

**Those Uneasy Currents:  
Elements of Menace and Terror in Selected Fiction of Elizabeth Bowen**

by

**Ann W. Perce**

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Elements of Menace and Terror  
in Selected Fiction of Elizabeth Bowen

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## THOSE UNEASY CURRENTS

### Elements of Menace and Terror in Selected Fiction of Elizabeth Bowen

Ann W. Perce

The elements of menace and terror are crucial aspects of Elizabeth Bowen's pervasive theme of betrayal in her investigation of human relationships. Bowen introduces menace into the familiar and predictable environment of her characters and threatens their sense of security and safety. They are vulnerable in their homes, as in "Reduced" and "The Needlecase," and in their gardens, as in "Look at All Those Roses" and "Telling." Bowen studies how menace becomes internalized into terror through the victim's helplessness and entrapment, as in "The Demon Lover" and *To the North*. In *The Heat of the Day*, her wartime novel, Bowen examines the cumulative effects of extended menace and terror both on individuals and on groups.

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## PREFACE

I love a mystery! However, I certainly did not expect Elizabeth Bowen to provide one when I began my study of her fiction. But the more I read of her work, the more I was intrigued by the numerous instances of situations filled with suspicion, threat, menace, crime, violence, and mystery. These situations vary, from reports of surprisingly gruesome murders to vague menace in a threatening atmosphere. There are mysteries left unsolved and terror-filled scenes abruptly terminated; an attempted murder is suggested, while blackmail and treason are exposed.

These recurring topics seemed incongruous with Bowen's usual reputation as a sophisticated, observant social chronicler of the English and Anglo-Irish domestic scene, inevitably compared to Jane Austen and Henry James. Why then did Bowen expend her time, energy, and creative ability on "those uneasy currents beneath the apparently placid surface" ("Short" 14)? It seemed to me that, for such a deliberate writer, whose every word is carefully selected and meaningful, there must be an intentional and valid purpose. Therefore, I accepted the challenge to analyze the generally neglected elements of menace and terror and their relation to Bowen's fiction.

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## CHAPTER 1

### A Drive through the Dark: Introduction to Elizabeth Bowen

The scars of childhood run deep. Long buried beneath the surface, their imprint will influence the adult in a negative or a positive manner. Many authors attempt to understand and transcend their personal experiences through their works and, when successful, enrich our understanding of the human condition. Elizabeth Bowen was such an author.

Born in Dublin in 1899, Elizabeth Dorothea Cole Bowen was the only child of an attorney and his wife. Her father was also the heir of the family "big house," Bowen's Court, built on land granted to the Bowen who had served Oliver Cromwell in his subjugation of Ireland in the 17th century. Her first seven years were filled with the warmth and support of an extended family and divided between the Dublin town house in winter and the rural Bowen's Court in summer.

The security of Bowen's childhood was abruptly shattered when her father suffered a mental breakdown, severe and possibly violent; his hospitalization was necessary. Although there had been indications that his condition was worsening, the decision was made suddenly for Elizabeth and her mother to leave Ireland immediately and stay with relatives in England. Elizabeth Bowen described this sudden departure to Edwin Kenney: "Late one night, after a day of alarms, I was got out of bed by Miss M--; a cab came around and she and I drove through the dark...I had left Herbert Place forever, without knowing" (25). This flight from Ireland was to be the first of a lifetime of Irish Channel crossings for Bowen.

Elizabeth and her mother spent the years in England living with her mother's relatives. Her father eventually recovered and returned to the Dublin home; Elizabeth and her mother did not. Without siblings or a home of her own, Elizabeth grew dependent on and extremely close to her mother. While the mental health of Elizabeth's father stabilized, her mother's physical health deteriorated. Increasingly bewildered and apprehensive, Elizabeth was not informed of her mother's serious condition and was shocked and devastated at age 13 when her mother died of cancer. These traumatic experiences filled Bowen with a sense of helplessness and betrayal that was to remain with her and reappear in her fiction.

For Bowen, childhood had been a magic time when she depended "for life" ("Book" 269) on the lies she was told and the illusions she perceived; as an author and storyteller she returned to that time with "dishonesty and debt" ("Book" 268). As an author she continually juggles reality



and illusion; Dunleavy claims the illusion "was necessary to prevent the overwhelming impact of reality" (70). Bowen maintains that the writer continues the child's hope that her world will somehow be explained; perhaps "the writer does not outlive that hope" (*Winters* 62). The despair, the panic, the terror remain; Bowen claims "our childish fears...are never to be rationalized away" ("Silas" 111).

Bowen's childhood experiences of betrayal and powerlessness appear throughout her fiction as components of the loss of innocence, a major theme in her work. Implicit in the loss of innocence is betrayal; menace, which is a precursor of betrayal, and terror, which is manifest in helplessness, are vital elements in Bowen's examination of betrayal. To assess the powerful elements of menace and terror, it is necessary to look at Bowen's fiction in general, to become familiar with her style and themes, and to concentrate on specifics of her novels and short stories.

When Bowen died in 1973, she had written ten novels and close to 90 short stories, as well as much nonfiction. Her best known novels are *The Death of the Heart*, *The House in Paris*, and *The Heat of the Day*. She concentrates on a narrow focus of the times, locations, and people that she knew. She writes almost exclusively of her contemporary time, with an occasional flashback. Her works are set in the areas of England and Ireland where she lived and in areas of France and Italy where she had traveled. Her characters, who are mainly her social equals, are men, women, and children in familiar domestic situations. Strong labels her a writer from a "specialised background about a specialised life" (132). Brooke elaborates: she has an "aristocratic" perspective on character and is concerned with the social behavior of people with an "appreciable education and/or sensibility" (10). To Austin, her characters are usually "sensitive, educated, well-mannered females" in a well-ordered and "well-to-do world" (94).

Bowen's style reflects her educated mind, her comfortable social status, and her perceptive observation. Her language is elegant and witty; her words are carefully chosen to present her subject as effectively as possible. Patterns of speech are distinctive; her narratives are "terse" and her dialogue "elliptical" (Austin 94). Her penchant for the convoluted sentence with its unusual construction has been often remarked and sometimes parodied. Sean O'Faolain remarks that Bowen works with the "subtle suggestiveness of an artist who uses her words with the most delicate implications" (*Hero* 163).

Brooke concurs that Bowen is a "deliberate artist", who leaves nothing to chance and calculates every effect (29). The objects that grace interiors or accompany characters are carefully chosen to denote class and personality or to symbolize an aspect of the story. Houses are described in detail and often correspond to the personality of a character.

Bowen's description of place is so intense that the reader can easily visualize each scene. Brooke suggests that this emphasis on the visible world is responsible for our "vivid

apprehension" of it (5). For Bowen, the physical setting is vital; as she writes, "nothing can happen nowhere...[scene] must give the happening the desired force" ("Notes" 253-4). The description also establishes and sustains the mood and atmosphere (Austin 94), especially the emphasis on the light that illuminates a scene, whether soft and diffused natural light or the harsh ghostly glare of fluorescent bulbs. Many analysts have remarked on this aspect of her work and compared it to the Impressionist painters; too, many of her scenes evoke the cold isolation of an Edward Hopper or German Expressionist painting. Hanson notes her "heightened sensitivity to colour, light, and atmosphere" (141). This sensitivity had led Bowen originally to consider a career in painting; she studied studio art in London for several years.

Bowen's attention to the mechanics of fiction is paralleled by her attention to the subject of her fiction, especially the complex social interrelationships between individuals. Reed comments that her work combines Thomas Hardy's "sense of tragic destiny," Henry James's "sense of evil," and James Joyce's "sense of ...human suffering" (15). For Eudora Welty, "the nature and workings of human emotions magnetized her imagination...she set forth to comprehend, and thus capture, human motives" (22).

Bowen writes that the author's "subject is not society but the individual as he himself is, behind the social mask" (*Winters* 64). She maintains that the writer must recognize the "endlessness of human variation and dissonance, the doublings and twistings of mankind under the grip of circumstance and the pressure of life" (*Winters* 64). Bufkin notes her concern with the subtleties and ambiguities of her characters, especially the subtleties and deceits that are just below the surface in any social interaction (299). Bowen establishes and maintains the tension generated as the hidden personality behind a social facade struggles to live his or her daily life. Bufkin claims that Bowen is the only novelist since Henry James who can delineate character so effectively (299). Most critics judge her female characters to be her most successful, and she is noted for the sensitivity of these female characters (Harkness 499).

Bowen's concentration on the female character can present ambivalent situations. On the one hand, as Edward Sackville-West explains, her depiction of female intelligence offers a "startling yet homely image," emphasis on the "heart of a complex personal relationship," and freedom from "political obsessions which nag and distort the visions of men" (78). However, this freedom from "political obsessions" may not be the woman's choice but a function of the social conventions of British society. Hall maintains that Bowen's characters "value competence and control" (18); thus, the attempt to reconcile competence and sensitivity is often contradictory and produces tension.

Hall also notes that women's expectations in the 20th century are a "given condition for restlessness" (19). As opportunities developed for women to choose from a wider range of roles, frustration resulted when a woman was forced to remain passive and unable to determine her role.

Lassner notes that Bowen examines how the "pressures of social and family tradition shape the lives of characters who wish for or resist change" (*Bowen 2*). According to Hall, Bowen maintains that characters must adapt to society's changing circumstances and demonstrates "the purposelessness, ineffectiveness, eccentricity, and insanity remaining in the less adaptable" (19). Tension between internal desire and external restraint, the "ominous cracking of the social fabric" (Brooke 15), establishes a common theme in Bowen's fiction. She reflects her interest in the "uneasy currents" in a "'fascination with the surface of life...for the dangerous sense which it gives of existing upon a thin crust beneath which lurks the bottomless abyss...the more the surface seems to heave or threaten to crack, the more its actual pattern fascinates me'" (Brooke 9).

Hall believes Bowen finds drama so necessary for daily life that this demand for drama turns the everyday "into continual skirmishing...she sets up drama as vital, natural, and complex" (22). Skirmishing allows the characters to express their intensity without giving up their valued "civilized intercourse"(Hall 24).

If this constant domestic warfare sometimes reads like social comedy, it conceals Bowen's more serious theme of betrayal in human relationships. Allen notes that the comedy is "secondary to a conception of human relations verging upon the tragic" (192). Certainly betrayal can take many forms; the one that Bowen most often examines is the loss of innocence, indeed the "death of the heart." Snow repeats the emphasis on "tragic" and declares that for Bowen the "journey...from innocence to experience is always a tragic one" (309); Kenney states that for Bowen tragedy is the "condition of life" and thus "cannot...be entirely avoided by innocence or deliberate ignorance" (35). Bowen's study of the relationship of innocence to experience is always a one-way street, with the outcome a foregone conclusion. Her contrast between innocence and experience is "harrowing" (Reed 15); it is the "experience of others that corrodes the innocent" (Reed 20). According to Kenney, the young people in Bowen's fiction "learn that there is no security, that security and happiness are a game played by grown-ups, that 'life...was an act of apprehension of death'" (35). The innocent learn, as Bowen did, that "maturity...is the end of the magic illusions" (Weekes 102).

Bowen summarizes the devastation from betrayal in *The Death of the Heart*: "one's fidelities are so instinctive that one hardly knows they exist: only when they are betrayed...does one realize their power. That betrayal is the end of an inner life, without which the everyday becomes threatening or meaningless" (298). And, with one of her most famous comments, she offers little consolation: "it is not only our fate but our business to lose innocence, and once we have lost that it is futile to attempt to picnic in Eden" ("Book" 265).

Bowen examines this loss of innocence in many of her novels, which O'Faolain describes as "exquisitely composed logs of disaster" whose heroines "ask only for the simplest things-- honest feeling, sympathy, trust, love" (*Hero* 161). Most people would choose these basic

emotional needs, and O'Faolain wonders if they cannot be had, then what "has gone wrong?" (*Hero* 161). Bowen attempts to answer this question as she examines both personal fulfillment and social environment. She has argued that the novel must not only describe human experience but increase our understanding as well (*Winters* 237). Austin comments that if Bowen has only one story to relate, it is how to live with diminished hopes after one's ideals and desires are reduced or destroyed (21).

This limited focus has not escaped critics and literary analysts. Austin terms it an overconcern for the "marginal aspects of life" (123); Moss questions if any of her subjects or themes were "important enough--ever held a match to the style per se" (125). Corn favorably compares Bowen's novels to those of the 19th century with their humane character analysis and extensive physical description, but finds that Bowen's lack characters who are "larger than life" (159). However, Brooke claims that her "specialty is the minor yet significant incident" (30), and Strickhausen finds "endless variety" and "rich sensitivity" within her limited range (165). Karl believes that the limitations and restrictions in her novels are self-imposed and, in contrast to the great novels of the early 20th century, her characters suffer from "insecurity instead of subversive thoughts, awkwardness instead of cosmic maladjustment, isolation in family terms instead of eternal loneliness" (111).

Critical assessment of Bowen's short stories is more consistent in its praise; for example, Bloom claims that she "may be the most distinguished British writer of short stories of our time" (1). Bowen wrote that in the short story the author "can render the significance of the small event" ("Short" 11) and, according to Heath, indicated that she preferred the short story "as a form to the novel" (140). Bowen elaborates on the difference in the preface to the Vintage edition of her stories: "into the novel goes such taste as I have for rational behaviour and social portraiture. The short story...allows for what is crazy about humanity: obstinacies, inordinate heroisms, 'immortal longings'" (*Mulberry* 30). Reed notes that her short stories have a richer and more "concentrated" atmosphere than her novels (21), while Austin comments that the stories examine more unusual "psychological states" (94). There seem to be more unbalanced characters and more aberration in the stories; this may be the explanation of why there is more crime in the stories.

The dramatic structure of the modern short story, where the curtain rises and the drama begins (Beachcroft 177), is a natural stage for Bowen's style. Trevor comments that the short story is "the art of the glimpse" (131), while Lassner finds that Bowen's stories "dramatize the moments before and after epiphany, not the revelation itself" (*Short* 29). In a lecture at Wellesley College in 1950 Bowen spoke of "'impression for its own sake--spotlit, isolated--only slight need for rationalization and explanation'" (Lassner *Short* 122). O'Faolain believes that for a short story "suggestion is everything" (*Story* 205). He maintains that a short story must have "punch and

poetry" (*Story ix*), a combination of plausibility and shock, which illuminates the material, sets it on fire, and "makes it fume in the memory as an aroma or essence" (*Story ix*).

For Bowen, the action should be simple, the subject relevant, and the plot haunting; her description of the short stories of de Maupassant applies to her own: "pictures in primary colours, outlines in black chalk" ("Faber" 40). Bowen considers the short story exciting, emotional, "tense, impetuous" (Lassner *Short* 119) with drama more important than character development (Lassner *Short* 120). O'Faolain agrees that revelation of a character is more important than development, as one would "peel off an outer skin or mask" (*Story* 191).

Bowen confesses that she tries to freeze her characters at a time when they are weak, exposed, and most vulnerable (*Winters* 188). Thus, somewhere in the story "the unexpected ambushes" the character and the story climaxes "with a moment of shock, a disclosure, or an experience...sufficiently disturbing" (Austin 22). This "sting in the tail," as it is generally called, is O'Faolain's "punch," which he compares to the final act of a drama where the spotlight is turned on and what was hidden in the darkness is "revealed in the sizzling light" (*Story* 186).

Bowen's stories often do not offer a solution or resolution. Rather, she says, the stories are questions asked and sometimes end "with a shrug...yet I cannot consider those trick endings...from true predicament there is no way out" (*Winters* 197). Heath claims that Bowen did not like to indicate the future of characters as is usual in novels (143); therefore, as Frierson points out, her conclusions do not offer solutions and the "characters must continue on with their problems" (316).

For O'Faolain, the short story must illuminate human nature and help us to better understand interpersonal relationships (*Story* 172). Bloom contends that Bowen's insights into her characters' behavior "are almost invariably accurate and persuasive, sometimes indeed uncanny" (2). Bayley, however considers most of her stories "primed and timed for a quick fascinated read and no more" (174); he questions if the stories are not "cruel by nature, like fairy stories, yet far from naive: based instead on a formula which combines sophistication with sensationalism" (viii).

Whether sensational or subtle, mystery and crime pervade Bowen's stories, accompanied by those sinister elements of betrayal--menace and terror. Many instances of menace and terror appear in works in which a crime has been committed or is threatened. Crime can be regarded as the ultimate form of betrayal, implying grave personal harm. Bowen uses crime to explore this aspect of betrayal, although not in the formulaic puzzle so characteristic of mystery stories and detective novels.

However, Bowen did refer to the structure of the genre repeatedly: "pure escape literature--detective fiction...crook melodrama...are so plainly functional that they keep a minor honesty" ("Need" 901); "the only above-board grown-up children's stories are detective stories" ("Book"

265); there is "much to be learnt from the detective story" ("Notes" 250); "the model for relevance is the well-constructed detective story" because nothing irrelevant is included ("Notes" 261). It is not surprising, then, to learn that in her fifties and sixties Bowen became increasingly fond of popular detective stories, especially those of Agatha Christie and P. D. James (Craig 132). Bowen praised Graham Greene's skill in depicting "the undertow of suspense and fear" (*Winters* 242) and noted the techniques that the thriller and the film have in common: visual, fast-paced, "dry, anti-emotional", (*Winters* 242).

Bowen might have written fiction containing mystery, crime, and suspense for thematic reasons. Briggs, in her study of the English ghost story, finds that this kind of story attracted "serious" writers because it dealt with the basic themes of life and death, human nature, and the presence of evil (23). Briggs also maintains that in the 1920s, when Bowen's early short stories were written, writers deliberately manipulated readers' sensations to produce erotic thrills (175).

Too, there could be an emotional and psychological need for Bowen to incorporate crime in her fiction. Lambert has studied writers who specialize in crime and speculates that to write crime an author must have had a childhood experience that searingly demonstrated fear's power. "Uncertainty is one of the hardest things for a child to bear...curiosity and dread perpetually interact" (xi). Lambert titled his book *The Dangerous Edge*, a phrase from the poem "Bishop Blougram's Apology" by Robert Browning; Craig chooses the same lines to indicate Bowen's interest:

"Our interest's on the dangerous edge of things.  
The honest thief, the tender murderer" (97).

Bowen, like Browning, commands our attention with the unexpected combination of the harmless and the threatening entwined as idea and modifier.

The "dangerous edge" certainly corresponds to Bowen's fascination with "those uneasy currents." It is a fascination especially intriguing in a person considered personally so urbane and sophisticated and professionally so sensitive and controlled. But close friends of Bowen present glimpses of another facet of her personality. Charles Ritchie, an intimate friend for many years, maintained that beneath her sophisticated exterior, Bowen was "mysterious, passionate, and poetic" (Craig 106). O'Faolain, a fellow writer and Irish colleague, found in Bowen's work a "sense of delinquency," "an untamedness," that was part of her "complex personality" (Glendinning 103).

Glendinning, author of a comprehensive biography of Bowen, comments that Bowen found "life with the lid on is both more frightening and more exciting than life with the lid off" (81). Glendinning argues that Bowen needed release, both in her life and in her fiction, from her "excessive sensibility" (137), and this tension between control and release gives Bowen's fiction "its peculiar pent-up intensity" (Glendinning 137). Briggs claims that the "cool, matter-of-fact

tone" (177) is important for a writer of mystery to win the reader's confidence; Bowen effectively combines this tone with tension in both style and imagery. As Beachcroft notes, she shows the "civilized surface with the tensions underneath" (184).

Critics have analyzed this tension and agree that it is the rage and violence just below the surface in familiar situations that is so effective. Lassner claims the stories "are terrifying because the characters' extreme feelings are expressed in terms that violate our protective conventions; these characters force us to feel their unresolved conflicts as uncannily familiar" (*Short* 54). She notes how instability results from "personal obsession [matched] with public manners" (*Short* 73). Harkness says that Bowen does not use overt melodrama but instead constructs the plots with "violent off-stage and antecedent material which is full of adultery, illicit passions, and murder" (500). The reader does not "see" the crime committed; instead we "see" the character later and examine how the crime has affected his or her life.

Lee agrees that there is "considerable violence...murder and suicide, but most alarmingly, the violence of the will" (*Bowen* 146). She states that tension is a natural result of a controlled and mannered style juxtaposed with "spies and ghosts, adulterers and runaways, murderers" (*Mulberry* 6). Too, Lee contends that tension is also reinforced through "suspense...shock...uncertainty...the reader's childhood 'helplessness and apprehension' ...ambiguity of all the characters" (*Bowen* 137). Indeed, in many stories the ambiguity is so pronounced that it blurs the distinction between victim and victimizer in the character.

The sinister elements of menace and terror are crucial aspects in Bowen's pervasive theme of betrayal. Menace is a prelude to betrayal; terror accompanies betrayal as the realization of helplessness. Webster defines menace as "intent to inflict harm; threat; impending evil; danger, threatening atmosphere or situation." We feel menace from a person or place where we are unsure of the intent and react with unease and dread. We fear for our safety or security. Bowen excels at presenting menace in understated but unmistakable terms with disturbing suggestion and nuance, with "edgy macabre images, odd turns of phrase, sinister details" (Lee *Bowen* 48). Strong claims Bowen "can suggest disquiet, whether moral, physical, or psychic, to a degree unequalled among her contemporaries" (145). Lee concurs, citing Bowen's "talent for expressing unease, a constant sense of peril" (*Bowen* 48).

If menace is perceived as threatening, dread can quickly escalate into horror. For Bowen, ghosts are means to "exploit the horror latent behind reality" (*Winters* 205), while Lassner extends the effectiveness to all of Bowen's "psychological thrillers" (*Bowen* 161). Bates claims horror stems from "what deviates from the normal" (84) and notes Bowen's skill in infusing menace "just below the surface of apparently harmless domestic settings" (82).

Betrayal of course is not confined to the physical; emotional, intellectual, and spiritual betrayal can often be as devastating. Greene notes Bowen's skill in demonstrating how "the most insidious peril need not depend on gore: it strikes at the heart, not the jugular vein, yet leaves no trace of blood" (607). Edward Sackville-West calls Bowen a genius at portraying the betrayal of the innocent by those whom they know and trust (91) .

Terror accompanies betrayal when one realizes helplessly that one is in grave, even mortal, danger. Webster defines terror as a "state of intense fright or apprehension." Terror derives from the sense of entrapment, the sense that there is no escape. Terror also derives from the realization of powerlessness, that one cannot control one's surroundings or determine one's destiny.

Bowen recalls the fear of entrapment in childhood walks in Dublin to forbidden areas of the city: "it was a charnel fear, of grave-dust and fungus-dust. And it was claustrophobic-- something might shut on me, never to let me out again; something might fall on me, never to let me through" (*Winters* 17). This childhood fear of entrapment surfaces in her fiction when a character is trapped in a situation from which there is no escape--the ultimate loss of control. Austin comments that some of Bowen's stories present an arid "vision of the wasteland" (95), as she explores various examples of imprisonment: evil against innocence, strength against helplessness, a self-crippling twisted ego or emotion, and random mysterious forces (95).

Terror also arises from the sense of powerlessness and helplessness. Strickhausen comments on the passive nature of many of Bowen's characters, "subjected to forces that they cannot control" (165). Because most of Bowen's major characters are female, they are exceedingly vulnerable to forces outside their control shaping their destiny. Bowen raises this issue when she discusses inevitability in her stories: the characters "have something within them which will probably take them towards some inevitable fate or end" (*Winters* 250). According to Edward Sackville-West, the evil that the characters encounter is precipitated "by a chance encounter" (91) or fate. Fate renders one powerless.

O'Faolain elaborates on the importance of fate in Bowen's fiction, attributing her perspective to her Irish heritage. He says that her stories contain an "atmosphere of ancient fable" (*Hero* 151) where fate is always present and drives the characters to an outcome "arranged long ago" (*Hero* 151). They are "passive recipients of fate" (*Hero* 149), even if they seem in control; their time is "brittle...snatched from fate" (*Hero* 149), and their happiness always has a price (*Hero* 149). As he says, Bowen likes to "deprive her characters of their autonomy" (159).

Without control over one's fate, one suffers an inability to assert one's independence. Hall considers this a crucial power and notes that "those who do not make their own choices have others make them" (27). Craig states Bowen's opinion that two things are especially devastating as a child: "helplessness and the feeling that something is being kept from you" (30). Moss contends that Bowen, as an Anglo-Irish native, found parallels of the child's helplessness with the English



attitude toward Ireland: "the colonial mentality...was a mirror image of the most exploitative relationship of all: that of the adult and the child" (128). Lassner states that Bowen cared intensely about the relationship of the powerful and the powerless and dramatized "both the passion of those desiring power and the disenchantment of those discovering they are powerless" (*Bowen* 7). It is not only disenchantment Bowen's powerless characters experience, it is overwhelming terror.

Bowen's affinity to the language of poetry has been remarked by many critics. Wagner calls her a "poetic novelist" with her formal style and vivid symbolization (155). Allen notes that she employs poetic devices (195), such as distilling what is crucial into a phrase or sentence (Reed 20). Bowen herself states the object of the novel as the "nonpoetic statement of a poetic truth" ("Notes" 250). Although I have already mentioned the comparison with Robert Browning, it is the poetry of Emily Dickinson I find pervasive in the fiction of Bowen's that I have selected to discuss. Dickinson's ability to invest the seemingly innocent verse with deadly chill, to reclothe the familiar with sinister undertones, and to suggest menace and terror so convincingly is echoed in Bowen's fiction. In each of the following chapters, then, the poetry of Emily Dickinson will introduce the prose of Elizabeth Bowen.

## CHAPTER 2

### The Unexpected:

#### Menace in the Home in "Reduced" and "The Needlecase"

"Doom is the House Without the Door--  
'Tis entered from the sun,  
And then the ladder's thrown away  
Because escape is done." (XV, 283)

Bowen excels at permeating the atmosphere of the home with menace. In what should be a safe haven for her characters, she introduces persons or situations that threaten the psychological and/or emotional well-being of the home's inhabitants. The emotional environment was crucial for Bowen; she took great care in the description of houses and their interiors, calling them "little guarded squares of light walled in carefully against the hungry darkness" (Hildebidle 90). Within the predictable and familiar world, as Mitchell points out, the unsuspecting individual can be betrayed by someone or something considered trustworthy and unthreatening (54). This juxtaposition intensifies the sense of menace and fear with just such use of the familiar setting. Briggs comments that the predictable environment creates "an illusion of security" where "tension between the known and unknown, security and exposure" is maintained (18-19).

Within the home Bowen often examines the "uneasy current" of the interrelationships of the family. She shows this group as a miniature society under pressure, whether "of loss...of distrust" (Lee *Bowen* 145-6). She creates excitement and unease by exploring the "sharp disturbances" (Frierson 315) in placid lives where the members of the household "are victims of each other" (Rupp 65). Lassner characterizes certain of Bowen's homes as "nurturing but dominating" (*Bowen* 151), which, although they may repress violence, "are shaken by the pressure of the lives within" (*Bowen* 151).

For Bowen the home is a metaphor for the persons within; her characters correspond to the kind of home where she places them. Physically, home can be located in different kinds of houses: enchanted cottages, stately country mansions, anonymous city flats, or brooding pretentious suburban houses. Emotionally the home can be a refuge of love and support or it can be a sinister, spiritually empty shell. Lee calls the latter "nowhere places" (*Bowen* 74) that perfectly match the dispossessed and empty persons who inhabit them. She characterizes these homes as places "where people have stopped living" and finds them central to "what is odd or ominous" in Bowen's settings (*Bowen* 74-5). In effect they are wastelands. Lee also notes that Bowen is

judging her characters when she places them appropriately because of their emptiness as human beings (*Bowen* 132).

Bowen's tentative attempts to examine class consciousness are evident in these two stories. She noted how difficult it was to interest the English reader in social issues; class, for example was an unpopular topic (Frierson 286). In an 1936 article Bowen states that "class--with the class that largely pays the piper--is a subject fatally unpopular. There is little temptation to write up the class struggle palatably" ("Need" 901). Bowen might have agreed with Julian Symons who, in his study of crime fiction, speculates that British authors in the '30s used mystery stories and spy thrillers as acceptable ways to question society (221). Several critics have noted Bowen's tendency in the '30s to include sensational episodes from the popular press in her short stories (Craig 76). Wilson is more specific: "murder and above all murderesses held the headlines of the popular newspapers. It was both sensational and macabre" (10). He criticizes Bowen for including this backdrop of murder in so many of her works: "the characters, especially women, also turn out to have been associated with murder, or to be acquitted murderesses" (10). How appropriate, then, that Bowen was appointed in 1949 to the Royal Commission on Capital Punishment. As a member, she studied the issue and visited jails and prisons both in England and in the United States. The commission recommended the abolition of capital punishment in 1953 (Glendinning 220-21).

In "Reduced" (1941) and "The Needlecase" (1934), a new female employee represents danger and threatens the stability and welfare of a family. These stories are excellent examples of Bowen's presentation of menace in the home and how family relationships, house personality, and class distinctions are affected by the threat.

"Reduced" is set on a wet, dank, dark September afternoon within a house that echoes the dismal atmosphere outside. Bowen introduces the characters as they finish lunch. Mrs. Carbury is "muddled and dim" (471), concerned about expenses, and highly anxious to please her husband since she is grateful to have married. Mr. Carbury has a reputation--"the most unpopular man in his part of the country" (471), is pompous, unsociable, and extremely miserly. Their two young daughters, Penny (aptly named) and Claudia, are "remote" (471), quiet, look alike with long fair hair and "vehement dark eyes" (480), and indeed think and act as one person. Two visitors are staying in the home: Mrs. Laurie, a friend of Mrs. Carbury, and a cousin, Frank. And there is Miss Rice, the governess, who has been with the family since May.

Bowen presents the atmosphere of the Carbury's house as cold and unloving as the family. The house is isolated and cut off from neighbors, a "mausoleum" (473) of deep red brick. Its "windows peered narrowly" (472) as if suspicious of the life outside; the house looked "dedicated to a perpetual January" (472). Mr. Carbury is as stingy with comforts for the house as he is with

affection for his family. The house is without electricity, meals are frugal, coffee is weak, cigarettes are "musty" (471), and heating is not permitted before October. "His rigid economies hit you everywhere" (472).

The observant Mrs. Laurie first draws the reader's attention to the governess. As an old friend of Mrs. Carbury's, Mrs. Laurie had often shopped with her for clothing at reduced prices for the girls and is well aware of Mr. Carbury's economies. She is therefore puzzled by the impressive governess in this thrifty household--its "one startling un-economy...[Mrs. Laurie] knew an expensive governess when she saw one" (472). As Mrs. Laurie continues to wonder about Miss Rice and her influence on her charges, the reader begins to feel uneasy. Mrs. Laurie noticed that the girls "revolved around her. 'Those little mice adore her'" (473). She remembers their returning to their rooms upstairs after lunch as "three people going back to a world of their own" (473).

When Mrs. Laurie tries to discuss Miss Rice with the Carburys, mentioning that she felt she had seen her somewhere, the Carburys are disconcerted and try to end the conversation. But Mrs. Laurie is patient and raises the subject again when she is alone with Mrs. Carbury. Is Miss Rice a "wicked extravagance" (474) of Mr. Carbury? Quite the contrary--she is a bargain, we learn. Flustered, Mrs. Carbury admits her fears about Miss Rice; Mrs. Carbury is "thoroughly frightened" (474). She is relieved to confide in her friend; the governess is "on my mind the whole time" (475). Mrs. Carbury reveals that Miss Rice was acquitted in a sensational murder trial last spring and was subsequently offered the post with the Carburys at a reduced salary.

With this revelation Bowen concludes the first part of the story. She has established the personality of the family, introduced a menacing outsider into the household, and set in place the suspense that will ensure the reader's attention.

The scene now shifts to the children's rooms upstairs. We learn of their deep affection, almost passionate attachment for Miss Rice: they call her "darling", worry whether she is warm enough in the chilly house, and despair that their "darling" might leave them. They had suffered the contempt of the previous governess and learned that "it was wretched" (476) to be a part of their family. Miss Rice seems like an angel to them, and they are desperate to ensure her happiness.

Miss Rice tolerates their affection in a distracted manner. She encourages the girls in a variety of appropriate activities and studies while she remains aloof and removed from these pursuits. She is usually reading and when not reading seems to be expecting something dreadful: "something they [the girls] could feel creep up behind her chair would make her speaking eyes go suddenly cold and dark as the grate. Against this their love was powerless" (477).

This unnamed dread is a powerful symbol of menace to alert the reader to the approaching climax. The girls fear that "their enemy here now" (477) will threaten Miss Rice; they feel "helpless" (477). Frank enters the room and prattles on about an acquitted governess. Although

Miss Rice responds only in noncommittal remarks, Frank notices the startling "agonized tension" (477) of the girls.

Mrs. Carbury visits the rooms upstairs and finds her daughters alone literally in the dark but figuratively enlightened. They have unconsciously been able to identify the source of the threat Miss Rice feared; the exposure of her identity has threatened their treasured situation and prepared the ground for rebellion. "Their unchildish eyes" (479) defy their mother as the family structure crumbles. She "for the first time felt mutiny in the air" (479). The threat of Miss Rice's power over the girls terrifies her: her children are always with the governess--"what does she say to them? What goes on the whole time? My own children are strangers" (479).

Mrs. Carbury has decided that Miss Rice must leave. However, the girls prevent their mother from speaking to Miss Rice, reminding her that she usually didn't want any communication with the governess or try to seek her out. In a desperate attempt to reestablish authority, Mrs. Carbury tells the girls that when Miss Rice is gone they will understand and be kind to their mother. "Tomorrow, Miss Rice will be going" (480). And speaking in unison, quietly, the girls have the last words: "'Then we will go too'" (480).

Will the girls leave? It is almost a moot question, for even if they do not actually leave physically, they have already left emotionally and psychologically. The alienation of their love is complete; their rebellion is over. The Carburys' bargain employee, obtained at a reduced rate, has been a tragic and expensive mistake.

In "The Needlecase," as in "Reduced," Bowen introduces the new employee in the first sentence of the story. Miss Fox, an itinerant seamstress, is joining the family of young adults to do some sewing for them. The family consists of two sisters, Angela and Toddy, and two brothers: the younger brother Frank, who is in the home, and the older brother Arthur, who will return home in a week.

The reader learns immediately that this family has considerable financial difficulties. Frank cannot hold a job and tends to spend whatever money he has frivolously. Although they maintain a chauffeur and servants within their large country estate, the house and lifestyle are a far too extravagant burden and are maintained with sacrifice and a "pretence that everything was for the best" (453). However, the house betrays their situation, "massive and dark and cold" (453), with a deserted appearance. The rooms are "dank" (454), cheerless, "like ice" (457), gloomy from unused light bulbs, and smell of coal from cold fireplaces. This "disheartened" (455) house, "this well of a house [that] drank money" (456), is maintained for Arthur and the rich, potential bride he hopes to impress with it because "Arthur must marry money" (456). Miss Fox has been hired to overhaul the upholstery and outfit the daughters in new clothes--to transform the house and family

appearance to win the heiress's approval. Their situation is so desperate that their one hope of financial salvation depends on Miss Fox.

However, although Miss Fox is the one who can rescue them, the family is condescending and smug about her social situation. They discuss the fact that because she is a "fallen" woman with an illegitimate child to support, she is available "dirt cheap" (454); she's been an itinerant for years, "going down in the world a bit" (454). And they resent her attitude of superiority to eating with the servants of the house--"she was of that difficult class" (455) that asked for meal trays in her room. Their frustrations with each other and with the sacrifices they must all endure for Arthur are projected onto Miss Fox.

Again, an observant character alerts the reader to the menace that the new employee presents. When Toddy visits the bleak room at the top of the house, she is struck by Miss Fox's "nunlike" (456) appearance, at once self-effacing and yet dominating. Her face was "expressionless" (455), as if carved, "immobile" (455), with a "secretive mouth" (455). Toddy is filled with anxiety because of Miss Fox's power: "she's important" (455), more than important, she realized, "Miss Fox held her fate in the palm of her hand" (455). Toddy is now frightened to be with Miss Fox and dreads being fitted by her. Impulsively, Toddy pokes through the seamstress's sewing basket and opens her needlecase. Inside she finds a photograph of a young boy; she has only a glimpse before Miss Fox snatches it away. Miss Fox meanwhile has been fascinated by Toddy, staring at her "as though she were a ghost" with "terror and pleasure" (456).

Bowen uses the weather the following day to symbolize the anxious atmosphere within the house: the sun disappears, "sharp" clouds with "steely" edges (458) overwhelm the sky, the cold wind "gnaws at...this great tomb of a house" (459). By evening, restless and tense, Angela seeks the company of Miss Fox. As they talk, Miss Fox remarks that she recognized Arthur in the photographs in the drawing room. "Oh yes, I've seen Mr. Arthur" (459). In detail she reveals how she had met Arthur eight years earlier when he was a guest at a home where she worked. The "young gentlemen...ever so gay and high-spirited" (459) would amuse themselves playing games "in and out of my workroom" (459). The socializing continued every day; at last Arthur asked to borrow the dressmaker's dummy for a prank. She blames herself: "I should have known better...to have known my place" (459). But she agreed. Arthur was careless and allowed the dummy to be broken. Although he returned to apologize to Miss Fox and promised to repair the damage, he left the next day, without admitting his responsibility to his host. His carelessness resulted in her dismissal. However, Miss Fox excused him, saying, "he meant no harm" (459).

Bowen extends the suspense by interrupting the narrative with Frank's intrusion. The thread of the story has been broken; it will be restored with an actual thread from the sewing basket. Noting a tear in Angela's stocking, Miss Fox takes a thread and hands it and the needlecase

to Angela. As she opens it to withdraw a needle, she, and Frank next to her, stare at the child's photograph within; "Arthur's face stared back again at the uncle and aunt" (460).

Two symbols are particularly effective throughout this story. The needlecase, a seemingly innocuous object, can be used to create new or repair damaged items. However, it contains sharp instruments that can wound or injure. This needlecase encloses the evidence that could precipitate a disaster for the desperate family. The other effective symbol is the seamstress's name, Fox. This beautiful animal can be a cunning adversary, yet also the victim of sport for the leisured classes. Miss Fox stoically acknowledges the comparison when she comments on her experience, "gentlemen will have their fun" (459).

In both "Reduced" and "The Needlecase," Bowen vividly portrays the unexpected menace that can appear within the home. Both families, under economic and personal stresses, have tried to take advantage of a woman whose past has placed her in a lower economic and social class and have unwittingly hired a person who can destroy them.

## CHAPTER 3

### The Serpent in the Sanctuary: Menace in the Garden in "Look at All Those Roses" and "Telling"

"Presentiment is that long shadow on the lawn  
Indicative that suns go down;  
The notice to the startled grass  
That darkness is about to pass." (LXVII, 101)

Gardens have appeared throughout the centuries in countless works of literature, in fairy tales, and in ancient fables and myths. The garden is often a symbol of earthly paradise, of Eden, of the unspoiled sanctuary of natural order and beauty. Within a garden one can feel a holy presence and appreciate the miracle of growth and abundance. One can be surrounded by peace and serenity that refresh and sustain the spirit.

Gardens can also imply a human partnership when a person has been responsible for the selection, introduction, and maintenance of the plants. The gardener functions as a steward who nourishes and protects the garden and attempts to regulate those elements that will enable it to flourish and to prolong its beauty.

A garden can, however, harbor a serpent within. This traditional symbol of menace can threaten the idyll of the garden and affect the corruption of its Edenic innocence. It is natural that Bowen, with her concern for betrayal and loss of innocence, uses the symbol of the garden and investigates the menace within. Again, Bowen's oft-quoted remark warns that once innocence is lost, it "is futile to attempt to picnic in Eden" ("Book" 265). Moss describes Bowen's Edens as "oddly sulphurous" (121); they have that whiff of hell about them. Strickhausen characterizes the dichotomy within her gardens as "deceptively beautiful, where belladonna flourishes alongside the dahlias" (165). "Look at All Those Roses" (1941) and "Telling" (1929) feature gardens prominently in their settings with symbolic Eden threatened by the menacing serpent.

"Look at all those roses!" is the innocent exclamation that opens the story. Lou and Edward, two lovers, are returning to London from the country on a summer day. The weekend, like their relationship, has lasted too long; they are bored with each other and communicate mainly by arguing and needling. They seem disoriented and oppressed with "fatigue and a feeling of unreality" (512). The roses they have just seen are "startling" and seem to them "like an apparition" (512). The reader now knows that this is no ordinary rose garden.



Bowen uses their wandering journey as a symbol of their relationship, lost and purposeless. Their "curious route" (512) led through ominous countryside that looked "abandoned" (512) with weedy grass, "rusty cattle-troughs" (513), and "neglected farms" (513). The whole area seems deserted and Lou and Edward cannot locate it on a map. To reinforce further the analogy of a deteriorating relationship, their car breaks down in what they interpret as a "special attack" (513). They must return to the house with the roses to phone for assistance.

The reader immediately senses danger. The house is waiting for them: "a trap baited with beauty, set ready to spring" (514), like an enchanted cottage in a fairy tale. Its isolation and its magical aura well exemplify Bowen's use of place to set the mood. She comments that places "where something happened...are haunted...scenes of acute sensation" ("Book" 51). According to Hildebidle, this kind of house demonstrates the successful combination of "seductive appeal" and "sense of dangerous temptation" (110).

The reader's sense of menace increases with the ethereal appearance of the owner of the house. She is expressionless, an "amazon" (514) with powerful hands, totally impersonal, calm and otherworldly. "Leave your wife here" (515), she commands. It is not a gracious invitation, but a sinister excuse to be rid of Edward. Glad to be away from Lou, Edward agrees and leaves for a repair garage in the village. Lou is led further into the house to a "long, low, and narrow" (515) room where the reader feels a sense of entrapment, symbolized by the presence of a caged canary. The "phantom" (516) draperies and the "guttled air" (516) of the room give it an air of unreality that disquiets Lou.

Within this room Lou meets the other occupant of the house, Josephine, a 13-year-old invalid. Josephine is interested in Lou, the "first new person I have seen for a year" (516), and unlike her taciturn mother is quite willing to talk about herself and her mother, Mrs. Mather. Josephine's back was paralyzed six years ago--the fault of her father who has "gone away" (516). But, she continues, "we don't wonder where" (517).

As the three females have tea, the sense of isolation of the house and of conspiracy between mother and daughter is made clear: "nobody comes to see us" (517), "they may be frightened of something" (517), "we are very much out of the way" (517), "an unlucky farm...[where] nothing more can happen" (518). Lou now has no appetite for tea and declines the food. She seems to fear that Mrs. Mather might have sinister powers to bewitch her with food; she sits "rigid" (518), sipping her tea "like a bird" (518), while the actual bird flies nervously around its cage. Josephine, noticing Lou's unease, says that Lou thinks "if she eats she may have to stay here for ever" (518).

However, it is the extraordinary profusion of the roses that is the most powerful symbol of menace in the garden. They dominate throughout the story from beginning to end. They are so overwhelming that one cannot escape from their imagery, any more than the characters can escape