot be as sure of either love. There are hints to suggest that she sought him out in rebellion against the world of her family. Mme Fisher, who could control both Karen and Max, may have engineered the affair in order to avenge herself for the prejudice that she suffered at the hands of the English society which Karen's family are models of. Did Max in fact love Karen or was he acting under the

influence of the older woman to whom he was so attracted? Many suspected that he was marrying Naomi for the money she just inherited. Might he seek the same in Karen? He asks Karen:

> "Would you marry me?"
> "You said that was not possible: after that I never let myself think."
> "Possible?" he said more calmly. "In what way do you mean? If your parents would give money. I have not enough for you" (p. 164).

Ray is still alive so Karen can have no fixed idea of him. She insists that he has changed but she also insists that she loved him the way he used to be and that she herself has not changed; these latter two arguments of hers are particularly shaky. Years later, in A World of Love, Elizabeth Bowen would write that:

> Life works to dispossess the dead, to dislodge and oust them. Their places fill themselves up; later people come in; all the room is wanted. Feeling alters its course, is drawn elsewhere, or seeks renewal from other sources. . . . Obstinate rememberers of the dead seem to queer themselves or show some signs of a malady; in part they come to share the dead's isolation, which it is not in their power to break down. . . .[27]

CHAPTER III

ENVIRONMENT: INTRODUCTION

In her writing, Bowen placed a special emphasis on places.[28] She found that "characters operating *in vacuo* are for (her) bodiless".[29] In her "Notes on Writing a Novel" she wrote that:

> Nothing can happen nowhere. The locale of the happening always colours the happening, and often, to a degree, shapes it. Scene, scenes . . . give the happening the desired force. . . . Scene is only justified in the novel where it can be shown, or at least felt, to act upon action or character. In fact, where it has dramatic use.[30]

"The Bowen terrain"[31] as she terms it, is Ireland and England "with occasional outgoings in France or Italy".[32] In *Eva Trout* she enters briefly into the United States. Most of the places that she writes about are the kind with which she was familiar from her own life, places like the Big Houses, the girls' schools, and London society.

There are roughly two kinds of Bowen environments: the sophisticated and urban, and the sophisticated and rural. The novels do not deal with the poor or uncultured in either an urban or rural setting. The typical Bowen woman does not live in a cottage or a tenement house.

Environment: The Houses

If the "Bowen woman" is a recognizable character, then so is the "Bowen house". Like the human characters, the important houses are contrasted against other dwellings in order to emphasize certain aspects of their significance as major characters. It is how these houses are identified as homes, by and in relation to their inhabitants, that is the main thrust of their operation in the novels.

The Bowen houses are shades and variations of Bowen's Court. In her novels, the closest comparison that can be drawn with her family home is with Danielstown, the Big House of *The Last September*. In a less than ideal world, such a house cannot be ideal but is nonetheless treated by the author with the sympathy appropriate for the protagonist of a story.

Danielstown, Farraways (in *To the North*), and Rushbrook (in *The House in Paris*) are examples of the kind of home that Bowen is most sympathetic to. These are all older places, somehow behind and out of touch with the time of the setting of the particular novel. Although Bowen attributes graciousness and humanness to the houses which are like characters, she equally recognizes their inadequacy in the face of a changing society. They are sanctuaries, but are temporary ones to which the characters can, for a time, escape from the speed and concerns of their present. Bowen's Court is the prototype and Danielstown is the fictional representation of the type.

Daniel: in the lion's den or surrounded by hostile forces, associated with dreams, is a name from the past. Houses like Danielstown owe their existence to a past: the time of Cromwell, and during the time which The Last September is set these houses were at the centre of, surrounded by conflict:

> The action takes place during "the troubles times" -- i.e., the guerrilla conflict between the Irish, in arms for freedom, and the British troops still garrisoning the land. Ambushes, arrests, captures and burnings, reprisals and counter-reprisals kept the country anxious, tormented and tense (in The Last September, p. ix).

The dreams are brought to the house by its inhabitants. The interpretation of these dreams is made by their projection by the people upon the house.

The Naylors' dream is one of the past. When the sound of English patrol lorries interrupts the flow of small talk one evening out on the front steps, Sir Richard suddenly begins to talk about the tennis courts. "D'you remember the fours we had on that court that summer -- wasn't it nineteen-six -- you and I and O'Donnell or poor John Trent?" (p. 39). When the sound of the lorry fades they feel comforted "But they found it was now very dark" (p. 39). At this point Lady Naylor decides that they should return into the house. She covers their retreat with gossip about the now dead John Trent. The retreat into the house is a retreat

into the safety of the past, a time when Danielstown had the security of power. But the house is no longer capable of granting protection from the threatening dark. Lady Naylor comments: "Oh, they haven't lighted the lamp in the hall. That is too bad! I am lost without Sarah -- do you remember Sarah, Francie? She died, you know" (p. 34). That the Big Houses are in decline can be seen from the observations of an outsider, Betty Vermont: "Of course they were all very shabby and not artistic at all. Mrs. Vermont used to say, she longed to be turned loose in any one of them with a paint-pot -- white -- and a few hundred yards of really nice cretonne from Barkers" (pp. 46-47). The family too is in decline; the Naylors are conspicuously childless. They have many house guests, but guests leave.

Like a band of refugees, the party on the front steps enter the house literally carrying and dragging with them their creature comforts:

> ". . . Laurence, help Uncle Richard in with the long chair, and remember to bring in your own chair afterwards". . . .
>
> Francie went in, groping; trailing her rug. The three men, carrying wicker chairs, converged at the door and the chairs jostled. They all put them down and apologised. Lois repeated: "I shall walk up the avenue." But having arranged an order of precedence they all passed on into the house, creaking and bumbling (pp. 39-40).

Lois, too, instinctively turns to the house for protection, only to find herself faced with its impotence:

> High up a bird shrieked and stumbled down through the darkness, tearing the leaves. Silence healed, but kept a scar of horror. The shuttered-in drawing-room, the family sealed up in lamplight, secure and bright like flowers in a paper-weight, were desirable sharply, worth coming out to regain. Fear curled back in defeat from the carpet-border . . . (pp. 41-42).

Although the fear is held off at the carpet-border, the security is artificial. The light is from a lamp only. The "scar of horror" is there and the family is "sealed up" inside it like dead flowers preserved "in a paper-weight".

The part of the house that best interprets Lois and Lois' dreams is the ante-room:

> Personally she liked the ante-room, though it wasn't the ideal place to read or talk. Four rooms opened off it, and at any moment a door might be opened, or blow open, sending a draught down one's neck. People passed through it continually, so that one kept having to look up and smile. Yet Lois always seemd to be talking there, standing with a knee on a chair because it was not worth while to sit down, and her life was very much complicated by not knowing how much of what she said had been overheard, or by whom, or how far it would go (pp. 6-7).

The suggestion of uncertainty and transitional existence is rendered bluntly in this passage. More subtle than this projection of Lois' dream of escape and impatience for change is the nightmarish quality of the room. There is the stench

of death and the threat of malignant ghosts from the past expressed in the passage immediately following:

> The high windows were curtainless; tasselled fringes frayed the light at the top. The white sills -- the shutters folded back in their frames -- were blistered, as though the house had spent a day in the tropics. Exhausted by sunshine, the backs of the crimson chairs were a thin, light orange; a smell of camphor and animals drawn from skins on the floor in the glare of morning still hung like dust on the evening chill. Going through to her room at night Lois often tripped with her toe in the jaws of a tiger; a false step at any time sent some great claw skidding over the polish. Pale regimented groups, reunions a generation ago of the family or neighbourhood, gave out from the walls a vague depression. There were two locked bookcases of which the keys had been lost, and a troop of ebony elephants brought back from India by someone she did not remember paraded along the tops of the bookcases (p. 7).

On a conscious level, Lois likes the ante-room. At night when the consciousness of the dream world begins to stir, the room begins to show its fangs. Lois is caught by the jaws of the house, an un-dead tiger; a false step would bring some great danger wildly "skidding over the polish" of her privileged existence.

Bowen presents the day-time and the night-time aspects of the room. She does the same with the house and its grounds as a whole: by day the tennis parties, by night the underlying danger is primitive and almost supernatural:

> A shrubbery path was solid with darkness, she pressed down it. Laurels breathed coldly and close: on her bare arms the tips of the leaves were timid and dark, like tongues of dead animals. Her fear of the shrubberies tugged at its chain, fear behind reason, fear before her birth; fear like the earliest germ of her life that had stirred in Laura (p. 41).

Hugo Montmorency's dream is one of the past, his own past, his boyhood when the future was still potential ("the brilliant young man he'd once been") (p. 20) and had not been put to the test. He pretends that his failure in life does not matter to him, that his expectations had been humble, and so aligns himself to Danielstown which like him has passed the prime of life. Hugo says to Laurence: "I was happy here at your age, I was full of the place, I asked nothing better. I ask nothing better now" (p. 57). Laurence, prosaic and cynical, is of the present. Though he is an intellectual, what he lives for is his meals. To Hugo he is "the undergraduate of today" (p. 58) He has no romantic attachment to the house. His ideas are threatening to Hugo:

> "I can't help my stomach. Besides I like eating, it is so real. But I should like something else to happen, some crude intrusion of the actual. I feel all glassy inside from yawning. I should like to be here when this house burns."
>
> "Quite impossible; quite unthinkable. Why don't you fish or something? . . . Nonsense!" he added, looking warningly at the house (p. 58).

Francie who would have liked stability in her life dreams of Danielstown as if it were her home for all time.

This is only her second visit to the house. The first had been twelve years earlier just after her marriage, the marriage that was to prove barren of any of the trappings of regular family life:

> She knew that she had never in all her life been so happy as on that first visit; time, loose-textured, had had a shining undertone, happiness glittered between the moments. She had had, too, very strongly a sense of return, of having been awaited. Rooms, doorways had framed a kind of expectancy of her; some trees in the distance, the stairs, a part of the garden seemed always to have been lying secretly at the back of her mind (p. 14).

The dream-like quality of that memory characterizes Francie. An invalid, she has little to hope for in the present and future but she is not hard and bitter. Like a gentle ghost from the house's past, a past before her own, her relationship with Danielstown is on a different plane of reality from anyone else's. Having barely any physical life in the present she can return spiritually to the Danielstown of the distant past, like one ghostly lover to another. It is as if her dreams of the past are memories of a previous life. If time can be "loose-textured" for her then she need not be temporal. There is a touch of the supernatural about her. She arrives at Danielstown tired and dusty but soon she is "happier, less tired" (p. 21) and mysteriously "the dust seemed to have gone" (p. 21). Danielstown's distant past hovers like a ghost scornful of time. The Naylors, their family and guests meet at the dining-room table under a

"crowd of portraits" (p. 27). The scene is "over-bright" (p. 28) with an "unearthly shimmer" (p. 28):

> While above, the immutable figures, shedding into the rush of dusk smiles, frowns, every vestige of personality, kept only attitude -- an outmoded modishness, a quirk or a flare, hand slipped under a ruffle or spread over the cleft of a bosom -- cancelled time, negatived personality and made of the lower cheerfulness, dining and talking, the faintest exterior friction (p. 28).

At times Francie is hand in hand with the ghost, like a lover from a time before:

> "Danielstown can't have been so exciting when you were here before," said Lois to Mrs. Montmorency.
>
> But Mrs. Montmorency, in an absence of mind amounting to exaltation, had soared over the company. She could perform at any moment, discomfitingly, these acts of levitation. She was staring into one of the portraits (p. 34).

Distant cousin to Danielstown is Farraways (in <u>To the North</u>): "It was a dull-faced, pleasant Victorian house with big bow windows, low window-sills and a long view down a slope of the Cotswolds" (p. 51). Appropriately named, it is a house in the country where "everything [is] . . . in its fixed order" (p. 54). Emmeline, though she lives her life in the city, in many ways belongs at Farraways. Markie is the opposite: "Last November, he said, he spent a week-end in the country, impure country where London's genteelest finger-tip touches the beechwoods. He had not enjoyed himself . . ." (p. 67). "His contempt for such placid pools in the life-stream surprised Emmeline. . . . Emmeline

wondered what Markie would do at Farraways" (p. 69). Emmeline is at home in the old house which like her is in many ways not of the present-day world.

Markie is modern, hard and practical. His home is convenient and heartless:

> Markie lived in a flat, completely cut off, at the top of his sister's house. . . . They made a point of not meeting, cut each other's friends at the door, had separate telephone numbers and asked no questions. One, in fact, might have lain gassed for days before the other became suspicious (p. 80).

Together Markie and Emmeline can have no home. Their week-end at the cottage is a failure. Emmeline brings food so that they can eat, as it were, at home. Markie insists on the convenience of a restaurant. The conflict is resolved by Emmeline conceding:

> Emmeline said no more; she blinked at the fire; the kettle, now humming, put out a comforting thread of steam. The cottage, the late lovely sense of arrival tugged at her heart. "Here we are," she had thought, coming in: but she had been wrong, they were not (p. 250).

The ideal home for Emmeline is the house in St. John's Wood where she lives with Cecilia. In the city but with a touch of the country (it has "a small green garden" and "temptingly sunny spaces of floor") (p. 10) it answers to the two facets of Emmeline's personality: the urbane businesswoman and the passive girl which the Vicar finds so charming. Unfortunately it is obvious that her

arrangement with Cecilia could not be permanent; it is inevitable that Cecilia should marry again and their home together would have to be broken up. In the end, when Emmeline speeds to her death, she is leaving behind no home. Cecilia is engaged and there cannot be a home in Emmeline's future if she links herself with Markie which is what she does, and thus linked she takes them to their death.

A house can be a home and have the attraction of home to its inhabitants while it destroys them. Such is the house in Paris. It is an unnatural place, not a real house; often it is compared to a dolls-house. Henrietta feels the house's hostility. The stripes of the wallpaper appear to her as bars. She is antagonized: "She felt the house was acting, nothing seemed to be natural; objects did not wait to be seen but came crowding in on her, each with what amounted to its aggressive cry" (p. 11).

The house has a hold on its inhabitants. Mme Fisher refuses to sell it despite the great value of the property and Naomi would not leave it even after marriage. Max and Karen, against their better judgement, are drawn to it. It has the pull of home but it is perverted. The power of the house is Mme Fisher's. The house is an extension of her and it is like her; "with its clean tight blinds across the inside darkness" (p. 14) and it is "proud" (p. 14) and "stern" (p. 14) Hermione Lee points out that there is something of the witch in Mme Fisher.[33] She always knew where in

Paris the girls in her charge were and she had a "terrific power over the girls' ideas" (p. 98). If Mme Fisher is in some way supernatural, then it follows that the house given prominence in the title, by association would also be.

At her dead aunt's home Naomi "began building her own" (p. 109). In her mother's house "she raced through work in a grey abstraction" (p. 109). Here she is calm, a "Martha" (p. 109). It is emphasized that she and Max really have no home; they are "refugees" (p. 110). Naomi and Max cannot even stay here for the house is to be sold. They must return to Paris, to Mme Fisher's house.

Karen's family lives "in one of the tall, cream houses in Chester Terrace, Regent's Park" (p. 62). Henrietta could not "place" (p. 9) the street of the Paris house but here she would have no problem. Judging accurately by the house, the Michaelis family is everything that Max and Naomi are not: wealthy, respected, admired, and most important -- rooted. Leopold, displaced as he is, inherits some of rootedness from Karen (we see, for example, his pride in Italy which has been his home), enough that Mme Fisher compares him with a young tree that must grow to break out of the tomb. Although the Paris house is likened to a charnel house, the implications of the reference to a tomb reach beyond just that house. The tomb that he must crack is made up of the society that compelled his mother to hide his birth, the house in Regent's Park being at the vanguard of that society.

Distant and symbollically apart from the Paris house and the London house, is the house in Ireland, Mount Iris at Rushbrook -- spiritual cousin to Danielstown. Uncle Bill's house Montebello was, like Danielstown, burnt during the troubles; Rushbrook is the substitute. Not as imposing as a Big House, Mount Iris nonetheless carries the prestige of the Anglo-Irish ascendancy and is associated with Karen's Aunt Violet who is wise, gracious, mild, and is gently dying. ("Aunt Violet seemed to have lived here always") (p. 70).

It is Aunt Violet who understands that Karen is not as blissfully engaged to Ray as the society expects her to be. The two women are discussing class revolution when what it is that is truly in Karen's mind comes out abruptly: "'Was there anyone else you liked?' 'Yes, there was. But he made me miserable'" (p. 80).

There is a great deal of truth and humanity in Aunt Violet's house because of Aunt Violet. She is aware of her impending death and approaches it with dignity. More importantly, she can clearly see herself and what her life has been. "'One sometimes wishes one had done more,' she said" (p. 77). When Karen tries to reassure her, Aunt Violet responds, "I meant, selfishly . . . I was thinking more of myself" (p. 77).

Ostensibly it is the public nature of her engagement to Ray that drives Karen to seek escape at Rushbrook, "Wanting to rescue something at any price" (p. 62). Instead

of the sort of peace or reassurance that she seeks, she is confronted with truth, not only from Aunt Violet's keen questions, but in her own actions. When Ray's letter arrives asking Karen if she is certain about the marriage, she reacts hysterically. Instead of admitting to the wisdom and acuity of Ray's question, she wishes to flee Rushbrook. When she discovers that Aunt Violet is dying, staying for Karen becomes unbearable. She cannot stand this truth either and Aunt Violet's acceptance of it unnerves her. She wants to "get away from Rushbrook while everything lasted" (p. 81).

One of the most effective executions of Elizabeth Bowen's impressionism is achieved in her use and treatment of houses. The indirectness of characterization through the description of the characters' homes removes the characters another step from the reader. More is to be learned from the houses than by direct observation of the characters. The characters are isolated from themselves and from each other: Lois does not completely know Lois anymore than Lady Naylor knows Lois, so either of their opinions on the subject of that young girl cannot define her. Furthermore, direct authorial comment is limited and is not given from a position of omniscience. The interpretation of the houses gives us a point of reference from which to approach these people. In other words, if we can establish what a house represents, then we can begin to assess each character according to his

position or relationship to it. James' house is in reverse: the characters are outside looking at the house each from his own position in the yard.

Environment: General

In Elizabeth Bowen's treatment of environment or setting, a meeting between the impressionism of literature and the impressionism in painting is made. As a painting can speak without words, Bowen's descriptions can show without telling. We are told that "Markie's Rome was late Renaissance, with a touch of the slick mundanity of Vogue" (in To the North, p. 7), but the way that Bowen then goes on to render Markie's Rome, is with an impressionistic brush. The content is Renaissance but because it is translated into words, it is conveyed impressionistically: "The sky above Rome, like the arch of an ornate altar-piece, became dark and flapping with draperies and august conversational figures" (p. 7). This is the impression of Rome created in Cecilia's imagination as Markie talks about his visit to the city. It is an image that Cecilia creates to attach to Markie. The author is not necessarily implying that Markie is somehow like this, only that Cecilia sees him in a certain way and so something is being said about both characters, but the author is not the one directly saying it. In this example, the author practically absolves herself of the responsibility of description by allowing the characters

to supply the description and with the characters there is of course no guarantee of objectivity or accuracy.

The two dominant elements of Bowen's impressionistic descriptions of environment are light and motion. Light: shimmering and pervasive or pointedly absent, crowds her descriptions, often minimizing the presence of the tangible objects of the scene. ". . . the glass brass-barred doors of the restaurant flashed and swung, that bright circular park outside with its rushing girdle of trams was the last of Italy" (in To the North, p. 1). In this short description are combined the elements of light and motion. However, what is immediately striking about the passage is the image of bright reflected light. The flash of the glass door as it swings is almost blinding, obscuring the door itself from sight.

When it is not working in conjunction with light, motion used to describe environment is often expressed in terms of the passing of time:

> On the left shore, a steeple pricked up out of a knoll of trees, above a snuggle of gothic villas; then there was the sad stare of what looked like an orphanage. A holy bell rang and a girl at a corner mounted her bicycle and rode out of sight. The river kept washing salt off the ship's prow. Then, to the right, the tree-dark hill of Tivoli began to go up, steep, with pallid stucco houses appearing to balance on the tops of trees. Palladian columns, gazebos, glass-houses, terraces showed on the background misted with spring green, at the tops of shafts or on toppling brackets of rock, all stuck to the hill, all slipping past the ship. Yes, this looked like a hill in Italy faded; it stood in that flat clear light in which you think of the past and did not look like a country subject to racking change (in The House in Paris, p. 64)

Bowen writes about "scene in fluidity, in (apparent) motion."[34] Referring to this scene with the ship (and Karen on it), Elizabeth Bowen writes that ". . . the beholder . . . does not merely -- as he would were he at a standstill -- see the scene, he watches its continuous changes, which act upon him compulsively like a non-stop narrative."[35]

The execution and effect of light with motion in the descriptions of environment are not only intensely visual and much in the manner of painting, but can also often be likened to a sort of pointillism. The effect is often one in which the image will seem to shimmer, for instance in the "vibration" of shadows and fringes of the silk curtains against the shining air" (in To the North, p. 169). The execution relies on the placing side by side of words that would normally not mix with each other (". . . a tree, brushed pale by wind from the flames" (in The Last September, p. 307)), but by being thus thrown together, create an image that can only exist in conjunction with the reader's perception of it:

> Seurat contended that an optical mixture was brighter than any physical mixture of pigment. . . . These scientifically based theories of form and color led Seurat to fill canvases with miniscule dots of color that, when observed at a distance of about six feet, merge in the eye to form glistening images. Such a pointillist painting is just a cluster of dots; its recognizable form is constructed only on the retina of the viewer's eye.[36]

In Bowen's descriptions of the environment "the viewer's eye" is replaced by the reader's visual imagination. In the following quotation, the idea of the activity of the reader's perception is both explained and exemplified. "Dusk would lie where one looked as though it were in one's eye, as though the fountain of darkness were in one's own perception" (in The Last September, p. 93).

The environments as they are described are not static, appropriate backgrounds for the characters. They are projections of the characters. The tall cream house in Regent's Park suggests the cool, smooth, imposing security that Mrs. Michaelis lives by and nurtures. Aunt Violet's drawing-room is not only implicitly hers, full of soft, delicate, pretty trappings of leisure, it *is* her; it sums up what her function in life has been.

In a broader view, large places, entire regions or countries can symbolize a character. Paris with its beauty, culture, corruption, and appeal to foreigners, is Mme Fisher. Danielstown with its power of the past, still imposing after its prime, is very much Lady Naylor although the more sympathetic aspects of Danielstown, the romance of the past, the fading beauty, the graceful aging, the fragility of its existence, associate it with Francie. Lois is Ireland itself, full of contradictions, rebellion, and change. St. John's Wood, an area delicately balanced between the business of the city and the timelessness and repose of the

country, is Emmeline's home. Cecilia is happy there, but she is rarely home for long; restless, she is forever either travelling or going out for social functions. She says, "It's a long way from everybody we know" (p. 12). She only stays home when she is short of money. Cecilia represents the tendency to move socially upwards. She marries first into Lady Waters' family, then although her arrangement with Emmeline is more than satisfactory, she feels the social pressures to marry again. Being aware of the likelihood of her succumbing to these pressures, the reader can surmise that St. John's Wood could not be a permanent home for her. If we are aware of the unlikelihood of Cecilia's staying in that place for a long term, we can see how she expresses her lack of relationship to it by always leaving it. The beauty of the Italian country-side that surrounds the hotel in the novel of that name is appropriate to and reflective of the idle wealthy who can afford to be beautiful without necessarily understanding beauty. ("She doesn't sketch, or one would understand her staring like that at the view" (p. 83)).

In a study of Bowen's characters, environment or place cannot be ignored or taken lightly. Not only does this author give as much attention to environment as to character, she treats them the same way. The environments are fictional in the way that are the characters. In other words, although many of the places do not actually exist, they are taken from reality. She writes that "Wholly invented scene is as

unsatisfactory (thin) as wholly invented physique for a character".[37] Conveying environment presents the same problems as do characters; simply describing it does not allow the reader to enter into it. Even in order simply to see an environment in one's imagination, external description is inadequate; something of the essence of the place is necessary. In Elizabeth Bowen's work, the essence is of course rendered impressionistically:

> There was just enough light to see. Henrietta, although dazed after her night journey, sat up straight in the taxi, looking out of the window. She had not left England before. She said to herself: This is Paris. The same streets, with implacably shut shops and running into each other at odd angles, seemed to unreel past again and again. She thought she saw the same kiosks. Cafés were lit inside, chairs stacked on the tables: they were swabbing the floors. Men stood at a steamy counter drinking coffee. A woman came out with a tray of mimosa and the raw daylight fell on the yellow pollen: but for that there might have been no sky. These different streets and eary morning faces oppressed Henrietta, who was expecting to find Paris more gay and kind.
>
> "A Hundred Thousand Shirts," she read aloud, suddenly (in The House in Paris, pp. 3-4).

From this kind of description we can feel something of the Paris of that moment. It is that moment and how it bears upon Henrietta that is important to the reader. By having Henrietta in a taxi, Bowen can use motion as a device (as she often does) to present only bits and pieces of Paris. Both the reader and Henrietta are experiencing Paris in the same disjointed way. Rather than getting a larger more general

description of the city (as from a tour guide), we are given specific fragments. By directing our attention in this way, Bowen is not only giving us a specific flavour of Paris, but she is also indirectly telling us about Henrietta.

It is difficult and probably contrary to the author's purposes to decide whether this description is more for the purpose of showing the environment or showing the character. Environment and character are inextricably woven together in Bowen's writing and they have similarly impressionistic traits, most notably (for my purposes) that of isolation. The fragments of information that make up Henrietta's first view of Paris are details isolated from each other, but flung together they create an impression. Elizabeth Bowen wrote: "'my' world (my world as a writer) is something of a mosaic".[38] It can be expected that the author, Henrietta, and the reader are all sealed to an extent, isolated, within their own separate realities. The impression felt by the reader cannot be a carbon copy of the author's. Each fragment may touch the reader in an intensely personal way but it is hoped that the vaguer impact of the sum of or a part of the specific details might promote an overlap between the mind of the author and the mind of the reader, providing a common understanding. The author would like the reader to see the environment as the author herself sees it, but she knows that the environment, like character, cannot be completely known, although its function in the fiction can be understood.

Elizabeth Bowen's characters and environment are created from a collection of impressions: "If the doors of perception were cleansed everything would appear to man as it is, infinite"[39] -- but they are not. All we have are limited bits of impressions from an infinite pool of possibilities, creating a shifting mosaic.

CHAPTER IV

LANGUAGE

Evelyn Waugh once said about Elizabeth Bowen: "'She's a good writer. So was Virginia Woolf -- within her idiosyncrasies -- but she was not as inventive as Bowen. Bowen learned a great deal from Woolf, but is a better writer.'"[40] It is not surprising that Waugh, who emphasised the importance of language, should admire Elizabeth Bowen. Her language is somewhat formal as she herself often was and like the author it is quite unusual and complex as well. George Wickes talks about Bowen's "uneasy style":[41]

> Elizabeth Bowen deliberately works against the natural flow of English idiom and syntax ("Nothing happens nowhere"); her writing is highly concentrated, to the point of being elliptical ("Illusions are art; for the feeling person, and it is by art that we live, if we do.") Language and expression are warped and strained, dense, tense, and terse like verse. A character in The Heat of the Day enters: "Everything ungirt, artless, ardent, urgent about Louie was to the fore; all over herself she gave the impression of twisted stockings." "London, 1940," is reminiscent of Gerard Manley Hopkins, the Anglo-Saxon sounds bumping together in assonance and dissonance: "At this corner where the burst gas main flaming floors high made a scene like a hell in the night, you still feel heat . . . we now see what we heard happen in the night. . . . Chatter bubbles up; or there is a cosy slumping sideways, to doze." All these unfluent awkwardnesses are calculated to create discomfort. They arrest the eye in its race across the page, forcing it to backtrack, and disturb the peace of mind.[42]

Often the tension felt in the description of a scene is a reflection of the tension in a character. What is interesting is how the sounds of the words themselves colour the description:

> Then someone's wife opened a cold piano: she tinkled, she tippetted, she struck false chords and tried them again. God knew what she thought she was doing. The notes fell on his nerves like the drops of condensed mist all round on the clammy beech-branches. Markie's left shoulder-blade had begun to itch violently: he ground it against a tree. Penetrated by all these kinds of discomfort he had raged in the bare meek woods. . . . The piano stopped, he went down hill again to tea (To the North, p. 68).

The repetition of the letter "t" promotes a feeling of itchy irritation. Likewise, the repeated "c" has an unpleasant dryness in its sound. Again we see the "Anglo-Saxon sounds bumping together," reflecting "discomfort" in the character, and creating it in the reader. Apparently this effect of uneasiness did not come easily to Bowen; she gave painstaking attention to her craft. Her friend Sean O'Faolain writes:

> It is evident from the complex weave of her novels that it can have been no more easy for her to intuit the central implication of any one of those conflicts -- she never trod an obvious line; nor easy for her to express those intuitions in that felicitous language which, more than any other writer of her generation, she seemed to command as if verbally inspired. But that suggestion of inspiration lifts a warning finger of memory. Once, when one of her guests at Bowen's Court, I inadvertently interrupted her when she was, as I first thought, tapping away fluently at her desk. She turned to me a forehead spotted with beads of perspiration.[43]

While her style is often compared to that of Henry James it is almost instantly recognizable as being entirely her own.[44] In her "Notes on Writing a Novel"[45] she wrote that "Plot is diction. Action of language, language of action".[46] Among her many idiosyncrasies of language is her fondness of compound words ("only-possibleness,"[47] "illusion-task,"[48] "scene-minded,"[49] "slower-down,"[50] "fatal-seeming,"[51]). The prefixes "non" and "pre" are staples of her writing ("Pre-Essential,"[52] "pre-imperative,"[53]) as is the suffix "ness" ("deadeningness"[54]). Her use of negatives she was famous for ("Nothing happens nowhere"[55] being the example most often cited) as well as her use of double negatives ("never not hearing" (in <u>The House in Paris</u>, p. 14)). Often she combines several of these elements to arrive at words such as "none-otherness,"[56] "non-irrelevance,"[57] and "non-virtuousness".[58] In general she has a predilection for a variety of prefixes and suffixes ("unanswerability,"[59] "unchangingness"[60]).

Perhaps unfairly, most of the preceding examples were taken from her "Notes on Writing a Novel" which, because they are notes and therefore written in somewhat of a shorthand, might warrant such condensation of language. But condensation is present and felt in all of her writing. Her literary executor Spencer Curtis Brown wrote that:

> Perhaps one of the most noticeable of her qualities was the conciseness with which she wrote. Every book seemed to the reader to be much longer than it actually was. She wrote in draft very many more words than appeared in the novel, purposely withdrawing what she, as author, had to find out by having written but what she then realised she did not have to convey in words. "The test of what is to be written," she wrote in an essay on "Exclusion," "is . . . not least its power to make known, by suggestion or evocation of something further, what needs to be known without being told." She was a master of such evocation and she achieved it not merely by choice of words but even more by the use of rhythm in her sentences and paragraphs. No one could, without loss, skip or skim her writing. She wrote unintendingly but naturally for those for whom reading was, like writing, a creative act.[61]

As I have indicated before, the narrative voice in Bowen's fiction is, if not unique, quite notable. As William Heath points out, "her narrators can assume mysterious unidentified voices that simultaneously confide in the reder, predicate an action, predict future events, and mockingly imitate a character."[62] The Bowen narrator is also indirectly the voice of the author in that she does not use the narrator as a persona as does Browning in some of his poems or as Emily Brontë does in Wuthering Heights. The narrators' attitudes as they are indicated in the various tones of the narration, reflect the attitudes of Elizabeth Bowen. The Bowen narrator it should be noted, is equally disposed towards making dramatic statements, even (arguably) effective overstatements: "The stairs swung on the bending candles;

one more violent and wordless hour disjointed from life was written over the week-end cottage" (in To the North, p. 258).

Over-riding all other aspects of the narration, is its impressionistic quality. Spanning the range from "chummy" to lofty, the narrative voice in its freedom from consistency is as much a personality as are the characters, thereby belying the absolute authority that a narrator might assume. Even when the narrator makes a statement that in its nature seems absolute, the precedent of inconsistency under-cuts any pretense of objectivity. When Elizabeth Bowen tells us about "Ambiguity (speaker not sure, himself, what he means,")[63] the idea is applicable to the author and by extension the narrator. In seeking to express a reality, Bowen does not deal in objectivity and the narrator, who in Bowen's case is not omniscient, can only be granted the subjective and fragmented knowledge of the reality which is all that can be known from merely human perception. For example, when the narrator states that "Emmeline, who had been perhaps faintly tiresome, would not come round Paris with Markie" (in To the North, p. 185), we must notice the use of the word "perhaps". This is a favorite word of Bowen's narrative voice and it reminds us that the narrator is not omniscient. Another example is this comment about Aunt Violet (in The House in Paris): "Was she perhaps conscious something was in the air, like a very light rain of

ashes? She glanced up at the sky" (p. 76). Here the narrator again gives what is only an opinion and then follows it by observing that Aunt Violet glanced at the sky. The observation describes a fragment of what can be seen about Aunt Violet and is given without an explanation, leaving the reader to draw the impression.

Elizabeth Bowen states that "Dialogue is the thin bridge which must, from time to time, carry the entire weight of the novel."[64] She felt that dialogue should not only express character, but that it was important to the advancement of plot.[65] The trip to Paris during which the death of Emmeline's innocence occurs, contains dialogue between her and Markie that is full of references to death. At one point Emmeline says "Oh well, if one's killed one's killed" (p. 185). A little later when they are discussing marriage, Markie says that he refuses to marry her because for one thing, it would be "an impossible end" (p. 186) for her. She responds by asking "But how am I to end?" (p. 186). These statements are made after Emmeline and Markie have spent their night together. The notion of the death of innocence, such a death now being an event of the past, becomes linked with the event of the future, their actual deaths. If these words had been exchanged by Emmeline and Markie the day before, they would merely foreshadow the imminent loss of innocence and the later loss of life. By being placed between rather than before the two events, the effect is

magnetic, the plot is felt to be pulled from the one event to the next.

Mannered and often contorted, her dialogue demands close attention from the reader. Although dialogue forms a large portion of the novels and stories, the characters actually <u>tell</u> very little. Instead, their statements are more often only suggestive, even ambiguous, unlike for instance, some of D. H. Lawrence's characters who on occasion seem to be able to articulate almost in the manner of a dissertation on philosophical or social questions. Occasionally, though not often, Bowen allows the authorial presence to slip in and the characters say too much. For example, in this exchange in <u>The Last September</u> which is not an overtly political novel, the political message is delivered with the subtlety of a blunt instrument:

> ". . . How far do you think this war is going to go? Will there ever be anything we can all do except not notice?"
>
> "Don't ask me," he said, but sighed sharply as though beneath the pressure of omniscience. "A few more hundred deaths, I suppose, on our side -- which is no side -- rather scared, rather isolated, not expressing anything except tenacity to something that isn't there -- that never was there. And deprived of heroism by this wet kind of smother of commiseration. What's the matter with this country is the matter with the lot of us individually -- our sense of personality is a sense of outrage and we'll never get outside of it."
>
> But the hold of the country <u>was</u> that, she considered; it could be thought of in terms of oneself, so interpreted. Or seemed so -- "Like Shakespeare," she added more vaguely, "or isn't it? . . . (p. 117).

This exceptionally overstated piece of conversation is not characteristic of Elizabeth Bowen and seems to contradict her own guidelines for dialogue: "Characters should, on the whole, be under rather than over articulate. What they _intend_ to say should be more evident, more striking (because of its greater inner importance to the plot) than what they arrive at _saying_."[66]

The first dialogue between Karen and Max upon waking on the morning after their one night together is, on the surface, bare:

> "I thought your things would get wet; I got up to move them."
> "Are they wet?" she said indifferently.
> "No, the rain did not come so far. The things on the table are wet, though."
> "Need we wake up?"
> "No" (_The House in Paris_, p. 156).

Karen and Max have a good deal more on their minds than they care to say and what they do say has more implications with regards to their story than they can know. We have been told earlier that Karen's life had been full of warnings, the first of them being "You will get wet" (p. 154). It seems that she has now given up caring about the consequences of getting wet. Later when the consequences of this night will close in upon her as does this rain, she will not face them and continue to believe Max's assurance that she need not "wake up".

Elizabeth Bowen deplored "infatuation with any idiom."[67] Superficially, the Irish, the foreign, and the lower-class do not sound radically different from the upper-class English who form the bulk of her cast of characters. The difference however, is felt. We are told early on that Max has an "oddly inflected voice" (in The House in Paris, p. 105) and though no great show of foreign accent is made in his speeches, this comment, coupled with the slightly odd pacing of his language, serves to effectively separate Max's voice from the others. One notices the halting, stiff quality of his speech: "'I am sorry,' said Max. 'I am not accustomed to holidays. Satan finds mischief for me, I daresay. Will you have more tea, Karen?'" (p. 112). The speech of the Irish girl that Karen meets on the boat is not distinguished by a brogue or any quirks of language beyond an occasional "D'you," but the narrator points out the girl's Irishness enough times that her actions and language seem to become coloured by her nationality. In a friendly, uncommanding way, the narrator tells us how to hear the Irish girl -- "She could not help acting Irish even at Karen" (p. 86). Hermione Lee points out how in The Heat of the Day "Connie and Louie, simplified caricatures of lower-middle-class types," do not have "entirely naturalistic lower-class dialogue."[68]

Bowen's dialogue is never naturalistic but it gives that impression. Her portrayal of children is sensitive and

astute, but their language is never childish. Hermione Lee writes:

> Henrietta and Leopold speak a formal, mannered, language but it expresses what they would feel in these circumstances. A. S. Byatt puts this well: "Leopold, and still more Henrietta, are children equipped with the language of the secret thoughts of intelligent children."[69]

Eleven year old Cordelia Barry (in The Hotel) is the prototype of the awkward, overbearing, intelligent little girl who is to appear in much of Bowen's fiction. The words put in Cordelia's mouth by the author are not there merely to convey that she is a child; indeed, for an eleven year old she is rather over-articulate. Typically for a Bowen character, she often says more than she knows. When Milton states that she came to the hotel to meet people, Cordelia's reaction incorporates a commentary on Milton, on literature, and on life:

> "Don't you know any people? Do you like them so much?" Cordelia inquired. "How funny! I only like people in books who only exist when they matter. I think it is being in danger or terribly in love, discovering treasure or revenging yourself that is thrilling and for that you have to have people. But people in hotels, hardly alive. . . !" (p. 127).

Lonely Pauline (in To the North) is taken care of by a committee of aunts and uncles (as was Elizabeth Bowen as a child). Though a novice, she is aware of, and pratises the language of social intercourse. When asked how she is enjoying her visit to Farraways, she replies:

> "Very much; it's a great thing to meet such interesting people. A girl of my age might easily feel de trop, but they are all determined to make me feel quite at home. Mrs. Summers came in last night and offered to hook my dress, but it hooks at the side. Shall we sit down in the summer-house?" (p. 210).

The older characters do the same but with more polish. The elaborate social game at which Emmeline is not adept but Cecilia is, is exposed by Pauline's inexpert passes at it. Pauline is a budding Cecilia. She is the other woman in Julian's life and he is as inadequate for her as he is for Cecilia. Many parallels are drawn between Pauline and Emmeline's sister-in-law, only Pauline's experiences are on a smaller scale. Cecilia's infatuation with travel is miniaturized in Pauline's excitement over a bus ride. Cecilia's delight over the "sunny spaces of floor" (p. 12) in the house at St. John's Wood is echoed in Pauline's reaction to the (appropriately) tiny room given to her at Farraways: "Oh, how cosy; it is divine!" cried Pauline, clasping her hands" (p. 191).

Daniel George, who read the manuscript for one of Bowen's later novels The Heat of the Day, wrote about her "characteristic contortion."[70] Victoria Glendinning relates a portion of his critique:

> Daniel George wrote four pages of notes on what he called "snags in the crystal stream" for her to think about, adding his own not unwitty comments. One sentence from the book -- which she did not amend -- was "Absolutely," he said with fervour, "not." His comment was: "Far, I diffidently suggest, fetched."[71]

In The Hotel Ronald says to Sydney, more awkwardly than he realizes: "Usen't you, too?" (p. 219). Sometimes Bowen's phrases are not quite contorted yet still, upon reading them, one is made to go back in order to disentangle the meaning. Such phrases are not necessarily long: "It was not yesterday with his chin and jaw" (in To the North, p. 127).

I have left my examination of the language of Elizabeth Bowen to the last because I feel that that is what is truly distinctive about her work. Her plots are by no means extraordinary in their content, though I might add that they are tightly constructed and that she did place a great deal of emphasis on what she termed relevance:

> . . . the model for relevance is the well-constructed detective story: nothing is "in" that does not tell. But the detective story is, or would appear to be, simplified by having fact as its kernel. The detective story makes towards concrete truth; the novel makes towards abstract truth.[72]

Within the artistic limitations imposed by conventional plot, move Bowen's characters. With a few exceptions (for example Terry in the short story "Telling"[73]), most of her characters are conventional people. The point being made is that "normal" people make psychological studies worthy of art. The artistry is in the subtle and exacting nature of the description required for such characters as opposed to the cruder sort of definitions adequate for more sensational characters who are more removed from the experience of the reader.

The experiences of any two people, in this case the author and the reader, exist in two separate realities. Being thus isolated, any shared understanding between the two parties must occur indirectly through the office of impressions. The more subjective and ambiguous in its delivery the impression is, the more potential for accuracy in the response of the reader is created. Paradoxically, such widening of the field also makes greater the likelihood of the writer missing the reader altogether. This paradox is in the language of Elizabeth Bowen. It is a language of impressions; if ambiguous in its presentation it is for the sake of seeking accuracy in the reader's response; if unnatural, in other words, unconventional in its appearance, it is to seek to pierce the natural isolation that exists between people, to join the three separate consciousnessness of author, character, and reader into a triangle unified for the brief moment of an impression:

> That which can be made Explicit to the Idiot is not worth my care. The wisest of the Ancients consider'd what is not too Explicit as the fittest of Instruction, because it rouzes the faculties to act. (William Blake: Letter to the Reverent Dr. John Trusler).[74]

> Painters have painted, and photographers who were artists have photographed, the tottering lacelike architecture of ruins, dark mass movements of people, and the untimely brilliance of flaming skies. I cannot paint or photograph like this. I have isolated; I have made for the particular, spot-lighting faces or cutting out gestures that are not even the faces or gestures of great sufferers. This is how I am, how I feel, whether in war or peace time; and only as I am and feel can I write.[75]

NOTES

[1]George Eliot, Middlemarch (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1968, first published in eight parts 1871-1872). All further references to this work are from this edition and appear in the text.

[2]Todd K. Bender, Nancy Armstrong, Sue M. Briggum and Frank A. Knobloch, Modernism in Literature (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1977), p. 502.

[3]Hermione Lee, Elizabeth Bowen: An Estimation (London: Vision Press Limited and Totowa, New Jersey: Barnes and Noble Books, 1981), p. 11.

[4]This quotation and further examination of the influence of her Irish background on Elizabeth Bowen can be found in the article by Barbara Brothers, "Pattern and Void: Bowen's Irish Landscapes and The Heat of the Day" (Mosaic, XII:3, Spr. 1979).

[5]Elizabeth Bowen, The Hotel (London: Jonathan Cape, 1927, first published in the collected edition 1950, reprinted 1960). All furhter references to this work are from this edition and appear in the text.

[6]Elizabeth Bowen, The Last September (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1952, first published 1929). All further references to this work are from this edition and appear in the text.

[7]Elizabeth Bowen, To the North (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1950, first published 1932). All further references to this work are from this edition and appear in the text.

[8]Elizabeth Bowen, The House in Paris (New York: Vintage Books, 1959, reprinted by arrangement with Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., first edition, February 1936). All further references to this work are from this edition and appear in the text.

[9]Elizabeth Bowen, Friends and Relations (London: Jonathan Cape, 1931). All further references to this work are from this edition and appear in the text.

[10]One of the more recent major critics of Elizabeth Bowen, Hermione Lee, considers Friends and Relations to be characterized by "preciousness" and "mannerisms . . . (that are) felt to be pointless". I should add that Lee considers Bowen's first novel, The Hotel, to be almost as bad. Lee is not alone in her lack of enthusiasm for Bowen's third novel. Virginia Glendinning writes that "Friends and Relations, with its misleadingly Compton-Burnett-esque title, is the Elizabeth Bowen novel that even Elizabeth Bowen enthusiasts tend to forget about". Hermione Lee, Elizabeth Bowen: An Estimation (London: Vision Press Limited and New Jersey: Barnes and Noble Books, 1981), p. 165 and p. 64. Victoria

Glendinning, Elizabeth Bowen Portrait of a Writer (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1977), p. 81.

[11]Elizabeth Bowen, Pictures and Conversations (London: Penguin, 1975, first published 1974), p. xxxviii.

[12]Written in 1928, The Last September made its first appearance in 1929.

[13]Elizabeth Bowen, The Heat of the Day (New York: Avon Books, 1979, first published 1948).

[14]George Wickes, Masters of Modern British Fiction (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1963), p. 485.

[15]Elizabeth Bowen, "Ivy Gripped the Steps," in The Demon Lover and Other Stories (Middlesex: Penguin Books Ltd. in association with Jonathan Cape, first published by Jonathan Cape 1945, published in Penguin Books 1966).

[16]William Blake, "When a Man Has Married a Wife," in Eighteenth Century English Literature, ed. Geoffrey Tillotson, Paul Fussell Jr., Marshall Waingrow, with the assistance of Brewster Rogerson (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc., 1969), p. 1506.

[17]Lee, Elizabeth Bowen: An Estimation, p. 100.

[18]Elizabeth Bowen, The Death of the Heart, (London: Victor Gollancz Ltd., 1938), pp. 144-45.

[19]Lee, p. 68-69.

[20]Elizabeth Bowen, Eva Trout or Changing Scenes (New York: Avon Books, 1978, first published 1968).

[21]Lee, p. 60.

[22]Lee, p. 46.

[23]Albert Camus, A Happy Death (New York: Vintage Books, 1973, this edition originally published by Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., May 1972. Originally published Paris: Editions Gallimard, 1971).

[24]William Heath, Elizabeth Bowen: An Introduction to Her Novels (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1961), p. 37.

[25]Heath, p. 24.

[26]Heath, p. 9.

[27]Elizabeth Bowen, A World of Love (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1955), p. 65.

[28]Bowen, Pictures and Conversations, pp. 34-57.

[29]Bowen, Pictures and Conversations, p. 34.

[30]Bowen, "Notes on Writing a Novel" in Pictures and Conversations, p. 34.

[31]Bowen, Pictures and Conversations, p. 35.

[32]Bowen, Pictures and Conversations, p. 35.

[33]Lee, p. 80.

[34]Bowen, Pictures and Conversations, p. 40.

[35]Bowen, Pictures and Conversations, p. 40.

[36]Bender et al., Modernism in Literature, p. 502.

[37]Bowen, Pictures and Conversations, p. 178.

[38]Bowen, Pictures and Conversations, p. 37.

[39]Blake, "Heaven and Hell," in Eighteenth Century English Literature, ed. Tillotson et al.

[40]Harvey Breit, The Writer Observed (London: Alvin Redman Limited, 1957), p. 45. This statement is from an interview given by Waugh March 13, 1949. Breit's book also contains an interview with Elizabeth Bowen dated March 26, 1950 (pp. 107-109).

[41]Wickes, Masters of Modern British Fiction, p. 486.

[42]Wickes, p. 486.

[43]Sean O'Faolain, "A Reading and Remembrance of Elizabeth Bowen," London Review of Books, 4, No. 4, 4-17, March 1982, p. 15. The article contains O'Faolain's "remembrance" of his friend Elizabeth Bowen as well as reviews of The Collected Stories of Elizabeth Bowen (Cape, 1981) and Hermione Lee's Elizabeth Bowen: An Estimation (Vision, 1981).

[44]George Wickes writes that James's "devious, suggestive, teasing style seems to have affected her as well as his psychological probing of subtleties." Daniel George describes one of her sentences as "almost more Jacobean than James." Victoria Glendinning comments on the frequency of comparisons of Bowen's style with Henry James's and she quotes Bowen from a 1959 broadcast interview in which the author was questioned about the influence of James upon her writing style. Bowen answered that "you can't say it's like catching measles, because its a splendid style, but it's a dangerous style. Glendinning adds that "For all that, she could not read James's 'more complicated' books: 'I

haven't ever read The Ivory Tower, he's quite beyond me there, I really belong to Portrait of a Lady.'" Wickes, Masters of Modern British Fiction, p. 486. Daniel George in Victoria Glendinning's Elizabeth Bowen Portrait of a Writer (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1977), p. 153. Victoria Glendinning, p. 153.

[45]"Notes on Writing a Novel" is in Bowen's Pictures and Conversations.

[46]Bowen, Pictures and Conversations, p. 170.

[47]Bowen, Pictures and Conversations, p. 171.

[48]Bowen, Pictures and Conversations, p. 171.

[49]Bowen, Pictures and Conversations, p. 178.

[50]Bowen, Pictures and Conversations, p. 178.

[51]Bowen, Pictures and Conversations, p. 183.

[52]Bowen, Pictures and Conversations, p. 169.

[53]Bowen, Pictures and Conversations, p. 184.

[54]Bowen, Pictures and Conversations, p. 179.

[55]This is how the statement is usually cited. However, what Bowen wrote in her "Notes on Writing a Novel" (Pictures and Conversations p. 177), was "nothing can happen nowhere."

[56]Bowen, Pictures and Conversations, p. 171.

[57]Bowen, Pictures and Conversations, p. 171.

[58]Bowen, Pictures and Conversations, p. 185.

[59]Bowen, Pictures and Conversations, p. 173.

[60]Bowen, Pictures and Conversations, p. 189.

[61]Bowen, Pictures and Conversations, p. xxiv.

[62]Referring to Bowen on the subject of narration, Heath also speaks of "understatement," (147) and "the novel of proposition" (147). Bowen has often been compared to Jane Austen and to Henry James and Heath uses these two attributes (which he considers characteristic of the English novel) to make his comparison. Heath writes that ". . . there seem always to have been novelists who compose by propositions, the art of whose fiction is generated and controlled by exploring the significance both expressed and hidden by a statement of condition" (p. 145). Heath then goes on to discuss "understatement" and says among other things that

> The quality of English understatement is not the tone one hears in the voice of a Hemingway narrator, whose distrust of language centers on the words one man speaks to another. English understatement is correlative with the novel of proposition because it depends, rather, on a distrust of final paragraphs -- of definitive formulations of meaning and significance -- combined with a conviction that the search for final statement is imperative (p. 147).

For the complete discussion on proposition and understatement, see the chapter entitled "Craft and Relevance" (pp. 145-159) in William Heath's book Elizabeth Bowen An Introduction to her Novels (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1961).

[63]Bowen, Pictures and Conversations, p. 180.

[64]Bowen, Pictures and Conversations, p. 182.

[65]Bowen, Pictures and Conversations, p. 179.

[66]Bowen, Pictures and Conversations, p. 182.

[67]Bowen, Pictures and Conversations, p. 182.

[68]Lee, p. 184.

[69]Lee, p. 95.

[70]Daniel George's comments are taken from Victoria Glendinning's Elizabeth Bowen Portrait of a Writer, p. 153.

[71]From Glendinning's Elizabeth Bowen Portrait of a Writer, p. 153.

[72]Bowen, Pictures and Conversations, p. 190.

[73]"Telling" was published in And the Darkness Falls (World Publishing Company, September 1946).

[74]William Blake in a letter to the Reverend Dr. John Trusler in Eighteenth Century English Literature, ed. Tillotson et al., p. 1516.

[75]Bowen in "Postscript by the Author" in The Demon Lover and Other Stories, p. 203.

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