

ELIZABETH BOWEN

(1899-1973)

Elizabeth Dorothea Cole Bowen was the author of ten novels, over one hundred short stories, one children's book, and countless reviews and magazine articles. Her first collection of short stories, *Encounters* was published in 1923 and in 1968 she published her last completed novel, *Eva Trout, or Changing Scenes*. Bowen's fiction was widely read in her lifetime; however, following her death in 1973, interest in her work declined. Her reputation and place in literary history was revived in the latter part of the twentieth century with four notable publications. The first was Victoria Glendinning's biography, *Elizabeth Bowen: Portrait of a Writer* (1977); this was followed by another biography in 1981 by Hermione Lee. The third publication was *The Collected Stories of Elizabeth Bowen* edited by Angus Wilson and published by Alfred A Knopf also in 1981, and Andrew Bennett and Nicholas Royle's study, *Elizabeth Bowen and the Dissolution of the Novel* (1995) was the fourth publication. All four books helped to restore Elizabeth Bowen to a position of both public and academic appreciation, and now her novels and short stories are, once again, read by many. Her reputation as a short story writer was enhanced further by Allan Hepburn's edited collection *The Bazaar and Other Stories* (2008) which contains stories not originally published in Bowen's collections, together with a number of unfinished stories. A significant number of her novels and short stories have Gothic or uncanny elements, an aspect of fiction which she writes about in her notebooks compiled when she was teaching at Vassar in 1960 and which Hepburn drew on in his introduction to *The Bazaar*: "The UNCANNY means – I think? – the unknowable – something beyond the bounds of *rational* knowledge – In this I include the GHOST STORY with its content of *fear*".

Born in the family home at 15 Herbert Place, Dublin on 7th June 1899 to Anglo-Irish parents, Bowen spent most of the summers of her early life in Bowen's Court in Co. Cork, and her winters in the house in Dublin. The two houses were very different. Bowen's Court, completed by Bowen's ancestor Henry Cole Bowen in 1776 was, according to Bowen in her history of her family and of the house *Bowen's Court*, 'an isolated, partly unfinished house, grandly conceived and plainly and strongly built'. It was "severely classical and, outside and inside" [... and] very bare"; however, as Bowen is keen to highlight, "[t]here is no ghost in this house." 15 Herbert Place, Dublin is described in her memoir *Seven Winters* as "a winter house [where] early dusks, humid reflections and pale sunshine seemed part of its being". Believing as a child that "winter lived always in Dublin, while summer lived always in County Cork", Bowen's confusion about her place of birth (having been born in the summer, she should have been born in Bowen's Court where summer lived) foreshadows her feelings of not always belonging later in her life, emotions that can be seen in some of her Gothic short stories: "by having been born where I had been born in a month in which that house did not exist," she writes, "I felt that I had intruded on some no-place." This sense of confusion perhaps fuelled her later fascination with the uncanny and the Gothic.

In 1906, Bowen's father, Henry Charles Cole Bowen, had a breakdown. After Bowen's mother, Florence (*née* Colley), was advised to move away from her husband, mother and daughter moved to England, settling on the south coast in Hythe until Florence's death in 1913. Bowen then went to live with her aunt in Harpenden, Hertfordshire, and attended Downe House, a boarding school in Kent—her time at the school is recounted in her 1934 essay, "The Mulberry Tree". In 1923, Bowen married Alan Cameron, an education administrator who, at that time, worked for Northamptonshire County Council; they moved to Oxford when he was appointed to the Oxford Education Committee, and then to London where he worked at the BBC. While in Oxford, Bowen became part of a literary and academic circle becoming friends with, among others, Virginia Woolf, T. S. Elliot, Graham Greene,

Rosamund Lehmann, and Rose Macauley. Although Bowen had numerous affairs throughout her married life (most notably with Humphrey House, Seán Ó Faoláin, and the Canadian diplomat Charles Ritchie), when Alan Cameron died in 1953, Bowen was grief stricken.

Inheriting Bowen's Court on her father's death in 1930, Bowen then spent her life between England and Ireland until she sold Bowen's Court in 1960. For most of the Second World War she lived in London, working as an Air Raid Precaution warden, and also providing reports to the British government on the neutrality of Ireland. Bowen travelled extensively, particularly after the Second World War, and spent a considerable amount of time in America, working for the British Council and lecturing at many universities. In 1948 she was made a Companion of the British Empire and was also awarded honorary doctorates from Trinity College, Dublin and Oxford.

From the time that she was able to read, at around the age of six, Bowen became a voracious reader and, as she grew older, particularly delighted in tales of the supernatural and the uncanny. As a consequence, perhaps, of her reading and her isolated childhood in an Irish "big house" (something which is explored in her 1942 essay "The Big House"), the idea of the supernatural greatly appealed to her as a writer, as well as a reader. Notions of the supernatural, of the uncanny, can be seen in much of her writing, for example in the characterisation of Madame Fisher in *The House in Paris* (1935) who sits spider-like in her dark house; or Maud in Bowen's 1955 novel, *A World of Love*, a young girl who delights in ideas of the supernatural and her own "familiar"; Gay David; or the war time setting of *The Heat of the Day* (1948) where the boundaries between the living and the dead become ever more permeable as the war progresses.

Bowen's use of Gothic tropes can also be seen in many of her short stories, from her earliest collection *Encounters* published in 1923 through to *A Day in the Dark and Other Stories* published in 1965. In "Salon des Dames" (Bowen's first published short story which, according to Allan Hepburn in *The Bazaar and Other Stories*, was first printed in the *Weekly Westminster Gazette* on 7th April 1923) the narrator hints at the gothic: "[e]ach of the hundred bedrooms with their shuttered windows [in the hotel] might have held a corpse, rotting in humidity beneath the glacial swathings of the bed." The possibility of haunted rooms is one explored by Bowen in "The Shadowy Third" (1923) in which a house (and the second wife) is haunted by the memory of a first wife and son whose deaths are never explained.

There are times, however, when Bowen appears to lead her reader astray: the house in "The Cassowary" (published in 1929 in *Joining Charles and Other Stories*) "was under no discredit from any hint of the supernatural". In "Emergency in the Gothic Wing" (first published in 1954 and reprinted in *The Bazaar*, the gothic wing with its "reek of ancient damp", its "dangerous head of the spiral staircase" and its "charnel draughts" should be the setting of terrible and frightening events but is, instead, the background for a cheerful and joyous Christmas party. This isn't the case in the aptly titled "Ghost Story" (an unfinished short story written in the mid-fifties) where two young cousins, Oswald and Verena, are summoned to a very different Christmas party, one where the hostess, Cousin Metta is absent, but who appears to communicate via written notes delivered by servants. Believing that they are to be named as heirs to her estate, the two discuss the untimely and unnatural deaths of the previous inhabitants of the house and each claim to see the ghosts of these relatives on the night of Christmas Eve.

Another haunted house is the setting for Bowen's story "The Cat Jumps" (in *The Cat Jumps and Other Stories* published in 1934). In this instance Rose Hill, the site of an atrocious murder referred to in the newspapers as "*The Rose Hill Horror*", is bought by a young couple, the Harold Wrights, who consider themselves to be above any mundane notions of sensationalism and have "light, bright, shadowless, thoroughly disinfected minds".

However, their pragmatism doesn't last, and they too succumb to the uncanny atmosphere of the house.

Bowen's writing of the Gothic is perhaps most evident in her collection of short stories, *The Demon Lover and Other Stories*, published in 1945 (this collection was published in the United States in 1946 as *Ivy Gripped the Steps and Other Stories*). In her preface to the American edition, subsequently reprinted in *Collected Impressions* (a selection of essays and introductions which Bowen felt most represented her work at the time of publication), Bowen refers to the "rising tide of hallucination" present in this selection of stories written between 1941 and 1944, at the height of the Second World War when she lived "with every pore open". The title story, "The Demon Lover", explores the fragile permeability returned to in *The Heat of the Day* as ghosts from a previous war come back to haunt those living through the horrors of the Second World War. While the haunting is, arguably, explicit in "The Demon Lover", this is not the case with another story from the same collection, "The Happy Autumn Fields" in which time is skilfully manipulated in such a way that the reader of this story is unable to tell whether ghosts from the past are haunting those in the present, or whether those from the present are the ones "haunting" those in the past.

The third short story in this collection which particularly focuses on the supernatural is "Mysterious Kôr", probably Bowen's most anthologised story, and one which draws on her childhood reading of *She*, both the novel (1887) by H. Rider Haggard and the poem "She" by Andrew Lang published in *Grass of Parnassus* (1888). She wrote about her love of Rider Haggard's *She* in an essay based on a talk she gave for the BBC in 1947 (reprinted in *Afterthought: Pieces About Writing*); it was a book she read when she had exhausted childhood stories of fairies, myths and adventure and, shying away from history and historical novels, the novel introduced her to both a world of promise and of adventure, and the power of writing. "Mysterious Kôr" focuses on one night in the lives of Pepita, Arthur (her lover) and Callie (Pepita's flat mate) and is set in an ethereal, ghostly London, where the moonlight transports Pepita into the land of Kôr. The moonlight is not, however, benign—although no longer responsible for drawing enemy bombing raids, it dissolves the images of people, and creates hallucinatory visions. It provides a sense of an extra day, a "day between days [which] was perhaps more than senses and nerves could bear". As Arthur says to Callie, "[a] game's a game but what's a hallucination. You begin by laughing, then it gets in you and you can't laugh it off".

That sense of hallucination, of the blurring of boundaries between the living and the dead, is also apparent in a short essay, "London, 1940", an essay which predates the stories in *A Demon Lover*. In this short piece, Bowen describes the emotions (or rather, lack of emotion) experienced the morning after an air raid, where houses and communities have been ripped apart by the overnight bombing; scenes that she later draws on, particularly, in "The Demon Lover" and "Mysterious Kôr", and which exemplify her own fears about the possible destruction of her home in Clarence Terrace, near Regent's Park.

While these stories are based, in part, on the events of the Second World War, Bowen's delight in the supernatural, and the terror that can be induced by fiction, can also be seen in her essays and prefaces. For example, in the introduction to an edition of *Uncle Silas* by JOSEPH SHERIDAN LE FANU—a writer who shared Bowen's Anglo-Irish heritage—published in 1947 by Cresset Press, a specialist, fine art printing house, Bowen extols the virtues of *Uncle Silas* (1864). She considered it to be one of the first psychological thrillers published, rather than the reworking of tired Gothic plots which was seen in much of the fiction of Le Fanu's contemporaries. She argues that it is a tale told with an unrelenting air of claustrophobia and suspense in the "sense of the tightening circle, the shrinking and the darkening room . . .". Although *Uncle Silas* was first published some eighty years before Bowen wrote her introduction, she rightly believed that it was a tale which would continue to

delight audiences in the mid-twentieth century; Le Fanu's ability, as Bowen saw it, to manipulate childhood fears, particularly feelings of helplessness, was as relevant in a post-war society as they were in the latter part of the nineteenth century. Bowen's love of Le Fanu's writing can also be seen in her 1968 introduction to his earlier novel, *The House by the Church-Yard* (reprinted in *People, Places, Things: Essays by Elizabeth Bowen*). *The House by the Church-Yard*, originally published in 1863, was, according to Bowen, a novel which had much that is praiseworthy: midnight burials, deviancy, the monstrous, the supernatural, the power of death; in short a novel which stirred the emotions thoroughly.

Bowen's introduction to *The Second Ghost Book* (1952), edited by Lady Cynthia Asquith, provides further evidence, should further evidence be required, of the pleasure that she took in tales of the supernatural. In the introduction, Bowen writes about the enduring popularity of stories of ghosts and hauntings, of obsessions, of buried guilt: elements of which can be found in her short story "Hand in Glove" which is included in this collection and then later republished in her own collection of short stories, *A Day in the Dark, and Other Stories* (1965). Noting that "Ghosts have grown up", Bowen suggests that ghosts have adapted: "Far behind lie their clanking and moaning days; they have laid aside their original bag of tricks – bleeding hands, luminous skulls, and so on [...] They abjure the over-fantastic and the grotesque, operating, instead, through series of happenings whose horror lies in being just, just out of the true."

Bowen further notes in this introduction that not all the stories are threatening, and that some are much lighter in tone: "Hand in Glove" is an example of this more humorous approach to the supernatural. It recounts the haunting of two young women, Ethel and Elsie Trevors as Ethel tries to ensnare a British soldier. Their pillaging of their aunt's belongings ends in Ethel's death, strangled by a ghostly disembodied hand in a much coveted glove. This was not, however, the only short story of Bowen's to appear in a collection by Cynthia Asquith: *The Third Ghost Book* contains the story "The Claimant" where the ghost of the heir to an inheritance haunts the owners of the house which he believes should have been his, a haunting which leads to the death of the new owner. Following his death, his widow puts the house up for sale: "Once again for sale, but I need the money. Empty or not empty, I cannot say. Who is in possession, I do not ask."

Interest in Bowen continues to grow: there are television productions of some of her books and stories, including *The Last September* (Maggie Smith, Michael Gambon, Keeley Hawes, David Tennant and Lambert Wilson: 1999) and *The Demon Lover* (starring Dorothy Tutin and Hugh Grant: 1986); The Elizabeth Bowen Society was formed in 2016; in 2018 the first volume of the *Elizabeth Bowen Review* was published online; a new Everyman edition of *Collected Stories* introduced by John Banville, was published in 2019; and, in 2020, Patricia Laurence published *Elizabeth Bowen: a literary life*, and Jessica Gildersleeve and Patricia Juliana Smith edited a collection of essays, *Elizabeth Bowen: Theory, Thought and Things*. Authors continue to be inspired by Bowen's gothic texts, Edwina Keown and Bernice M. Murphy, for example, suggest that Bowen's influence can be seen in the writing of Shirley Jackson. It's an influence which comes from Bowen's love of the supernatural, the Gothic, "the stamp of other-reality" as she calls it in the introduction to *The Second Ghost Book*, which can be found in both the writing and the reading of her stories published through much of the twentieth-century; it is a love which is encapsulated in Bowen's penultimate line of that introduction: "we are", she writes, "twentieth-century haunters of the haunted."

Nicola Darwood

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