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# **Identity at Risk:**

## **An Analysis of Female Identity in Four of Elizabeth Bowen's Wartime Texts**

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Til Oda, Jonas og Bjørn



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# Abbreviations

<i>LS</i>	<i>The Last September</i> (1929)
<i>HP</i>	<i>The House in Paris</i> (1935)
<i>SW</i>	<i>Seven Winters</i> (1942)
<i>BC</i>	<i>Bowen's Court</i> (1942)
<i>HD</i>	<i>The Heat of the Day</i> (1949)
<i>WL</i>	<i>A World of Love</i> (1955)
<i>A</i>	<i>Afterthought: Pieces about Writing</i> (1962)
<i>DD</i>	<i>A Day in the Dark and Other Stories</i> (1965)
<i>ET</i>	<i>Eva Trout</i> (1968)
<i>PC</i>	<i>Pictures and Conversations</i> (1974)
<i>CS</i>	<i>The Collected Stories of Elizabeth Bowen</i> (1980)
<i>MT</i>	<i>The Mulberry Tree</i> (1986)



## Preface

This preface gives a brief comment on referencing, bibliography, the editions of Bowen's work to which I refer and sources that are not translated into English. I have relied on the fourth edition of the *MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers* for my standard style of referencing and for the conventions followed in my bibliography. Thus, references to sources are indicated in parentheses in my text and bibliographical information is provided in the bibliography. For parenthetical references to Bowen I have chosen to use abbreviations of the titles. With respect to novels and short stories, I have used the Penguin editions of Bowen's work, and have thus chosen to use *The Collected Stories of Elizabeth Bowen* when I refer to the short stories; this is the collection most often used by critics. *Seven Winters* was first published by Cuala Press in 1942 and republished by Longmans in 1943 under the title *Seven Winters: Memories of a Dublin Childhood*. Thus a change has been made in the title of the book, a change that will be discussed in Chapter 4. A closer look at the two editions shows that changes have also been made to some of the names. The Cuala Press edition names Bowen's governesses Miss Watney and Miss Bound; these names have been changed in the Longmans edition to Miss Wallis and Miss Baird. "The little Townsends" (SW 18) in the first edition are presented as "[t]he little Townshends" (SW 19) in the Longmans edition. The dancing-mistress is named Miss Tieler in the first edition, but this has been changed to Miss Thieler in the Longmans edition. There is no comment as to why these names have been altered or changed. The Longmans edition is the one most widely used by critics and is

also the base text for later republications of *Seven Winters*. I have chosen to refer to the Longmans edition in this context.

I have used sources from different languages, not all of which have been translated into English. For those that have been translated I refer to the existing published translation, but for texts that have no published translation I have provided my own translation, which is indicated in the text in a footnote, where the original quotation is also provided.

# Introduction

## “The uncertain ‘I’”

Elizabeth Bowen says in the postscript to the first U.S. edition of *The Demon Lover* that:

The past, [...], discharges its load of feeling into the anaesthetized and bewildered present. It is the ‘I’ that is sought – and retrieved at the cost of no little pain. And the ghosts – [...] what part do they play? They are the certainties. The bodiless foolish wanton, the puritan other presence, the tipsy cook with her religion of English fare, the ruthless young soldier lover unheard of since 1916: hostile or not, they rally, they fill the vacuum for the uncertain ‘I’. (MT 98)

A fundamental uncertainty is ascribed to the ‘I’ by Bowen, and this uncertainty is filled by the ghosts of the past, thus dissolving the line between the living and the dead, and between the past and the present. That the ghosts of the past fill the present indicates that there is something in the past that has been left undone, that returns to haunt the present; the ghosts take the place of the ‘I’, leaving little room for it in the present. The sense of uncertainty expressed in the quotation does not just apply to the stories of *The Demon Lover*, although this feeling is particularly conspicuous in this collection, where the presence of ghosts is integral to many of the stories. In general the uncanny has a prominent place in much of Bowen’s prose, and the uncertain ‘I’ epitomizes the problems and uncertainties reflected by the fictional selves in Bowen’s work in terms of the different crises of identity the texts present. The perilous situation of the ‘I’ described by Bowen in this passage, is expressed in a pessimistic tone in Bowen’s work generally,

which begs for reflection on how identity is presented in her work. The certainty of the ghosts fill the vacuum of the 'I', and this leads us to ask the question of what is left of the 'I' in Bowen's prose?

Lotus Snow argues in the article "The Uncertain 'I': A Study of Elizabeth Bowen's Fiction" that all stories in *The Demon Lover* "express the means by which the personal life is salvaged from the depersonalization of war" (300). Personal identity is found, according to Snow, "through the subjective experiences of love, hate, illusion" (309). I will contest the idea that the character's life is salvaged when escaping into illusions and a world of dreams. My analyses show that the different escapes presented in the texts do not necessarily constitute a solution for the characters, but rather represent a threat to their identity, but, as we shall see, this is also ambiguous.

Identity is the key term in my study, and it will be subjected to thorough discussion in Chapter 2. I will, however, make a brief initial comment about this term. Identity is an ambiguous and complex term that can be taken to express who a person is. Identity is not, however, only applicable to the person, it is also a concept that can be understood as identification in a much wider sense, as its Latin origin *idem* suggests. *Idem* means 'same', and when understood as sameness, identity implies identification with something or someone other than oneself. Thus this understanding of identity underscores elements of identity that are fundamentally different from the characteristics that make a person unique, because it encompasses the idea of identity as sameness with others. The distinction briefly outlined here indicates that identity consists of a social and an individual identity. This ambiguity and complexity in the term is captured in the French philosopher Paul Ricoeur's dialectical understanding of identity as discussed in Chapter 2, where his conceptualization is understood as potentially conflicting identities within the self, where the complexity of the term can be said to be incorporated in the self, but at the same time involved in relational activity.

This study has been motivated by the reading and exploration of Bowen's work, where Bowen constantly returns to the problematics of identity, be it the child who seeks a sense of self in the hope of meeting his mother for the first time,<sup>1</sup> the innocent girl/adolescent who attempts to come to grips with a world of which she has little

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1. Leopold in *The House in Paris*.



knowledge,<sup>2</sup> the young woman who attempts to find self and identity in a world stifled by silence, moral conventions and repression,<sup>3</sup> the middle-aged woman's quest for self in the past,<sup>4</sup> or the man who tries to reconstruct his identity and sense of self each night when he writes a letter to the woman he murdered.<sup>5</sup> Bowen repeatedly returns to similar characters and problems in her work, and they have been of constant interest to critics. Edward Mitchell, for instance, said in 1966 that "[w]hile it might be argued that all of Elizabeth Bowen's short fiction deals with the relationship of innocence to experience, the complexity of that relationship should not be overlooked. The tension between the self and the world of external fact is, [...], never simple or static" (50).<sup>6</sup> Hermione Lee comments that the self is "always unstable" in Bowen's fiction (*Bowen* 7), and John Hildebidle claims that the self is "the most maddeningly fluid of all landscapes in Bowen's fiction" (119). Bowen's texts present important insights into identity that provide us with a good basis for reflection about what, in fact, her texts contribute to the discussion and understanding of identity.

My focus is on the dialectics of identity in Bowen's work. The problems of identity construction in Bowen arise in situations where the natural dialectic between social and individual identity is threatened or dysfunctional. The reasons why the female characters in these texts have these problems are varied, but the state of the world the characters live in is a particularly important reason (class- and religion-divided Dublin; wartime London). Bowen has developed a narrative technique that conveys both how the female characters see themselves and how they are seen by the world. In this study I argue that the dialectic of identity is constantly undermined in Bowen's texts, and for each text analysed here we must ask whether there is, in fact, a self in this text at all.

When I use the word 'undermined,' the activity involved can refer to different agents in the text, but 'undermined' also incorporates how the reader perceives Bowen's work.

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2. See for example Portia in *The Death of the Heart*.

3. See for example Lois in *The Last September*; and Karen in *The House in Paris*.

4. Dinah in *The Little Girls*.

5. Prothero in "The Disinherited".

6. Alfred Corn comments that: "The figure, so common in her novels, of the innocent young girl forging toward experience leaves an impression less of 'worth and risk' than of the destructiveness of innocence, to self and others" (159).

The undermining of identity takes place within the fictional world(s) where characters find that their own sense of self is undermined by, for example, events, interaction with others, doubts and introspection or the ghosts of the past. Additionally, I argue that Bowen's fiction undermines a possible reader's belief that human beings have well-defined and stable selves. Does Bowen's exploration of self and identity in any way alter or add to our conception of these terms? When analysing Bowen's texts I am not solely concerned with the literary techniques Bowen uses to depict fictional selves, but also the exploration of what identity means to us in our time. The texts analysed here are all implicitly or explicitly wartime texts, and often in a time of crisis identity is exposed to threats of annihilation, but such a time also permits a writer like Bowen to explore the implications of living, where everything one knew to be certain, is undermined, and where such a situation potentially challenges our understanding of who we are.

### **The work of Elizabeth Bowen**

Elizabeth Bowen's (1899-1973) fictional and non-fictional production is substantial; her work includes seven collections of short stories, totalling more than eighty stories, ten novels, one family history, one autobiographical work, a fragment of an autobiography and the first chapter of an unfinished novel. Bowen also wrote a number of reviews, articles and essays, a non-traditional travel book about Rome, and a history of the Shelbourne Hotel in Dublin. Her work was produced in the period 1923–1968, starting with her collection of short stories, *Encounters*, and ending with the novel *Eva Trout*. J'nán M. Sellery and William O. Harris have published an excellent bibliography of Elizabeth Bowen's work that provides detailed information about all of her publications. It also provides information about manuscripts, letters, radio and television productions

and appearances, in addition to listing the different translations of Bowen's work.<sup>7</sup>

## Structure

*Seven Winters*, "The Happy Autumn Fields", "Mysterious Kôr" and *The Heat of the Day* are the texts I analyse in this study. Children and women are the primary characters in Bowen's work, and in my study specific attention is given to the female characters. The main observations that I make, relate to these analyses, but, as I will illustrate in my conclusion, the approach I use can also prove fruitful in the analysis of other works by Bowen.

This thesis is divided into 7 chapters, where Chapter 1 gives a thorough outline of the critical history of Bowen's work, thus providing an important backdrop to my analyses. Chapter 2 presents a discussion of critical method, and theoretical reflections of identity, where my theoretical approach is primarily informed by the theories of the French philosophers Paul Ricoeur and Maurice Merleau-Ponty. In addition to theory and method, this chapter also discusses the differences and similarities between autobiography and fiction.

I have chosen a chronological approach for my analysis, thus I start by analysing *Seven Winters* (1942) in Chapter 3 where particular attention is paid to the child's coming to consciousness and the challenges the child meets in this process. With respect to "The Happy Autumn Fields" and "Mysterious Kôr", I begin with an analysis of "The Happy Autumn Fields", thus following the order of the collection *The Demon Lover* (1945) where "Mysterious Kôr" is the last story. Both stories were, however, first

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7. For Norwegian readers it might be of interest to know that only *The House in Paris* and *The Demon Lover and Other Stories* have been translated into Norwegian (*Huset i Paris* (1947) and *Lykken og de høstlige jordene* (1949) (Sellery and Harris 193, 195)). Interestingly the translator has chosen "The Happy Autumn Fields" as the title story of the Norwegian translation, and the Norwegian translation of the title is indeed odd; it provides food for thought as to what the translator would like to suggest by such a translation. It is odd in the sense that the ambiguity that is found in Bowen's title is lost when the adjective "happy" is transformed into the noun happiness (lykken) and separated from "the autumn fields" (de høstlige jordene) with the conjunction "and" (og), thus happiness is no longer as clearly connected to the autumn fields as it is in the original title. It is also worth noting that the title "The Happy Autumn Fields" is a quotation derived from Alfred Tennyson's lyric "Tears, Idle Tears"; additionally, the title can also be understood as a reference to the Elysian fields in Greek mythology.

published in 1944, although, “Mysterious Kôr” appeared first in *Penguin New Writing* in January, while “The Happy Autumn Fields” was published in *Cornhill* in November of the same year (Sellery and Harris 140). “The Happy Autumn Fields” is analysed in Chapter 4, and takes as its starting point Bowen’s notion of the dream as a “saving hallucination.” I question whether the dream truly represents an escape for the character. Escape is also central to Chapter 5, and in the analysis of “Mysterious Kôr”, where there is a closer focus on the relationship between the city, the character and the desire to escape from a wartime atmosphere. Chapter 6 analyses *The Heat of the Day* (1949) with primary focus on the two central female characters, Stella Rodney and Louie Lewis, and their quest for identity. Finally, a conclusion is provided for my analyses where I also reflect on whether this approach can be used to analyse other works by Bowen.

# Chapter 1 The critical history of Bowen's work

## 1.1. Critical attention

To the best of my knowledge, the critical attention devoted to Bowen's work consists of sixteen book-length studies and a substantial number of articles, chapters in books, and reviews. The bulk of Bowen criticism is particularly focused on comparative studies of Bowen's novels, where her collections of short stories and autobiographical texts are used as commentary in the analyses of the novels. The exception here is Phyllis Lassner's *Elizabeth Bowen: A Study of the Short Fiction*, which concentrates on Bowen's short stories. Lassner remarks that "[r]eaders of her novels never fail to refer to her stories, but the latter are usually read as glosses on the longer works" (*Short Fiction* xi), thus Lassner underscores the predominance Bowen's novels have in the critical approaches to Bowen's work.

The short stories, "The Happy Autumn Fields" and "Mysterious Kôr", are frequently mentioned as two of Bowen's best stories, and they are often analysed in conjunction with the other stories in *The Demon Lover*. *The Heat of the Day* has generated a significant body of criticism, and together with *The Death of the Heart*, has often been considered to be one of Bowen's best novels. *Seven Winters*, on the other hand, has not been subjected to a thorough commentary by critics, but is most often mentioned in connection with *Bowen's Court*. The main reason why these are treated in conjunction is probably because these are both autobiographical texts. *Bowen's Court* has been considered a more important text by critics because of its historical focus on the Anglo-

Irish Ascendancy and the Big House, two central themes in Irish literature and culture, while *Seven Winters* treats a theme that is fundamentally different from that of *Bowen's Court*. W. J. McCormack sees *Seven Winters* as "slight and personal" and *Bowen's Court* as "massive and profoundly historical" (210), while Victoria Glendinning describes *Seven Winters* as "a spin-off from the more important book, *Bowen's Court*" (159).

*Seven Winters* is an account of childhood which is more personal than the family history *Bowen's Court* and, as some critics have argued, therefore of lesser interest to the general public than *Bowen's Court*. The effect of various critics' downplaying of *Seven Winters* is that this text is given a less important place in Bowen's *oeuvre*, and consequently, that less attention is given to this text by critics. E.D. Pendry is critical of Bowen's non-fictional texts, and has said that *Seven Winters* "is a collection of trivialities which cannot possibly have the same importance for the general reader, or even for the academic critic, as it has for the writer" (142). Pendry's criticism thus suggests that *Seven Winters* is too personal to be of interest to anyone else but the writer. In contrast, Harry Strickhausen argues that "[t]he memoir, which recreates the growing awareness of a child in Dublin to things and persons and places, is a fine and sensitive work in richly imagistic prose, quite comparable to Elizabeth Bowen's fiction as a work of art in itself" (158-159).

This chapter provides a chronological overview of Bowen criticism, starting in the 1930s and continuing to the present time. More attention is devoted to the criticism of the 1980s and onwards; the primary reason for this is that there was more variety in the critical interest devoted to Bowen during this period. Additionally, much of the early criticism is outdated and of lesser interest today. Around 1990, the critical attention shifts from a more thematic and comparative approach to a greater focus on theoretical perspectives in the analyses of her work. This shift is very much in line with more general developments in literary criticism, but this does not imply that all of the critical approaches of the 1990s and onwards take a theoretical starting point; indeed, we find a clear difference of opinion among Bowen scholars. Different critics read her as a social realist, or a writer of comedy of manners, a novelist of sensibility, or an Anglo-Irish writer, a modernist and also as a postmodernist. This multifarious response to Bowen's

work attests to the complexity and subtlety of her *oeuvre*, which allows for many different perspectives and readings of her work.

## 1.2 The 1930s-1970s: the literary tradition

Criticism from the 1930s to the 1970s attempts to locate Bowen in a literary tradition. P.H. Newby comments in 1951 that “[t]his highly intelligent and exquisitely sensitive Anglo-Irish writer cannot put pen to paper without being aware of her novelist predecessors, and showing that awareness without allowing it to cramp her originality” (19). Jane Austen, Henry James, Virginia Woolf, E.M. Forster, George Eliot, Marcel Proust and Katherine Mansfield are some of the writers whom critics have named as sources of Bowen’s inspiration. Hermione Lee divides the sources that inspired Bowen into two: the Irish and the English, where the Irish consists of Maria Edgeworth, Sheridan Le Fanu and Somerville and Ross, and the English of Forster, James and Woolf. Lee sees the different traditions as reflecting different perspectives in Bowen’s work (58-59).

Few book-length studies were published in this period. A short survey was written in 1952 by Jocelyn Brooke, but this is too short to be considered a book. The first full-length study was published in 1961 written by William Heath, followed by Allan E. Austin’s *Elizabeth Bowen* in 1971. Edwin J. Kenney and Harriet Blodgett published studies of Bowen’s work in 1975. Of these books, William Heath’s undoubtedly offers the most intelligent and illuminating approach to Bowen’s work. Heath presents a comparative study of Bowen as a social realist in which he illustrates how the romantic will loses in her texts. Austin’s and Kenney’s studies are both short general introductions. Austin’s study takes the form of summary rather than analysis,<sup>1</sup> and Kenney’s approach is strongly biographical. Blodgett’s *Patterns of Reality: Elizabeth*

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1. James Gindin is critical of Austin’s book arguing that “the limitations of space, especially when combined with the apparent need to summarize enough of the plot to make the critical commentary easily accessible and the obligation to provide biographical and bibliographical material, can choke off the opportunity for developing extended and illuminating ideas about the author’s work” (81). Gindin concludes his review by saying that “[i]nstead of a critical book, Mr. Austin has written an extended review of a literary career, one that is occasionally perceptive, full of judgements, placements, and comprehensible labels. Still it is a review, not a critical book at all” (83).

*Bowen's Novels* differs from most Bowen criticism in its interpretation of Bowen as a Christian writer.

Austin claims that “[w]hat makes Elizabeth Bowen a relevant and valuable novelist initially is her stolid capacity to confront the chaos of the twentieth century without blenching and to counter it with a sturdy British determination to carry on” (17-18). Bowen undoubtedly treats the chaos of the twentieth century, but a sense of carrying on is not predominant in her work; instead we are faced with a feeling of emptiness and stasis, where the inability to move on is dominant and sometimes suffocating. I will argue that what makes Bowen an important and interesting writer, however, is her ability to dwell in the chaotic, and to explore what happens to the characters in the literary text in a world of turmoil.

The response to Bowen’s work varied greatly in this period. In her 1949 article “Elizabeth Bowen’s Fiction”, Elizabeth Hardwick, for instance, does not think highly of Bowen’s work. *The Heat of the Day* had just been published, and Hardwick comments:

*The Heat of the Day* is a curiously sentimental and confused reflection on a deplorable family with a stunted sense of the emotional value of property; and that this is the true theme is elaborately and tediously acknowledged by the subplot, which has to do with an estate in Ireland inherited by Stella Rodney’s son. As a political novel, or a commentary on the English middle class, or a character novel, except for the engaging treatment of Stella Rodney, it is too impalpable to be held in the mind. (1118)

Hardwick claims that the portrayal of Robert Kelway as a British spy for the Nazis is not convincing. A similar concern is expressed by P.H. Newby:

When this novel is read after the space of some years it may well be found that the treason theme of *The Heat of the Day* is quite acceptable; but here and now in the uneasy aftermath of war, an aftermath that is not yet peace, this kind of treason is a burning issue, and anything which might seem perfunctory in a writer’s treatment of it will naturally be questioned. [...] It is her attempt to prove the man a traitor that bothers one. (20-21)

The Second World War poses a common frame of reference for the critic and the writer, and it is interesting to observe the critical reactions resulting from this particular setting



where the role of the traitor is given a central place. That critics have had difficulties accepting the character of Robert Kelway, resonates in Heather Bryant Jordan's discussion of *The Heat of the Day* in 1992 where she comments that "[c]uriously, Bowen made him a fascist, and he is unconvincing in part because we hear so little from him directly" (155). Another response to *The Heat of the Day* is provided by James Hall who comments that: "Unfortunately, *The Heat of the Day* comes out an inadequately controlled fantasy deficient in felt life" (51). Hermione Lee argues that much of the early Bowen criticism was negative and that it presented Bowen either as a "female writer",<sup>2</sup> or off the point<sup>3</sup> (*Bowen* 221-226).

This antagonism towards *The Heat of the Day* is, however, strongly in contrast to the view of other critics who claim that it is one of Bowen's best novels. Hardwick's contemporary, David Daiches, says that Bowen became "a major modern novelist" with *The Heat of the Day* (305), arguing that "she is one of the great British novelists" (313). Similar praise was bestowed on Bowen by her friends and colleagues Graham Greene, V.S. Pritchett and Howard Moss. John Strachey considers Elizabeth Bowen as the only writer of what he calls, "highbrow intellectual novels"(12), whose work is justified because it "rises right out of this category and becomes something of profound and tragic importance" (12).<sup>4</sup> As we shall see, the critical attention given to Bowen changes over the years, both with respect to whether she is considered an important writer or not, and also concerning what the different periods perceive as most interesting about her work, which also results in different interpretations of her work. Within the various periods we find that critical attention is not united. As we have seen, wartime, as a common frame of reference for her contemporaries, did not result in an unanimous reception of *The Heat of the Day*.

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2. See Raymond Williams, Anthony Burgess and Angus Wilson.

3. Harriet Blodgett's presentation of Bowen as a Christian writer.

4. Praise for Bowen's work is also awarded by L.A.G. Strong, among others, who comments that "[s]he is an artist of very rare quality" (145). Barbara Seward regards her "as one of our foremost writers" remarking that little critical attention has been given to Bowen's work despite her position as a writer (30).

### 1.2.1. The biographical tradition

Elizabeth Bowen says in the preface to the 1959 Vintage edition of *Stories by Elizabeth Bowen* that:

[...] any fiction (and surely poetry too?) is bound to be transposed autobiography. (True, it may be this at so many removes as to defeat ordinary recognition). I can, and indeed if I would not I still must, relate any and every story I have written to something that happened to me in my own life. But here I am speaking of happenings in a broad sense – to behold, and react, is where I am concerned a happening; speculations, unaccountable stirrings of interest, longings, attractions, apprehensions without knowable cause – these are happenings also. When I re-read a story, I re-live the moment from which it sprang. A scene burned itself into me, a building magnetized me, a mood or season of Nature's penetrated me, history suddenly appeared to me in some tiny act or a face had begun to haunt me before I glanced at it. (A 78)

Bowen's concept "transposed autobiography"<sup>5</sup> has been taken by several critics as a justification to read her works of fiction not as *transposed* autobiography, but simply as *autobiography*. We know now, as is discussed in Chapter 2, that autobiographies do not represent direct replicas of life. What Bowen herself describes in the quotation is the inspirational source of her writing, and clearly what she defines as transposed autobiography does not necessarily correspond to what we would take as the factual details of an author's life. Moods and sensations are important elements in the concept transposed autobiography, and as such are not easily identifiable by the critic.<sup>6</sup> Neil Corcoran comments that "[t]he writing self is not, indeed, the thinking self" (14), suggesting that there is not necessarily a direct correspondence between life and work.

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5. Bowen first uses the phrase "transposed autobiography" in her preface to the second edition of *Encounters* (MT 121).

6. A striking example of how transposed autobiography is understood as autobiography is found in David W. Meredith's 1982 article "Authorial Detachment in Elizabeth Bowen's 'Ann Lee's'" where Meredith goes to great lengths to find an autobiographical identification between Elizabeth Bowen and the character Ann Lee, and also between Bowen's husband Alan Cameron and the character Mr Robinson.

Victoria Glendinning's book *Elizabeth Bowen: Portrait of a Writer* is the most comprehensive and detailed biographical study of Bowen. Unfortunately it is somewhat flawed by its anecdotal form.<sup>7</sup> It is not a book of literary criticism *per se*; instead, Glendinning makes use of biographical information to create a connection between life and fiction in an attempt to illustrate how the writer's life serves as a source of inspiration for the world of fiction. Her biographical outline is often elaborated by a comparison between Bowen's life and her literary texts. The structure of Glendinning's book is chronological, and the chronology is followed in both life and fiction; thus people and incidents in Elizabeth Bowen's life often correspond with the fictional characters and settings of her work at the same time. One example of Glendinning's comparison is her comment on *To the North* in which she says of Cecilia and Emmeline that "[t]he two young women in the story both have aspects of Elizabeth" (85). John Bayley comments in his review of Glendinning "that though she has some excellent and discerning things to say about the novels—and even more about the stories—she automatically relates them to the Bowen lifestyle and household and what was going on at the time. This does nothing for them at all" (450). Alfred Corn comments that "this biography fails to treat Bowen as a writer, to add to our understanding of her achievement" (156). The point these critics make, suggests that a direct biographical correspondence to the literary text is not necessarily interesting for how the writer's work or her life are perceived.

As mentioned earlier, Edwin J. Kenney takes a biographical approach to Bowen in his short survey, where he underscores biographical detail to substantiate his analytical argument, thereby creating a biographical bond between life and text.<sup>8</sup> One example is where he equates the stories in *Encounters* with events in Bowen's life, commenting that "[t]he experience of the children is Elizabeth Bowen's own: insecurity, loneliness, deception" (31). The consequence of Glendinning's and Kenney's approaches is that the

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7. Patricia Craig's short biographical book published in 1986 was very much influenced by Victoria Glendinning's work. Craig also uses an anecdotal form to create a bond between life and fiction, but her speculation goes beyond that of Glendinning's.
  8. Another example of a biographical reading of Bowen is Anne M. Wyatt-Brown's "The Liberation of Mourning in Elizabeth Bowen's *The Little Girls* and *Eva Trout*", which takes a psychoanalytic biographical approach to Bowen, and which explains her last two novels in light of the author's lack of mourning for the loss of her mother when she was a child.

literary text succumbs to biographical detail and is not read as fiction, but is constantly compared to the writer's life. Anthony Bennett and Nicholas Royle point out that the blurbs of the Penguin editions of Bowen's novels establish a link between life and work. Bennett and Royle argue that "[t]he 'life' of the novel is blotted out by the focus on the 'life' of the author" (xv).

Another aspect of this approach is a tendency to ascribe the critic's intention to the writer, as illustrated by phrases such as "[f]or Elizabeth Bowen this is the fundamental truth about living" (Kenney 61), "Elizabeth Bowen knows hope is only an illusion" (Kenney 64). These statements are derived from the critic's analyses, and as such are analytical conclusions that should be attributed to the critic and not to the writer.

The biographical tradition occupies a dominant position in Bowen criticism. It starts in the early criticism and remnants of this approach remain in present-day studies. Bowen criticism is often structured around a biographical outline of Bowen's life that subsequently progresses on to analyses of her work where the biographical outline serves as a referential backdrop. In contrast to this approach, the French post-structuralist proclamation of the death of the author presents a diametrically different understanding of the author's role in relation to the literary text. Proclaiming the author's death is drastic, and in recent years a return to discussions of the relationship between fiction and reality and the place of the author has become more prominent. An interest in the intention of the author will always be of concern to the literary critic, but it is important to point out that autobiography naturally deals with the life of a person. Fiction will, however, always be important in the production of autobiographical texts. This will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 2.

Venturing into the 1980s and present-day criticism, we see a clear shift in the Bowen criticism both with respect to focus and to the interest in Bowen's work.

### **1.3. The 1980s and to the present**

Hermione Lee's study *Elizabeth Bowen* was first published in 1981, with a revised edition published in 1999 in which Lee remarks on the lack of critical interest in Bowen in the 1980s. She explains this lack as resulting from Bowen often being "treated as

minor because female, because writing about girls growing up, love affairs and women's lives – like Rosamond Lehmann or Jean Rhys" (2). John Hildebidle also claims in 1989 that the writers he studies in his book *Five Irish Writers: The Errand of Keeping Alive*,<sup>9</sup> "are likely now to be ignored, or at best relegated to a peripheral place, in any account of twentieth century Irish writing, lost somewhere in the shadows between Joyce and his artistic sons, Samuel Beckett and Flann O'Brien" (9). Lee and Hildebidle, writing at the beginning and at the end of the 1980s, both describe the lack of interest in Bowen, and both critics endeavour to create a greater critical awareness of her work. Hildebidle claims that O'Flaherty, O'Brien, Bowen, O'Faolain and O'Connor are "what most significantly happens in Irish fiction immediately after Joyce" (1), and Lee argues that "Elizabeth Bowen is one of the greatest writers of fiction in this language and in this century" (*Bowen* 1).

Lee claims that the criticism after 1981 derives from "two main [...] areas of academic work, which occasionally overlap: Anglo-Irish studies and feminist approaches to the novel" (*Bowen* 4). She describes her own approach to Bowen as presenting "a [...] political, realist, socially observant and self-consciously controlled Bowen" (*Bowen* 13). Lee follows in the footsteps of critics who place Bowen in a tradition and a historical context and who read her texts in relation to this context.

Hildebidle takes as his starting point Bowen's story "Human Habitation" to describe how loss of identity corresponds with "an increasing sense of outward loss" (89) that is not only descriptive of development in this particular story, but that illustrates, what Hildebidle calls, a "small map of Bowen's fictional world" (91). Loss, dissolution and displacement prevail in Bowen's work; these are all elements that I will explore more extensively in my analyses.

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9. Liam O'Flaherty, Kate O'Brien, Elizabeth Bowen, Sean O'Faolain and Frank O'Connor.

### 1.3.1. A Bowen revival

The 1990s was marked by a revitalization of interest in Bowen's work. A number of book-length studies of Bowen were published,<sup>10</sup> in addition to a large number of critical articles that add to the revivalist mood of this period. Some of the criticism of the 1990s and onwards differs in one important respect from earlier studies in that newer criticism increasingly integrates theoretical reflections in the analyses; notable in this respect are the full-length studies of Phyllis Lassner, Renée C. Hoogland, Andrew Bennett and Nicholas Royle, and Maud Ellmann. Variety and difference most aptly describe the Bowen criticism of this period. The theoretical approaches are inspired by, in particular, deconstruction, feminism, lesbian criticism, and psychoanalysis. Additionally, contemporary critical reflections on Bowen tend to describe her as a modernist and even a postmodernist writer. These reflections relate to her style, form, content and to a sense of resistance in her writing to predefined perceptions of the individual. These are central aspects that will be explored in my analyses, for example by giving particular attention to Bowen's use of language as one element that communicates how identity is undermined in her work.

Neil Corcoran argues that "Elizabeth Bowen is a writer deeply impressed by the ambitions of High Modernism"; he does, however, point out that "she never entirely loses touch with classic realism and its customary methods" (4). Thus he suggests an inherent ambivalence in Bowen's writings that very much contributes to the complexity of her work, and that is also reflected in the various critical approaches. Robert L. Caserio finds Bowen's modernism in "a narrative motion that unsettles certainties" (265-266) and in her "use of disjunction in form and content" (269). Maud Ellmann argues that Bowen's novels "are characterised by an arresting oddness, marked in a prose-style whose reflexivity and material intrusiveness associates her work with the modernist tradition" (x). She also finds that "Bowen's preoccupation with nothingness" links her to

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10. The following books were published in the 1990s and the 21st century: Phyllis Lassner, *Elizabeth Bowen* (1990); Phyllis Lassner, *Elizabeth Bowen: A Study of the Short Fiction* (1991); Heather Bryant Jordan, *How Will the Heart Endure* (1992); Renée C Hoogland, *Elizabeth Bowen: A Reputation in Writing* (1994); Andrew Bennett and Nicholas Royle, *Elizabeth Bowen and the Dissolution of the Novel* (1995); John Coats, *Social Discontinuities in the Novels of Elizabeth Bowen* (1998); Lis Christensen, *Elizabeth Bowen: The Later Fiction* (2001); Maud Ellmann, *Elizabeth Bowen: The Shadow Across the Page* (2003); Neil Corcoran, *Elizabeth Bowen: The Enforced Return* (2004).

modernists such as Eliot, Beckett and Joyce (15). Conservative and religious, Bowen's perception of nothingness did not, however, reflect the religious scepticism and reactionary understandings of her modernist contemporaries (Ellmann 15-16). Ellmann furthermore argues that Bowen's "waste land" originated "in the Anglo-Irish landscape of her childhood, where 'emptiness' was the prevailing impression of the countryside surrounding [...] Bowen's Court" (15). Ellmann also claims that Bowen's last novel *Eva Trout* "both anticipates postmodernism and diagnoses its deficiencies" (21). Bennett and Royle argue that "Bowen's work can be described as postmodern in its resistance to traditional Western assumptions of what constitutes an ethics and politics of the subject" (66). Bowen's style and use of language is often debated by critics. For example, Phyllis Lassner says Bowen's "double negatives, unfinished sentences and arch use of abstractions are her post-modern response to moral complacency" (*Bowen* 161). Bowen's use of language is a central concern in my analyses, where I give particular attention to the implications and meanings of sentences and phrases for identity construction in Bowen's texts.

However, not all critical approaches of the 1990s and the 21st century integrate theoretical discussions or perceive Bowen as a modernist; some critics are, indeed, very critical of the psychoanalytical and deconstructive approaches that have emerged in recent years. John Coats, for instance, questions the approaches of Lassner, Hoogland and Bennett and Royle in his 1998 study *Social Discontinuity in the Novels of Elizabeth Bowen: The Conservative Quest*. Coats' traditional approach to Bowen expresses a fundamental scepticism of critical studies such as Bennett and Royle's, Hoogland's and Lassner's. Coats' sceptical view arises from a conception that these critics do not "accept the religious and conservative views which were the foundation of Bowen's vision" (3). Coats argues that there is little or no room to explore "Bowen's conservative intellectual and moral position" in today's academia (242-243). Coats' criticism reflects a controversy between a more traditional approach to Bowen and a radical theoretical criticism.

The 1990s also saw a focus on Bowen's writings from the Second World War by critics such as Heather Bryant Jordan, Phyllis Lassner and Gill Plain. These approaches vary in their degree of theoretical approach; Bryant Jordan is primarily interested in the

historical background of the wartime writings, while Lassner and Plain take a feminist approach to the issue of women's possibilities in wartime.

I will address the various critical responses to Bowen with a focus on the ideas of Irishness, feminist and lesbian criticism, war, and psychoanalytical and deconstructive approaches to her work.

### 1.3.2. Irishness

George Brandon Saul comments in 1965 that “[o]ne of the unhappy feelings hard to shake off in reflecting on the short stories of the Irishwoman Elizabeth (Dorothea Cole) Bowen [...] is that of their essentially un-Irish quality and character”. Bowen is not Irish, according to Saul, because her stories do not reflect “the traditions of the *filid* — or even the ‘shanachies’” (53), thus pointing out a lack of Celtic reference in her short stories. A rather anomalous contribution to the discussion of Bowen's Irishness was provided by the Aubane Historical Society, which questioned Bowen's Irishness in the 1993 *North Cork Anthology*, where the editors underscore Bowen's lack of Irishness by literally crossing out her name. This publication led to a controversy with the *Irish Times* where the Aubane Historical Society was accused of being racist for not acknowledging Bowen's Irishness. In response to this dispute, the Aubane Historical Society in 1999 published a book arguing for their position based on Elizabeth Bowen's work for the Ministry of Information during the Second World War. Roy Foster dismisses the Aubane Society's evaluation of Bowen and argues that “an Irish ear and an Irish sensibility pervade many of her novels and – even more particularly – her short stories” (*The Irish Story* 149). Thus for Foster, Bowen's Irishness is indisputable. Neil Corcoran comments that “[t]he Aubane Historical Society's polemic is ignorant in some respects” (185) but he also argues that “it is not altogether unintelligent, [...] it serves to show how great a strength of feeling there still is in certain circles in Ireland about the justification for neutrality itself and about the part played in Ireland during the war by people like Bowen” (186).

What does it imply to be an Irish writer? And what does it imply to be an Anglo-Irish writer? Are these the same or different? Heather Bryant Jordan points out that “[e]ven the term *Anglo-Irish* has become part of the controversy surrounding Bowen's ancestors”



(xii). Anglo-Irish is a category that includes both English and Irish at the same time and that denotes an intrinsic ambiguity,<sup>11</sup> thus the question of belonging and national identity is inherent in the discussion of the Anglo-Irish writers and the Anglo-Irish Ascendancy.

John Hildebidle argues that “regional identities” and an “intensely local vision” describe the writers he discusses, and he furthermore states that these are features characteristic of Irish fiction, thus connecting a notion of Irishness to regionality and a focus on selected areas (9).<sup>12</sup> Bowen’s Irishness is widely debated by critics and many take her Anglo-Irish background and heritage as the starting point for their criticism. Declan Kiberd argues that Bowen “wrote not so much to record as to invent a self, which lived on the hyphen between ‘Anglo’ and ‘Irish’” (368).<sup>13</sup> Hermione Lee comments that “[a]mbivalence’ has always been a key word in accounts of Anglo-Irishness, but it has been applied to Bowen more and more intensively” (*Bowen* 7).

*The Last September* and *A World of Love* are the only novels by Bowen with a specific Irish setting. The Big House is the central theme in these novels, where Bowen captures the demise of the Anglo-Irish class. Bowen follows the tradition of Maria Edgeworth and Somerville and Ross<sup>14</sup> in her exploration of the Big House in these novels and in her autobiographical work *Bowen’s Court*. The Big House is also a theme that is widely explored and discussed by critics. Richard Gill comments that “it is Elizabeth Bowen who has the most memorably identified herself with the Big House” (51).

Nine of Bowen’s short stories have been included in her collection *Elizabeth Bowen’s Irish Stories*. There is some disagreement, however, as to the number of Irish stories that Bowen actually wrote. Some critics would argue that “The Back Drawing-Room” should also be counted as one of Bowen’s Irish stories,<sup>15</sup> but this has not been

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11. The term Anglo-Irish can be taken to include Irish texts written in English; however, Anglo-Irish is often also used synonymously with the Ascendancy class.

12. The notion of regionality and Bowen is also discussed by Roy Foster in *The Irish Story*.

13. See also Roy Foster, W. J. McCormack and Seamus Deane.

14. See for example Vera Kreilkamp who in *The Anglo-Irish Novel and the Big House* discusses the development of the tradition of the Big House in Anglo-Irish fiction, starting with Maria Edgeworth and ending with John Banville.

15. See for instance Antoinette Quinn’s article “Elizabeth Bowen’s Irish Stories — 1939 to 1945”. Neil Corcoran comments that “The Back Drawing-Room” “is most definitely an Irish story too” (31).

included in the selection compiled by Glendinning. Interestingly, Bowen wrote half of her Irish stories during the Second World War. This suggests an acute awareness of the implications of the war on two worlds which were set even more apart as a result of the Second World War. Antoinette Quinn argues that “her compulsion to write about Ireland at this particular period is significant in the context of a discussion on national identity in Irish literature” (314). Even though few of Bowen’s texts have an explicit Irish setting, Ireland plays a prominent part in much of Bowen’s work as a contrast or an opposition to England.<sup>16</sup>

### 1.3.3. Feminist criticism

Bowen was adamant that she did not consider herself a feminist: “I am not and shall never be a feminist”;<sup>17</sup> it is clear, however, that her work lends itself to feminist readings. Maroula Joannou argues in her discussion of Rebecca West, Rosamond Lehman and Elizabeth Bowen that “[t]he writers do not all think of themselves as feminists but the ideological position of an author is not necessarily that of her text” (130), thus pointing out that there is not necessarily a correspondence between the biographical details of an author’s life and the themes she explores in her work.<sup>18</sup>

Phyllis Lassner has written two book-length studies of Elizabeth Bowen from a feminist perspective. In line with Joannou, she argues that “[t]he surfaces and attitudes of her work are conservative only in the sense that she presents a world bound to tradition. But all her work serves as well to question and revise the ideological and social assumptions of all traditions” (*Bowen* 163).<sup>19</sup> The first study is part of a series on women writers published by Macmillan, where Lassner is primarily interested in a selection of Bowen’s novels. Her second book, however, deals with Bowen’s short fiction, and is the

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16. *The House in Paris* and *The Heat of the Day* both present Irish landscapes and houses that are juxtaposed against the main settings of the novels.

17. From Bowen’s 1961 article “Women’s Place in the Affairs of Men”, quoted in Jordan (xvi).

18. In her discussion of these writers Joannou argues that “[t]he feminist implications of these texts are located to some degree, [...], in their analysis of class-relations” (155). Joannou discusses Bowen’s *The Death of the Heart* from this perspective.

19. Harriet S. Chessmann and Ann Owens Weekes exemplify other critics who take a feminist approach to Bowen.

only full-length study of Bowen's short stories. Additionally, Lassner has included Bowen in her survey of *British Women Writers of World War II*.

Phyllis Lassner's book *Elizabeth Bowen* explores how the female characters in Bowen struggle for self-expression in a world where the norms of domestic space control women's possibilities of expression. Many of the houses depicted by Bowen thus become emblems of domesticity and the stifling of women's possibilities of self-expression and sexual identity. Lassner takes a similar approach in her study of Bowen's short fiction, and also strengthens her focus on the connection between history and the individual.

Heather Ingman's study *Women's Fiction Between the Wars: Mothers, Daughters and Writing*<sup>20</sup> takes a feminist psychoanalytical approach inspired by Jacques Lacan and French psychoanalytic theory, arguing in her analyses of Bowen's inter-war writings that entering language and the symbolic order is necessary for women. If women do not enter the symbolic, life indeed becomes precarious:

The alternative to entering the symbolic is madness (Cousin Nettie), death (Eva) or a silence so total that it seems to erase all personality: in *The Heat of the Day*, Louie says, "From on and on like this not being able to say, I seem to get to be nothing" (Bowen 1949/1987: 246). Only in the symbolic can we speak as subject and it is only because we can speak that we can evoke the loss of our pre-symbolic existence. (84)

The passage suggests an understanding of Lacan's theory that does not present the symbolic order as a stage in children's language development, but as a choice for the adult character between language and madness. I will argue, however, that the reader is left unsure in *The Heat of the Day* whether Cousin Nettie merely presents herself as mad, or whether she really is mad. In both cases an act of articulation has taken place; madness is not devoid of language. This madness, whether it is chosen or a real affliction, is, however, presented in the novel as a socially acceptable escape from Mount Morris, and as such does not necessarily represent a challenge to patriarchy, even though for the character Cousin Nettie, madness constitutes her escape from a life that has constrained her.

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20. In addition to Elizabeth Bowen, she studies Rose Macaulay, Ivy Compton-Burnett, Jean Rhys, Virginia Woolf and Dorothy Richardson.

There are many different feminist contributions to the Bowen scholarship. One approach, found in Deborah Parsons' *Streetwalking the Metropolis*, emerges out of a general interest in recent years by feminist critics in the relationship between the woman and the city. Here Parsons explores the figure of the *flâneur*, and the possibility of talking of a female wanderer, *a flâneuse*. The texts I have chosen to analyse, all explore the relationship between city and self. I will briefly review Parsons' discussion of the *flâneur* to examine its relevance for my analyses.

A focus on the figure of the *flâneur*<sup>21</sup> as an expression of modernity and a description of the urban observer has, in feminist criticism, been directed at how aesthetic projects by female artists and writers articulate the relation between woman and city. The figure of the *flâneur* characterizes one way to depict modernity and the changes taking place in the urban sphere in the nineteenth century.<sup>22</sup>

Parsons attempts to rewrite the concept of the *flâneur* by inscribing the female *flâneur* or *flâneuse* in the urbane landscape. She returns to Baudelaire's texts and discusses the various female urban characters he describes, seeing these as other aspects of modernity and of the *flâneur*. Parsons translates the female characters in Baudelaire's "The Painter of Modern Life" and *The Flowers of Evil* into urban observers instead of objects of the male gaze. Parsons says the character that most clearly illustrates this is *la passante* in Baudelaire's poem "A une passante".<sup>23</sup> Parsons argues for the concept of the *flâneuse* based mainly on Baudelaire's texts. Thus rewriting the concept of the *flâneur*, Parsons makes use of the *flâneuse* in her analyses of several women writers, among them Bowen.<sup>24</sup> Parsons argues in her reading of wartime novels that "[i]n women's representations of wartime London, the city frequently becomes the province of the

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21. Charles Baudelaire and Walter Benjamin are credited with giving the concept of the *flâneur* literary and historical emphasis (Selboe 199), and in their texts the *flâneur* is presented as a male artist who observes the crowds of the city, a man of leisure who moves freely in the urban atmosphere of 19th century Paris. See Charles Baudelaire's *The Flowers of Evil* and "The Painter of Modern Life", and Walter Benjamin's "The *Flâneur*" and "On Some Motifs in Baudelaire".

22. Various feminist contributions to the discussion of the *flâneur* have been given by, among others, Janet Wolff, Griselda Pollock, Elizabeth Wilson and Tone Selboe.

23. English translation: "To a Woman Passing By"

24. Parsons concentrates her study on *To the North*, *The Heat of the Day* and "Mysterious Kôr". In addition to Elizabeth Bowen, Parsons studies Amy Levy, Dorothy Richardson, Jean Rhys, Janet Flanner, Djuna Barnes, Anaïs Nin and Rosamond Lehman.

*flâneuse* rather than the *flâneur*” (188), and she presents the wartime landscape as a “particularly female world” (190). One of the problems with Parsons’ use of the concept of the *flâneuse* is that it seems to be applied at a distance from the literary text. It is not clear what being a *flâneuse* actually entails, and using the term female *flâneurs* or *flâneuses* with respect to Bowen’s texts is problematic. We do indeed encounter female wanderers who observe the city and the crowd, but the sense of liberation and empowerment that Parsons attributes to the concept of the *flâneuse* is not recognizable in the female wanderers in Bowen’s texts, as will be discussed in Chapters 5 and 6.<sup>25</sup>

Parsons’ study illustrates one way in which feminist criticism theorises about, not only the relationship between woman and city, but also the possibilities posed for women in the wartime city. Women’s wartime experiences are central to the critics who in the 1990s particularly focused on Bowen’s wartime writings.

#### 1.3.4. Wartime: a sphere of empowerment for women?

Heather Bryant Jordan argues that the different wars of Bowen’s time<sup>26</sup> not only influenced her wartime writing but that “[h]er inescapable proximity to these overlapping wars altered the way she described or imagined the smallest, most intimate details of character and setting, even in peacetime” (x). Jordan takes a historical approach to Bowen’s life and work, following the tradition of earlier Bowen critics who interweave the work of art with biographical detail. Jordan argues that “Bowen’s wartime writing resonates with the generalized pain and horror engendered by her individual experience as a writer, a civilian, and a government employee” (8).

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25. Wendy Parkins discusses women’s modernity and mobility in “Moving Dangerously: Mobility and the Modern Woman”, where she claims that there is a need to look beyond the metropolis when discussing women’s modernity, arguing that “[i]f we widen the frame to consider the mobility of the female subject beyond the city, however, the picture of women’s modernity becomes a more complex and interesting one” (77). Parkins uses *To the North* to illustrate the “nonsynchronicities of modernity and the instabilities of modern subjectivity” (77).

26. The First World War, the Troubles (1919-1921), the Irish Civil War (1922-23) and the Second World War. Hermione Lee comments that Jordan “reads Bowen as essentially a writer of war, registering the violent shifts in her world that arose from the First World War, the Troubles and the Civil War in Ireland, and the Second World War. Jordan takes as her cue an (unpublished) radio play of 1949, looking back to 1918, in which the narrator says, ‘I can’t imagine myself without a war’” (*Bowen* 9).

Several critics of Bowen's wartime writings take a feminist approach, notably Gill Plain and Phyllis Lassner who have both conducted comparative studies of women's writing in wartime.<sup>27</sup> Gill Plain argues in *Women's Fiction of the Second World War: Gender, Power and Resistance*<sup>28</sup> that the notion that war represented a space where gender definitions could be challenged was an illusion; indeed, Plain claims that patriarchal organisation was strengthened during war rather than weakened (28). She sees the text as "the only potential space that could offer any challenge to the homogeneity of masculine discourse" (29).

Phyllis Lassner takes a somewhat different approach to the understanding of the relationship between war and women in her study *British Women Writers of World War II: Battlegrounds of their Own*,<sup>29</sup> where she argues that "gender roles not only reflect prevailing social codes, but question and revise them" (10). Thus in contrast to Plain, Lassner argues that a development of social codes and gender takes place during wartime; consequently, Lassner implies that this shift also empowers women. Lassner is critical of Plain's understanding of "war as a victimizing experience for women" (254 5n); Plain, on the other hand, questions Lassner's reading of *The Heat of the Day* where Stella is presented "as the unchallenged centre of the novel" and that Lassner "sees this as a strategy of empowerment" (185).<sup>30</sup>

In many respects, Plain's and Lassner's studies take a similar approach in that they both describe the historical and cultural atmosphere surrounding women during the Second World War, and see the importance of focusing on women's wartime writings. The conclusions they draw from their studies, however, differ greatly; where Lassner understands war as a time with a potential for empowerment for women, Plain perceives wartime as a strengthening of patriarchy that results in a further victimization of women. These two critical approaches aptly illustrate a disagreement that exists among feminist

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27. Kristine A. Miller criticizes Plain and Lassner for merely focusing on the gender issues in Bowen's wartime writings, thus ignoring "the interdependence of gender and class ideologies in Bowen's work" (139).'

28. Plain studies the 1930s and 1940s fiction of Dorothy L. Sayers, Stevie Smith, Virginia Woolf, Naomi Mitchison and Elizabeth Bowen.

29. Among the writers she discusses are Virginia Woolf, Vera Brittain, Stevie Smith, Dorothy L. Sayers, Naomi Mitchison, Storm Jameson and Vita Sackville-West.

30. Plain's criticism of Lassner relates to Lassner's study of *The Heat of the Day* in *Elizabeth Bowen*.

critics of how war should be understood with respect to women: does wartime represent a situation of empowerment for women or not? This will be discussed further in my analyses. My focus will, however, to a greater extent be on the individual in the text and less on the historical backdrop of wartime, but this will also be included in my reflections.

A somewhat different and original approach to Bowen's work is presented by Maud Ellmann who comments that "Bowen's wartime fiction struggles to make sense of a world suddenly stripped bare of furniture. If the past inheres in furniture, the loss of tables and chairs implies the destruction of memory" (145). Ellmann argues that furniture in Bowen's fiction represents an important link between past and present, and that furniture is more animate than people (142). Thus a dependency between individual and furniture is described, where a loss of one's furniture implies loss of identity and understanding of one's history, of the connection between past and present. The imminent danger of loss of furniture and buildings is escalated in a time of war; thus, following Ellmann's discussion, identity is under constant threat in wartime.

### 1.3.5. Lesbian feminist criticism

Renée C. Hoogland takes a lesbian feminist approach inspired by psychoanalytical and deconstructive theories in her book *Elizabeth Bowen: A Reputation in Writing*.<sup>31</sup> Hoogland's study is radically different from much of the previous criticism of Bowen because she provides a lesbian feminist perspective on Bowen's work. She claims that presenting Bowen as "a class-conscious [...] writer of sensibilities" who writes works that are "romantic" and "narrow in scope", is an approach that has dominated Bowen criticism and that has led to a reductionist view of Bowen's work (15-16). Hoogland argues that critics have not recognized that Bowen is "a truly radical, innovative, and critically practising feminist" (20). She acknowledges Phyllis Lassner's work on Bowen, but states that "Lassner prefers to overlook the configurations of lesbian sexuality emerging on various levels of these idiosyncratic texts" (21). Hoogland's analyses of *The*

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31. See also Patricia Coughlan's "Women and Desire in the Work of Elizabeth Bowen" for a lesbian feminist approach to Bowen.

*Last September, The Heat of the Day* and *Eva Trout* focus on “the question of female sexual identity” (22) and she finds that lesbianism surfaces in all of these texts.

Hoogland takes the Bakhtinian notions of dialogism and answerability as a theoretical starting point for her discussion of female sexual identity in Bowen (28), thus establishing the dialogic relationship between Self and Other/s as fundamental for the subject, as something that always exists and results in a constant process where “‘identity’ is an activity never to be completed” (30). Hoogland argues that “it is only in the dialogue between Self and (the) Other/s that the subject’s answerability—which is life itself—is located” (92). Thus Hoogland argues that identity is always in the making where the individual is an integral part together with the Other/s in the dialogic activity of identity. That identity is understood as a constant process will be addressed more fully in Chapter 2, and identity understood as a process and as relational are central ideas that are incorporated in my analyses of Bowen’s work. Hoogland’s theorising of identity contrasts with that of Bennett and Royle, as we shall see shortly, where they argue that the individual is left without authority to define his or her identity.

I concur with Hoogland that a great deal of the Bowen criticism takes an introductory form with a traditional focus where many critics lack a firmly based analytical perspective. As mentioned earlier, this pattern emerges from the early critical approaches to Bowen, such as that taken by Brooke<sup>32</sup> and Austin, later reproduced by subsequent critics. I will argue that the effect of such a criticism is that it becomes repetitive in the long run.

Hoogland’s critique of earlier critics’ reductionist approaches to Bowen could, however, just as well be applied to Hoogland’s own analyses of Bowen’s work. Hermione Lee claims that Hoogland’s study of Bowen “seems a flattening, intractable model for Bowen’s slippery and complex fictions” (*Bowen* 11), and Ellmann comments that Hoogland “rather overdoes her excavation of lesbian motifs in Bowen” (37 45n). While Hoogland’s lesbian approach to Bowen might fall prey to reductionism, her theoretical reflections provide useful insights that can be applied in a wider context.

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32. Hoogland takes Brooke’s book as her starting point for her criticism of early critics (14).



### 1.3.6. Psychoanalysis and deconstruction

Hoogland's criticism is not the only critic inspired by psychoanalysis and deconstruction. Andrew Bennett and Nicholas Royle's 1995 study *Elizabeth Bowen and the Dissolution of the Novel* also take this approach. They argue that "[t]he novels of Elizabeth Bowen are open to fundamental rereadings, to readings which at once transform the status and importance of Bowen's work and effect a deconstruction of everything that is seemingly most conventional and reassuring about the very notion of the novel" (xvi). Thus they challenge our understanding, or notion of the twentieth century novel in their readings of Bowen's work. Bennett and Royle are strongly critical of approaches that describe Bowen as a realist writer, because these do not capture the complexity of Bowen's work but instead marginalize her work "within the realist tradition" (xvi). Bennett and Royle argue "that the notion of character (that is, people, real or fictional) is fundamentally transformed in Bowen's writing: her novels derange the very grounds of 'character', what it is to 'be' a person, to 'have' an identity, to be real or fictional" and they claim that "[t]he 'realism' of the novel in the twentieth century is dissolved, along with other preconceptions according to which critics and readers have responded to the apparent conventions of this genre" (xvii). Bennett and Royle argue that Bowen's novels represent a fundamental destabilization of character. This perspective is interesting to my study because it suggests an understanding of character that has repercussions for our understanding of identity, and this will be explored in my analyses.

Dissolution and mourning pervade Bowen's writing, according to Bennett and Royle (xviii), and they claim that "[l]iving, in the work of Bowen, is dissolving" (xix). Paramount in Bennett and Royle's study of Bowen's work is the notion of dissolution which they argue permeates her work "at the level of personal identity, patriarchy, social conventions and language itself"; additionally, they suggest that "Bowen's novels figure a dissolution of the novel as such: Bowen's novels *are* still lives" (xix). Bennett and Royle take "still lives" as their conceptual starting point for analysing Bowen's work and argue that "[t]hese novels provide an extraordinarily rich and challenging account of how lives *are* still, of how lives are programmed – socially, emotionally, erotically – by the dead" (xviii). Thus "still lives" is presented as a conceptualization of death and the relationship between the living and the dead. It is interesting to note the clear difference

in critical approaches where, as we have seen, some critics take empowerment as a concept that describe the female characters in Bowen's work, while Bennett and Royle understand her novels as still lives, as frozen. My position is somewhere in-between these critical perceptions, where I argue that the characters are struggling to achieve an understanding of identity, and they are not necessarily frozen, nor empowered while doing so.

Bennett and Royle argue that the individual in Bowen's texts is "being catatonically constructed by the thoughts of others"; furthermore, they state that:

Rather than thinking themselves, then, people in Bowen are, [...], *being thought*. And, being thought by others, people in Bowen are stilled, caught up within the cognitive parameters of other people. In Bowen, there is no possibility of escape from the catatonia of others' conceptions and constructions, no escape from the interior quietness which is being thought. (9)

Thus Bennett and Royle see identity in Bowen as totally dependent on others; the others are thinking you, the individual is caught in the stillness of the others' thought, and cannot exist without being thought by others. This suggests an inability to exist and develop outside the parameters of others. Bennett and Royle continue: "In order to live real lives, still lives, people in Bowen must be constructed by others' fictionalizing perceptions: identities are founded on the fictions of others" (10). Identity and fictionality are combined through the lens of the other, the individual is left powerless with respect to control of self and identity, thus without the other identity dissolves.

Bowen's work calls for another kind of thinking about notions of self and identity, a kind of thinking that would leave dramatically in abeyance the very attribution of identity to a self, the very notion of a unitary self, the very equation of identity-as-authority. (93)

Consequently, Bennett and Royle argue that there is no unitary self in Bowen, the individual has no authority over her identity. These are reflections I will address in my analyses; is the individual left with no power with respect to defining a self in Bowen?

Maud Ellmann argues that "Elizabeth Bowen is one of the finest writers of fiction in English in the twentieth century. She is also one of the strangest" (x). Ellmann takes the notions of strangeness and nothingness as her vantage points in her psychoanalytical and

deconstructive interpretations of Bowen's work (xi). She argues that a sense of nothingness is inherent in Bowen's work; "all her works invoke a different nothingness and build a different kind of dwelling-place to shut it out – or hold it in" (9). The notion of nothingness will be included in my analyses, such as when examining the concept of 'no-place' as it is presented in *Seven Winters*. Chapter 2 discusses theoretical implications of these concepts in the literary tradition.

Much like Bennett and Royle, Ellmann sees loss and mourning as one of Bowen's central themes, additionally, she adds that "the necessity of company, responsibility for the other, and the third presence at the heart of love" are important themes (25). The concept of the third presence is central in Ellmann's study; she argues that there is always a third presence in the different relationships presented; a relationship or a love affair is never a twosome in Bowen's prose: "By ignoring the presence of the third, Bowen's lovers strive to forestall the awakening of consciousness; their love is presented as a state of sleep bordering on entropy" (25). Ellmann's particular contribution to Bowen criticism is her discussion of the third presence<sup>33</sup> and its implications for the relationships depicted in Bowen's work. Ellmann argues that "[t]he third is the nothing that brings couples together but also tears them ruthlessly apart" (8). In my study I will explore examples of the third presence which relates to the importance of secondary characters for how main characters are perceived. This perspective is particularly interesting in "Mysterious Kôr" and *The Heat of the Day*.

Ellmann's psychoanalytical approach also involves biographical reflections; this is illustrated in her initial discussion of "Look at All Those Roses", where Ellmann argues that "[i]t is tempting to interpret her [Elizabeth Bowen's] lifelong stammer as a symptom of an everlasting struggle between speech and muteness, speed and stasis, words and roses ..." (3). Thus Ellmann connects her analysis of the story with biographical reflections in a psychoanalytical framework, and in so doing Ellmann reflects the general biographical critical tradition in Bowen criticism. Ellmann's introductory chapter provides several analogies between life and work. With respect to Alan Cameron's death Ellmann comments that "[m]ourning for Alan reawakened her pain about her mother's

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33. Equally important are also the fourth and fifth presence in some of Bowen's texts (Ellmann 23).

death, which provides the impetus for her last novels” (33). She does not substantiate this conjecture with a reference to a specific statement from Bowen, thus this passage seems to represent the critic’s interpretation of what effects Cameron’s death possibly had on Bowen’s creative production. Ellmann’s biographical reflections contrast with Bennett and Royle’s approach; they too make use of a psychoanalytical theoretical method, but they are sceptical of criticism in which biographical detail is highlighted.

### 1.3.7. History returned

Neil Corcoran’s 2004 work, *Elizabeth Bowen: The Enforced Return*, is to the best of my knowledge, the most recent full-length study of Bowen’s work. Corcoran is also critical of recent psychoanalytical and deconstructive analyses of Bowen’s work because they “present us with a Bowen endlessly death-inflected, dissolved, haunted, cryptic, modulated towards silence and negativity, in ways which I find too monotonous to account for a writer in my view tonally very varied indeed” (11-12). Thus he argues that these approaches miss out on the diversity of Bowen’s work, such as her comic side. Corcoran argues that Ireland, childhood and war are images in Bowen’s work that are “close to being obsessions”, and he structures his book around these images (11). In her review of Corcoran’s book Lucy Carlyle comments:

It may be safe to say that Elizabeth Bowen, marginalized for so long, has become a major writer again. The publication of Maud Ellmann’s acclaimed *Elizabeth Bowen: The shadow across the page* (2003) and now of Neil Corcoran’s *Elizabeth Bowen: The enforced return*, with the additional efforts of critics such as Hermione Lee, Heather Bryant Jordan, Andrew Bennett and Nicholas Royle, suggest that Bowen has been re-established as an important literary figure of the twentieth century. (31)

Corcoran takes reading and writing<sup>34</sup> as a starting point for his discussion of Bowen and her work, arguing that “acts of writing and reading are [...] constantly offered to readerly inspection and interpretation”, and these acts “are slippery with secrets, duplicities, treacheries, betrayals, the second selves which the traces of script inscribe on the page, the selves we may wish to eradicate but which remain ineradicably behind us, in

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34. For example the different letters and messages that are presented in her work.

evidence” (3). In this initial statement Corcoran points to the constant critical interest in Bowen’s work, and in particular in the areas of her work that remain a conundrum to the reader such as how self is perceived. Furthermore, it is implied that Bowen’s work involves an unpleasant confrontation for the reader, where what we would prefer to forget about ourselves comes to haunt us.

Corcoran’s approach follows the lines of the comparative studies of Bowen’s work where the focus is on the connections between her different texts, he is also interested in situating her work in relation to other literary texts of the time. He argues that: “The return enforced in Elizabeth Bowen is always, [...], a return to the already written, but it is one measure of her strength as a writer that this re-reading is also an invitation to us as readers to read the traditions themselves differently” (6). Thus he presents Bowen’s connection to tradition and other writers as a process of continual change, where the re-reading involves a constant process of transformation. The involvement of the reader is also a characteristic feature of modern literature, and this is one aspect I will comment on when analysing Bowen’s texts.

#### **1.4. Conclusion**

When embarking on an analysis of an author’s work, it is inevitable to explore the critical traditions that have developed over the years, and to be inspired by and incorporate these traditions in one’s understanding of the author and her work. This overview has shown that biographical, comparative and cultural/historical approaches dominate Bowen criticism. This multifarious response to Bowen’s work represents an important backdrop to my study, even though I do not take any of these approaches in my study. I have suggested in my overview that, to a certain extent, criticism repeats itself, but also that the critics follow in a tradition, as do I, adding yet another layer of text to the critical responses. At the same time, however, continual debates and dialogues between the different critics suggest that we have not yet come to an end; Bowen’s work continually fosters new critical reflections and debate. My contribution will be to explore the landscape of identity in Bowen by close reading her texts with a particular focus on

certain details in the texts, and by taking a different theoretical approach to identity than what has been done in earlier Bowen criticism.

# Chapter 2 Critical method and concepts of identity

## 2.1 Introduction

This chapter begins by providing a discussion of the critical method used in this thesis; this is followed by a theoretical exploration of various conceptualizations of identity that are relevant to my analyses of Bowen's texts. The chapter ends with a discussion of differences and similarities between fictional and autobiographical texts.

I argue that identity is constantly undermined in Bowen's texts; this argument is based on a set of concepts I have derived from my readings of Bowen's texts. These are concepts I perceive to be central to understanding her work. First and foremost, the complexity of Bowen's presentation of identity must be addressed, and for this purpose I use the French philosopher Paul Ricoeur's dialectical understanding of identity. I also make use of other concepts that participate in defining identity, concepts such as no-place, the gaze and the body.

The central reflection from Ricoeur, that 'who you are', must be understood as a narrative of temporal activity, is also reflected in theories of autobiography. In this study I refer to Paul John Eakin's *How Our Lives Become Stories: Making Selves*, to exemplify how self can be understood as relational, and also to illustrate the potential fictional elements of autobiography. Particular attention is given to concepts such as truth and the relationship between life and fiction. Additionally, the final section in this chapter discusses whether all autobiographies are – in part – fictions. In addition to Paul Ricoeur,

I base my theoretical point of departure on the work of another French philosopher, Maurice Merleau-Ponty and his explorations of the gaze and the body. This second central theoretical section is introduced by a comparison of Jean-Paul Sartre and Maurice Merleau-Ponty's discussions of the gaze in order to illustrate different understandings of the subject/object relationship. This section also includes a discussion of the Dutch narratologist Mieke Bal's concept 'focalization' as one approach to the questions of 'who sees?' and 'what is seen?' in the text. To supplement Merleau-Ponty's conceptualization of the body, this subsection also includes the Australian philosopher Elizabeth Grosz's feminist challenge to Cartesian dualism, where her inscription of the body in the world is presented as vital to an understanding of identity.<sup>1</sup>

### 2.1.1 Psychoanalysis

My introductory chapter pointed out that psychoanalysis is one central theoretical perspective in recent critical approaches to Bowen's fiction in, for example, the work of Bennett and Royle, Hoogland and Ellmann. Of course, the discussion of self and identity is integral to psychoanalytic theory, and has an inescapable role in this theoretical landscape, where Sigmund Freud introduces the unconscious as a central aspect of our understanding of self. Freud argues in *The Ego and the Id* that "[t]he division of the psychological into what is conscious and what is unconscious is the fundamental premiss of psycho-analysis" (13). The division Freud establishes between the conscious and the unconscious depicts an individual whose perception of self is torn between rational thought and unconscious desire. Freud's focus on the unconscious destabilizes the idea of an autonomous self and – in its time – challenged existing, unitary conceptions of the self.

I have chosen, however, to provide a discussion of identity that does not take its primary focus from psychoanalytic theory, since this has already been thoroughly explored by Bowen critics. My interest lies in providing a new theoretical approach to Bowen's texts, and using this approach to discuss my main argument: that identity is

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1. In *Volatile Bodies* Grosz provides a thorough discussion of Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological discussion of the body, where she also points out the shortcomings of his approach, in particular, with respect to his lack of focus on sexual difference (110). My focus here is not on sexual difference, thus I not address this discussion in this context.



constantly undermined in Bowen's work. For this purpose, Paul Ricoeur's dialectical understanding of identity provides a different conception of identity than, for example, Freud, in the sense that Ricoeur pays more attention to the individual situated in the world interacting with others, and the implications such a relational identity has for how the individual understands (her)self.

## **2.2 Method**

The method I use in this study is close reading. A characteristic feature of all close reading is the attention given to details in the text, an attention that can play a crucial role in illuminating the textual whole. It is my aim to analyse the different texts as accurately as possible, with the purpose of revealing potentially overlooked details, ambiguities, ambivalences and nuances in the texts. One example of how close reading is used is the detailed attention I give to Bowen's use of language, where focus is given to sentences and phrases, and reflection is given both on their importance at a local level, but also on their potential implications for the text as a whole. Bowen's style of writing and her use of language have been of interest to all Bowen critics, but to the best of my knowledge such a similar detailed analysis of Bowen's language has not been provided by other critics. My methodological approach is also informed by a French literary science tradition, where the focus on individual texts has a prominent role; this tradition also has a strong presence in Scandinavia.

### **2.2.1 The New Criticism**

The method of close reading in Anglo-American literary criticism originates with the New Criticism, and close reading has an established place in literary criticism today. Jonathan Culler remarks in *The Pursuit of Signs* that "[w]hatever critical affiliations we may proclaim, we are all New Critics, in that it requires a strenuous effort to escape notions of the autonomy of the literary work, the importance of demonstrating its unity, and the requirement of 'close reading'" (3). Cleanth Brooks understands close reading as "the closest possible examination of what the poem says as a poem" (vii). New Critics

generally agree that interpretation of the text should exclude extra-textual elements;<sup>2</sup> this is not, however, an approach which is widely used by literary critics today. Interestingly, the Norwegian literary critic Peter Rokseth created a tradition in Norway in the 1920s-1930s, which we can call the aesthetic-philosophical school, that predates the New Critical movement in the USA. As with the New Criticism, the literary text is the primary interest of the aesthetic-philosophical school, but in contrast to the New Criticism, Rokseth considers extra-textual elements to be a precondition for analysing the literary text (11-12).

What different literary critics understand by close reading may differ from the original ideas of the New Criticism. The important insight close reading provides for me is the focus given to the literary text; this focus does not, however exclude the possibility of including extra-textual elements in the study. In my analyses I refer, for example, to Bowen's reflections about central concepts that are of importance to the understanding of different texts, concepts such as 'the sense of place' and 'saving hallucination'. Furthermore, existing background knowledge about, for example, the Second World War and critical reflections about Bowen and her work, represent a necessary basis for my study. My close readings are primarily concerned with the potential meaning derived from focusing on a variety of details in the text. A formalist approach to the text is not my aim in this study.

### 2.2.2 Selection of texts

I have chosen four of Bowen's texts for my study. In contrast to most Bowen criticism, I have chosen a relatively small number of texts, thus one could say that I am going against the grain of the established criticism. I will, however, argue that much can be said about an author's work when a close focus is taken with the purpose of illuminating the details of a text. Additionally, a detailed analysis of a selection of texts allows for understanding of other texts by the same author in a new way; this will be exemplified in my concluding chapter by looking more closely at Bowen's last novel *Eva Trout*. My study does not offer a general survey of Bowen's work; this has already been aptly done

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2. Such as background information, the role of the real author and the reader.

by many Bowen critics; instead I offer a close focus on each of the individual texts. The rationale for not extending the material to include more texts is based on the methodological approach of close analysis, as mentioned above, where the primary focus is the details in the text. My close analyses interweave theoretical perspectives and my own interpretations; furthermore, my analysis integrates the reflections of other Bowen critics, consequently illustrating the multiplicity of approaches to her work.

A close analysis of a text is a time-consuming method that requires an alertness to the ambivalences, ambiguities and nuances of each text. The method itself consequently limits the number of texts that can be subjected to analysis within the given time frame of this study. I argue that concepts of what the self consists of, can be constructed by the critic or the reader on the basis of what Bowen presents in her texts. How these concepts develop in each text are explored in depth in my study, and this approach potentially provides a means for analysing other texts by Bowen in a similar way.

### **2.3 Self and identity**

Identity is created in the interaction with one's surroundings. Elements such as history, gender, nationality, race, class and ethnicity play an important part, and when we talk about fiction, or the construction of a narrative identity, similar elements are integral to the fictional universe. The concept of identity does not necessarily include a self. The sociologist Anthony Elliott points out in *Concepts of the Self* that "it can plausibly be argued that the concepts of 'the self' and 'identity', though similar, are not coextensive, since there are forms of identity which are not based on the self, namely, forms of collective identity, such as nationalist identities" (9). My interest with respect to identity is personal identity. Personal identity does not, however, exclude reflections on collective identity and national identity; these are integral to the individual's sense of personal identity. My use of the concepts self and identity thus reflects the fact that they are interconnected and related to the individual who experiences. That self and identity are interconnected does not, however, necessarily imply that they are the same. In 1950, the American ego-psychologist Heinz Hartmann defined self as the subject's own experience of being a subject (Munk Rösing 45). I will argue that self epitomizes the

individual's thoughts, reflections, fantasies, dreams, fears and relations to other people. Self thus encapsulates a self-definition based on the individual's own experiences. Identity can, in contrast, relate to how the individual is perceived by others to a much larger extent. Moreover, as already described, identity is a much broader concept that also includes understandings of identity that are not attached to the self specifically, but where society and collective understandings of identity define groups of people. Our sense of our own self is related to, and partially incorporates, the sense others have of our identity. At the same time, the sense that others have of our identity is, in part, based upon behaviour that is influenced by our sense of our self. Continuous modification of both self and identity thus takes place.

### 2.3.1 Sameness and selfhood

As stated previously, my theoretical approach is informed by Paul Ricoeur's theory of narrative identity and his dialectical understanding of identity as sameness and selfhood, *idem*-identity and *ipse*-identity, respectively. Ricoeur introduces the terms *idem* and *ipse* in *Time and Narrative 3* (246), and this understanding of identity and the implications of this dialectic are further extrapolated in *Oneself as Another*. In this context *Oneself as Another* is my primary source for my exploration of Ricoeur's understanding of identity. In *Oneself as Another* Ricoeur names his understanding of self and identity as a hermeneutics of the self (16). I take Ricoeur's hermeneutics of the self as an overarching theoretical perspective that serves to enlighten identity in my close analyses of the various texts, and for my purpose here it is the dialectic *idem* and *ipse* that is of particular interest, because this dialectic contributes to a better understanding of the complexity of identity in Bowen's texts. I will use Ricoeur's dialectic to illustrate how identity is constantly undermined in her work.

For Ricoeur sameness-identity and selfhood-identity are two aspects that are both present in the self; as we shall see in the analyses, the degree to which each aspect is present in each individual varies, but they are nevertheless essential to how identity is understood. We could argue that the concepts *idem* and *ipse* represent two aspects of human identity that represent the self's social and individual sides respectively. Identity does not, so to speak, emerge from within, but is acquired as a result of the individual's

process of socialization, which is related to social power structures, language and corporeal routines. Acquiring an identity represents the acquisition of specific, existing ways of being a human being. This acquisition should not, however, be understood as mere reproduction. Each individual can, in his/her own way expand and challenge the given parameters; this involves adapting his/her individual identity to the given social identity;<sup>3</sup> consequently creating an *ipse* based on a given *idem*. This is also the reason why Ricoeur underscores the dialectic between the two; we cannot imagine an individual identity without understanding it in relation to the parameters of a social identity. In the same way, we cannot imagine the social identity abstracted from the ways specific individuals use and expand social identity. What we find is that Ricoeur's conceptualization of *idem* and *ipse* represents a dialectic performed in the construction of personal identity.

In *Oneself as Another*, as in Ricoeur's monumental work *Time and Narrative*, time is Ricoeur's main concern – a concern that also informs his exploration of narrative identity. Ricoeur comments in the conclusion to *Time and Narrative 3* that “temporality cannot be spoken of in the direct discourse of phenomenology, but rather requires the mediation of the indirect discourse of narration”, and he furthermore says that “our working hypothesis [...] amounts to taking narrative as a guardian of time, insofar as there can be no thought about time without narrated time” (241). Philosopher David Wood comments in the introduction to *On Paul Ricoeur: Narrative and Interpretation* that time “is near to the surface of most of the central problems of philosophy, and has a major impact on how we think of identity, of truth, of meaning, of reason, of freedom, of language, of existence, of the self” (2). When we discuss identity in Bowen's texts, this is a subject that is intimately bound up with temporal reflections: the characters explore who they are in a movement between past and present, be it by the use of memory, the escape into the dream or envisaging what the future will be like.

Ricoeur's study *Oneself as Another* is but one example in a long tradition of a thorough philosophical investigation of identity, where the complexity of the concept is examined. By broadly entering in a discussion of the philosophical tradition and its different conceptualizations of identity, Ricoeur points out that it is necessary to

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3. Social identity involves, for instance, history, culture, class and gender.

understand identity by means of a dialectic approach. Ricoeur's study *Oneself as Another* develops the concept 'narrative identity' further, which he explains in the following terms in *Time and Narrative 3*:

Here "identity" is taken in the sense of a practical category. To state the identity of an individual or a community is to answer the question, "Who did this?" "Who is the agent, the author?" We first answer this question by naming someone, that is, by designating them with a proper name. But what is the basis for the permanence of this proper name? What justifies our taking the subject of an action, so designated by his, her, or its proper name, as the same throughout a life that stretches from life to death? The answer has to be narrative. To answer the question "Who?" as Hannah Arendt has so forcefully put it, is to tell the story of a life. The story told tells about the action of the "who". And the identity of this "who" therefore itself must be a narrative identity. (*Time* 246)

The passage suggests that identity is acquired through an action told in a temporal narrative. Identity is connected to the narration that takes place when the story of a life is told; this temporal activity gives permanence to the identification associated with a particular person. The central question "Who?" reflects the complexity of identity, and is central to Ricoeur's investigation of identity in *Oneself as Another*, where he expands the understanding of narrative identity presented in *Time and Narrative*. In the essay "Narrative Identity" Ricoeur compares *ipse*-identity to Heidegger's term *Dasein* to illustrate the difference between selfhood and sameness:

The break between self (*ipse*) and same (*idem*) ultimately expresses that more fundamental break between *Dasein* and ready-to-hand/present-at-hand. Only *Dasein* is *mine*, and more generally self. Things, all given and manipulable, can be said to be the same, in the sense of sameness-identity.

Having said that, the self intersects with the same at one precise point: permanence in time. (191-192)

Permanence in time is descriptive of sameness-identity; this is also an aspect that is characteristic of selfhood-identity, and this is where the two identities intersect. According to the critic Morny Joy, Ricoeur "had become aware that the dilemma of delineating identity in time brought into stark relief an ambiguity in the meaning of the term 'identity'. In one sense, 'identity' refers to the idea of similarity that implies

repetition in time. [...]. The other meaning of 'identity' is that of selfhood which conveys an idea of constancy as in perduration in time" (38). Even though "permanence in time" is where these identities intersect, we find that temporality is expressed differently for the two identities. Where sameness-identity is connected to similarity with the other, temporality with respect to selfhood-identity "has reflexive and existential connotations" (Joy 38). It is the necessity to distinguish between the two that is at the core of Ricoeur's dialectic, which also at the same time underscores the complexity of identity. Combined, sameness-identity and selfhood-identity illustrate that Ricoeur's conceptualization of identity suggests an understanding of identity that reflects stability and openness at the same time, where *ipse*-identity is clearly the most complex and elusive term. Selfhood-identity can be understood to include an openness that is not integral to sameness-identity, and selfhood is associated with permeability, insecurity and instability; simultaneously, *ipse*-identity also involves something that does not change, that Ricoeur captures in the concept 'self-constancy'. Ricoeur underscores that selfhood is not sameness; in fact, Ricoeur presents selfhood as an opposition to sameness (*Oneself* 3). A closer look at how Ricoeur explains sameness-identity in contrast to selfhood-identity is required before we continue.

Sameness is, according to Ricoeur:

[...] a concept of relation and a relation of relations. First comes *numerical* identity: thus, we say of two occurrences of a thing, designated by an invariable noun in ordinary language, that they do not form two different things but 'one and the same' thing. Here, identity denotes oneness: the contrary is plurality (not one but two or several). To this first component of the notion of identity corresponds the notion of identification, understood in the sense of the reidentification of the same, which makes cognition recognition: the same thing twice, *n* times.

In second place we find *qualitative* identity, in other words, extreme resemblance: we say that *x* and *y* are wearing the same suit — that is, clothes that are so similar that they are interchangeable with no noticeable difference. To this second component corresponds the operation of substitution without semantic loss, *salva veritate*. (*Oneself* 116)

Sameness-identity is not understood as plurality, but as identification of the same, and this understanding of sameness-identity separates it from selfhood-identity. In contrast to

selfhood-identity, sameness-identity “is used in the context of comparison; its contraries are ‘other,’ ‘contrary,’ ‘distinct,’ ‘diverse,’ ‘unequal,’ ‘inverse.’” (*Oneself* 2-3). While comparison is descriptive of sameness-identity, Ricoeur argues that “*ipse*-identity involves a dialectic complementary to that of selfhood and sameness, namely the dialectic of *self* and the *other than self*” (*Oneself* 3).<sup>4</sup> The otherness suggested in the title of *Oneself as Another* is of a different kind, according to Ricoeur, than that of comparison; this is an “otherness that can be constitutive of selfhood as such” (*Oneself* 3). Critic and translator Kathleen Blamey gives the following short, instructive understanding of *ipse* and *idem*: “that is the person as *someone* in contrast to the fixed permanence of sameness” (577), thus underscoring how selfhood-identity relates to change, while sameness-identity denotes something immutable.

‘Attestation’ is a central concept, introduced by Ricoeur, that enlightens our understanding of *ipse*-identity. Ricoeur argues that “attestation is fundamentally attestation of self. This trust will, in turn, be a trust in the power to say, in the power to do, in the power to recognize oneself as a character in a narrative, in the power, finally, to respond to accusation in the form of the accusative: ‘It’s me here’” (*Oneself* 22). Attestation is understood as the individual’s ability to express who she is. What *ipse* is should therefore be looked at with reference to attestation as an expression of the action or activity performed by the subject. The definition Ricoeur provides for attestation further underscores the action involved in the concept: “attestation can be defined as the *assurance of being oneself acting and suffering*. This assurance remains the ultimate recourse against any suspicion; even if it is always in some sense received from another, it still remains *self-attestation*” (*Oneself* 22-23).<sup>5</sup> To express oneself in language represents one way of self-attestation that expresses activity and emotion, and even more importantly, attestation can be related to self-consciousness in the sense that one has a knowledge of being the source of one’s own speech. We shall see in Chapter 6, that Louie Lewis in *The Heat of the Day* exemplifies a character who lacks this self-consciousness, and who has difficulties expressing who she is.

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4. Emphasis in the text.

5. Emphasis in the text.



We shall see that *Seven Winters*, “The Happy Autumn Fields”, “Mysterious Kôr” and *The Heat of the Day* all confront the dialectic sameness-identity and selfhood-identity in different ways. We find, for example, that the gradual coming to consciousness explored in *Seven Winters* challenges the child’s understanding of her class and of Ireland as representing something unique that she is part of. The challenge to the dialectic of sameness and selfhood is more subtle in Bowen’s autobiographical text than in her fictional texts where this dialectic is threatened. This is shown, for example, in the character Louie Lewis’ desire for sameness in the form of imitation in *The Heat of the Day*, a desire that seemingly threatens her selfhood and consequently the dialectic of sameness-identity and selfhood-identity. The presentation of Pepita, the main character in “Mysterious Kôr”, represents a different, yet equally present threat to the dialectic, where her desire for her own dream excludes the idea of sameness-identity. The dreamer’s identification with Sarah in the dream in “The Happy Autumn Fields” constitutes a different threat to the dialectic, which relates to what an identification with characters in a dream-world represents.

For my purpose here it is, in particular, the complexity and dialectic reflected in these terms that is of interest, and how this understanding of self is seen in relation to the concept of the other. The dialectic Ricoeur presents in his definition of identity broadens and complicates our understanding of self and identity. This dialectic also involves the concept of the other as a central element, and the following passage illustrates how Ricoeur understands the two conceptualizations of identity, and their different importance in relation to the other:

As long as one remains within the circle of sameness-identity, the otherness of the other and the self offers nothing original: [...]. It is quite different when one pairs together otherness and selfhood. A kind of otherness that is not (or not merely) the result of comparison is suggested by our title, otherness of a kind that can be constitutive of selfhood as such. *Oneself as Another* suggests from the outset that the selfhood of oneself implies otherness to such an intimate degree that one cannot be thought of without the other [...]. (3)

Sameness-identity is presented as the kind of identity we understand through comparison, but the passage also suggests that this perception of identity does not in

itself add more to the understanding of self. Thus otherness in this context relates not only to the comparison with the other, but also to the otherness in oneself – in which, what is different from the other is highlighted in the sense that this is an otherness that underscores individuality.

Ricoeur does not understand the relationship between *idem*- and *ipse*-identity as constant, rather identity should be understood, as Morny Joy argues, as “a constantly negotiated process, which is never complete” (39), and this idea of negotiation also relates to the discussions that follow in the next sections, for example the discussion of Paul John Eakin’s theory of autobiography where relationality is central to the concept of identity. The degree to which sameness-identity and selfhood-identity are present in each individual relates to the complexity of Ricoeur’s conceptualization. We must presume that, by definition, sameness-identity is unchanging. According to Ricoeur, it is when the dialectic is threatened that problems arise with respect to the individual’s self-perception.<sup>6</sup> But what happens if this dialectic is threatened? In modern literature, loss of identity (variously understood) is often a central theme; this is also the case in Bowen’s work, as we shall see in the analyses. With respect to loss of identity in fiction, Ricoeur argues that: “My thesis is that, set back in the framework of the dialectic of *idem* and *ipse*, these unsettling cases of narrativity can be reinterpreted as exposing selfhood by taking away the support of sameness” (*Oneself* 149). Thus *ipseity* is totally exposed because it no longer has the support of *idem*; if selfhood-identity is threatened we can no longer talk about a dialectic between the two identities, thus no longer an identity.

We will return to Ricoeur and a further exploration of the implications of loss of identity in the section that discusses the importance of no-place in Bowen. The discussion presented here shows that Ricoeur’s understanding of identity represents an identity that combines changeable and unchangeable elements. His approach does not represent an understanding where self is autonomous. The discussion that follows exemplifies some of the reflections discussed in this section on Ricoeur, taking Paul John Eakin’s autobiographical theory to represent a field of research which gives concrete examples of why self is not to be understood as autonomous.

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6. In her article “Beauvoir et Ricoeur - L’identité narrative. Analyse d’une crise identitaire dans *L’Invitée* de Simone de Beauvoir,” Annlaug Bjørnsnøs illustrates by the use of Ricoeur’s concepts *idem* and *ipse* how identity is threatened in Beauvoir’s novel.

## Relational or autonomous self?

The notion of an autonomous self is often associated with the autobiographical genre, where this understanding of the self is not problematised to the same extent as we see in works of fiction. In modernism and postmodernism, the notion of an autonomous self is questioned, and even rejected or attacked. We find that alongside novels presenting an autonomous self, other novels deal with the fragmentation of the self. To talk about an autonomous self in Bowen's work is problematic because, as my analyses show, the notion of autonomy is challenged in her work. We cannot talk of one understanding of identity in Bowen's work; the complexity reflected in her characters' quests for self indeed underscores the necessity of understanding identity as multifarious and complex, and this is what Bowen explores in her texts. The critical history of Bowen's work reflects the fact that identity in general is not easily defined, as we have seen in Chapter 1.

The concept of the autonomous self implies an individual who is not influenced by others, but who has a clear conception of self. This understanding of self is reflected in *The New Oxford Dictionary of English*, where self is defined as the essential qualities that make a person different and unique. The notion of the autonomous self has played a key role in autobiographical texts, but discussions of self and the autonomous self are also addressed in fictional texts. The definition suggests that self is unchangeable, static, that we know who we are. Critics have challenged the focus on the idea that identity deals solely with individuals being different from each other, arguing that this understanding devalues the complexity of the concept of identity. Compared with Ricoeur's understanding of identity, viewing self as autonomous results in a static and unchanging self. Literary critic Paul John Eakin explores the complexity of self and self-experience in *How Our Lives Become Stories: Making Selves*, arguing that "[t]he myth of autonomy dies hard, and autobiography criticism has not yet fully addressed the extent to which self is defined by—and lives in terms of—its relations with others" (43).<sup>7</sup> At the core of Eakin's theorizing about self is the notion of relationality. Self is not predefined, it is created, and is in constant change in relation to others and the world: "In forming our

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7. In addition to *How Our Lives Become Stories: Making Selves* Eakin has written extensively on autobiographies and life writings in books such as *Fictions in Autobiography: Studies in the Art of Self-Invention* (1985) and *Touching the World: Reference in Autobiography* (1992).

sustaining sense of self, we draw on models of identity provided by the cultures we inhabit” (46). Eakin understands self “as a kind of awareness in process”, and not as defined and unified (x). Eakin’s perspective reflects a constant consciousness about self; furthermore, it implies that self is constantly changing. He argues that “[s]elf and self-experience, [...], are not given, monolithic, and invariant, but dynamic, changing, and plural” (xi). Furthermore, he does not talk of “the self” because “the definite article suggests something too fixed and unified to represent the complexity of self-experience” (x). We find that Eakin’s understanding of self contrasts with Ricoeur’s dialectic of sameness and selfhood in the sense that selfhood-identity does not seem to have a place in Eakin’s understanding.

The American psychologist Jerome Bruner makes a similar point in “Self-making and world-making” where he argues that “[s]elf-making is powerfully affected not only by your own interpretations of yourself, but by the interpretations others offer of your version.” Bruner continues: “[i]t becomes plain, as one observes this process of self-formation, that it is probably a mistake to conceive of Self as solo, as locked up inside one person’s subjectivity, as hermetically sealed off” (34). Thus Bruner challenges the idea that self-definition is a project solely restricted to the realm of the individual; indeed, self and identity are constructed in interaction with other people and society. As for Eakin, Bruner seems to reject the concept of selfhood-identity. What Eakin and Bruner do that is important is to exemplify the relational sides of identity, but a potential problem with their approaches is that all stability is lost. According to Eakin, “the most common form of the relational life” is “the self’s story viewed through the lens of its relation with some key other person”. “[T]he *proximate other*” is the concept Eakin coins for this relation (86). One of the relationships he mentions is that of the parent. For our purposes here, Eakin’s discussion of the absent proximate other is of particular interest:

[...] one of the most striking varieties of the relational life concerns the parent who is—literally or figuratively—absent. I want to return to Steedman’s assertion that “children are always episodes in someone else’s narrative.” This is a hard truth for children to accept, for we naturally assume that we are not only the central but the exclusive figures in our parents’ lives. Part of the pain of growing up is learning otherwise. (87-88)

Bowen repeatedly returns to the lost and/or parentless child in her work. Chapter 3 addresses, in addition to *Seven Winters*, one example in which the parent is literally absent from the life of the child. The mechanisms the child uses to meet this challenge are discussed in the chapter. The autobiographical text *Seven Winters* also exemplifies parental absence in a subtle way.

Eakin turns to the cognitive psychologist Ulric Neisser to find a model of self that encompasses the relational elements of self-construction. Neisser's five-fold model consists of the following: 1. The ecological self, 2. The interpersonal self, 3. The extended self, 4. The private self, and finally, 5. The conceptual self. Neisser's model defines the first two selves as being present in infancy, while the other three selves develop at a later stage<sup>8</sup> (Eakin 22-23). These five selves demonstrate how a formation of a sense of self depends on space, relation to others, time, feeling and thoughts, and ideas and concepts. The model illustrates the complexity of self; who we are and what we become is in constant flux, and developing a sense of self requires that the different selves be interlinked.

The extended self emerges, then, during a peculiarly rich developmental phase in which newly acquired language and narrative skills combine with temporal awareness and a nascent sense of social accountability to lay the foundations of autobiographical memory. (Eakin 113)

The quotation suggests how the extended self develops in conjunction with the other selves in Neisser's model; an autobiographical memory is gradually developed in children, but is not something they possess at an early stage. Eakin argues that a sense of self is closely related to autobiographical memory, and refers to the developmental psychologist Robyn Fyvush, who argues that in order to have an autobiographical memory, the ability to construct a life history is required (112). Autobiographical memory and temporality are intrinsically linked. This focus on temporality reflects Ricoeur's thinking about the primacy of this concept in understanding narrative identity.

The idea of something essential, real and stable is challenged in modern theories of self and identity. For the individual, an idea of the real self could potentially bring

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8. Awareness of the extended self is developed by the age of three, and, before the age of five, the child has developed an awareness of the private self (Eakin 22-23).

comfort and stability to a chaotic world, but is it possible to talk of a real self, of something essential, of something that we *are*? Eakin's and Neisser's model of self also disputes the notion of the real self and instead presents self as an entity that is constantly developing and changing. In contrast to Ricoeur, Eakin seems to suggest that self is to be understood more as sameness-identity, and less as selfhood-identity, while Ricoeur's definition of identity captures both perspectives. What could be potentially problematic with Eakin's understanding of self is that there is seemingly nothing that is constant, while Ricoeur's *idem*-identity and *ipse*-identity both incorporate a sense of constancy with respect to permanence in time.

We shall see that the pain and agony involved in not having a clear sense of self are central to the way identity is presented in Bowen's work. The characters' identity fluctuates, and they desire something more permanent.

#### Nothing, no-place and nobody

Identity understood as both sameness and selfhood is, as mentioned, a theoretical reflection that is relevant to all texts analysed in this study. Additionally, the concepts 'no-place' and 'nonentity' derived from Bowen, are central to the analysis of *Seven Winters*, and theoretical reflections on related terms such as 'nobody' and 'nothing' serve to further explore implications of such conceptualizations.

"Nothing can happen nowhere", Elizabeth Bowen says in "Notes on Writing a Novel" (MT 39). Bowen makes it clear in the context of her essay that she wishes to underscore the necessity of place in the literary text, and that place is essential to the plot. Her statement is, however, ambiguous. Maud Ellmann argues that "nothing is precisely what returns in Bowen's fiction" (2).<sup>9</sup> Nothing is given a place in Bowen's work. *Nowhere* is the place where *nothing* happens, thus *nowhere* is the location for *nothing*. But can *nowhere* be understood as place, and if so, what kind of place is *nowhere*? To consider *nowhere* as place is indeed paradoxical, because *nowhere* negates the idea of place in the same way as *nothing* negates the idea of something. Ellmann points out that "Nothing can happen nowhere" is "a resounding double negative that undercuts its own

9. Gill Plain argues that *The Heat of the Day* "focuses most often upon the contradictory presence of a terrifying nothingness"; furthermore, Plain claims that "[a]bsence and nothingness [...] form dominant motifs within [...] *The Demon Lover*" (167).

assertion. Her fiction fends off nothing and nowhere with an anxious solicitude for place, hallucinatory in its intensity of focus” (7). Thus at the same time that Bowen advocates the importance of place, she places her focus, in her fiction and autobiography, on nothingness and a lack of place, as exemplified in her notion of “no-place” in *Seven Winters*. “No-place” will be discussed more fully in Chapter 3.

The prominent positions that the notions of nowhere and nothing take in Bowen’s work beg for reflection on a corresponding concept of the character. The concept *nobody* aptly encompasses the idea of the bodiless character operating *in vacuo*. The Norwegian literary critic Ingvild Folkvord points out that the notion of nobody reflects a literary tradition that originates in Homer’s epic *The Odyssey* (76). Odysseus escapes captivity from the Cyclops Polyphemus’s cave by naming himself *Udeis*, or Nobody. Odysseus and his men blind Polyphemus and when he cries for help from the other Cyclops, saying that “Nobody is killing me by force or treachery”, Polyphemus receives no help from his fellow Cyclops because they believe him to be alone (Homer 392-393). The duplicity of the name *Udeis* is addressed by the German philosophers Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, where “*Udeis* can mean either ‘hero’ or ‘nobody’”, thus the name refers “both to nobody and to Odysseus himself”. Furthermore, they argue that “[h]e [Odysseus] declares allegiance to himself by disowning himself as Nobody; he saves his life by making himself disappear” (47-48). Naming constitutes the subject through the use of the name Nobody. Through the use of language we understand the importance of naming for the subject, where a choice between different possibilities is presented. The name Nobody implies denial or negation of self, but also at the same time offers an opportunity to save himself. Thus the duplicity of the name implies eradication and constitution of self simultaneously. The contrast in the meanings ‘hero’ and ‘Nobody’ further underscores the duplicity of the name.

A parallel reflection on the notion of Nobody is provided by Paul Ricoeur who discusses what nothingness implies for the subject, which also relates to the idea of loss of identity:

The sentence ‘I am nothing’ must keep its paradoxical form: ‘nothing’ would mean nothing at all if ‘nothing’ were not in fact attributed to an ‘I.’ But who is *I* when the subject says that it is nothing? [...]. In these moments of extreme destitution, the empty

response to the question 'Who am I?' refers not to nullity but to the nakedness of the question itself. (*Oneself* 166-167)

The perception of the subject as nobody or nothing both suggests a fundamental and existential questioning of self, but at the same time these understandings underscore a "plea for selfhood" (*Oneself* 166) that illustrates the duplicity of these perceptions of self where meaning is attributed to ideas of self that supposedly imply a nullification of the subject, but that in effect underscore selfhood.

In addition to Ricoeur's hermeneutics of the self, Maurice Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological conceptualization of perception is central to an understanding of self and identity in my study. Where temporality is the main concern in Ricoeur's theories, spatiality is a central concern in Merleau-Ponty's theory. And by this, I am referring to Merleau-Ponty's reflections of the perceiving subject as part of a world, as a body in the world. We shall see in the analyses, that the characters' perception of themselves as bodies in the world is central to their understanding of self and identity, and to our understanding of them as focalizers and focalized objects. This is an important perspective in *The Heat of the Day* where the corporeal clumsiness attributed to Louie underscores her inability to understand who she is.

### 2.3.2 To see or to be seen?

To see someone or to be seen is a relational process. The look or the gaze involves two positions: the seer and the seen. The relationship between seer and seen is often described as a subject/object<sup>10</sup> relationship. What are the effects of being the object of the other's gaze? The French philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre understands 'being' as dependent on the look of the other: "in order for me to be what I am, it suffices merely that the Other look at me" (351). Sartre describes this relationship as a struggle where the object of the other's gaze strives to achieve a position as a subject; a power struggle takes place between the object of the gaze and the other:

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10. 'Subject' and 'subjectivity' are the terms I apply when discussing Sartre and Grosz because these are the terms they use. I understand these as related to the terms 'individual' and 'individuality' that I use in my study.



Shame, fear, and pride are my original reactions; they are only various ways by which I recognize the Other as a subject beyond reach, and they include within them a comprehension of my selfness which can and must serve as my motivation for constituting the Other as an object. (387)

Sartre presents a model of the subject/object relationship where reciprocity is not possible, but where a desire to objectify the other is essential to achieving a sense of self. In *Phenomenology of Perception*, Maurice Merleau-Ponty challenges the notion that the subject/object relationship necessarily involves a power struggle. In contrast to Sartre's dichotomisation of subject/object, Merleau-Ponty presents a theory of perception where the relationship between subject and object is based on dialogue. Merleau-Ponty also directs this criticism at a science that attempts to objectify what is subjective; he thus questions one's power to objectify the other.

I must choose between others and myself, it is said. But we choose one *against* the other, and thus assert both. The other transforms me into an object and denies me, I transform him into an object and deny him, it is asserted. In fact the other's gaze transforms me into an object, and mine him, only if both of us withdraw into the core of our thinking nature, if we both make ourselves into an inhuman gaze, if each of us feels his actions to be not taken up and understood, but observed as if they were an insect's. (360-361)

Merleau-Ponty suggests that objectification of the other only takes place if one does not communicate with other people. Merleau-Ponty understands seeing as a corporeal experience, connecting body, seeing and experience, and because we are corporeal beings we are also beings that communicate with others: "In so far as I have sensory functions, a visual, auditory and tactile field, I am already in communication with others taken as similar psycho-physical subjects" (*Phenomenology* 353). This suggests that communication is inevitable, thus Merleau-Ponty presents an understanding of the relationship between subjects that rejects the power-structures objectification implies. Merleau-Ponty contemplates the proximity between body, seeing and movement in a discussion of the art of painting, where the body is perceived as an "intertwining of vision and movement" (*Eye and Mind* 124). The role of language is fundamental, according to Merleau-Ponty, in the way we perceive other people:

In the experience of dialogue, there is constituted between the other person and myself a common ground; my thought and his are interwoven into a single fabric, my words and those of my interlocutor are called forth by the state of the discussion, and they are inserted into a shared operation of which neither of us is the creator. We have here a dual being, where the other is for me no longer a mere bit of behaviour in my transcendental field, nor I in his; we are collaborators for each other in consummate reciprocity.

*(Phenomenology 354)*

With respect to the notion of self as reciprocally formed, I will argue that Merleau-Ponty's theory of the subject presents the relationship between people as necessarily relational. This perspective is illustrated in the passage above in the idea that we cooperate in constructing each other's identities. The idea that we are both interwoven corporeally and "into a single fabric" underscores relationality, and the dialogue expresses a relational communicative practice that transcends the idea of the subject/object relationship as a power struggle. The dialogic approach to seeing must, indeed, be considered as an ideal understanding of identity, where the opposition of subject/object is transcended, and both are presented as subjects. Of the texts analysed here, the power of the gaze is particularly central in "The Happy Autumn Fields", where a struggle between the seer and those seen appears to be expressed. We need to ask how the characters relate to the gaze: are we presented to a subjection to the gaze? Consequently, we need to ask how the characters relate to the other through the gaze.

Living in a state of crisis can lead to a stabilization of identity (community feeling), where new identities are created, but this is also a vulnerable position where identity is under threat, where identity can be destroyed. In the texts analysed here, we encounter characters who wander through the landscape, be it a rural setting or the city; they observe their surroundings in their wanderings, so that seeing and movement are interlinked. Merleau-Ponty understands movement as "the natural sequel to, and maturation of, vision" (*Eye and Mind* 124). Movement represents a possibility for identity formation in Bowen; this does not, however, result from the movement itself, but arises from what the body is confronted with in the movement.

Another aspect of seeing that involves observation of others is the voyeuristic perspective, for example, the main character Eva, in *Eva Trout*, has never experienced love; she has only "looked on at it" (*ET* 17). This illustrates another perspective of the

outsider — the perspective where the character is an outsider to feeling, who longs for an experience she has never had. The same voyeuristic perspective is presented in *The Heat of the Day* in the character Harrison, who has never experienced love, but who has “watched quite a lot of it” (*HD* 43).

Seeing is, however, not exclusively related to a subject/object relationship. A different entity that holds a power over the individual is that of the crowd. Compared with the other,<sup>11</sup> the crowd is different in the sense that it represents a multiplicity, and thus the possibility of being seen by many. Often, the crowd is presented as acting as one unit, so that not being seen by the crowd has a strong exclusionary force, as we shall see in the discussion of Louie Lewis in Chapter 6.

Seeing can also be understood as introspection; the individual’s quest for self can manifest itself as an introspective activity where the individual sees herself, and achieves an understanding or higher consciousness of self, which possibly involves a change for something better, and an acceptance of herself. This is the ideal understanding of introspection, of course, where a positive outcome for the individual is envisaged, but it is equally possible that no change occurs, that no understanding of self is achieved. A problem with seeing understood as introspection is that it suggests that the self is there to be seen or understood by oneself, rather than to be something that is formed relationally.

Furthermore, seeing involves the one who sees the city and the crowd. The setting for “Mysterious Kôr”, “The Happy Autumn Fields” and *The Heat of the Day* is the wartime city. This is a city in dissolution and decay, where the physical and social structures of the city are placed under threat by the mechanisms of war. The protagonist’s perception of the city and the crowd in “Mysterious Kôr” is central to the character’s understanding of self.

Some of the characters in Bowen’s texts are receptive to their surroundings; they seek an understanding of self through observation and movement. Receptivity, observation and movement are also what we are seemingly presented with in the texts discussed in this study, but, in wartime, the city is transformed and this transformation affects the characters’ perception and receptivity. The wartime city has been

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11. I only capitalize ‘the other’ when I refer to Sartre, elsewhere I have chosen not to capitalize to distinguish it from Sartre’s conceptualization.

transformed: buildings have become ruins and the people of the city move at night through streets drenched in darkness, which changes the city's topography and transforms it so that the individual moves through a city she no longer knows: she is estranged from the city.

The struggle to find meaning is a seminal characteristic of Bowen's wanderers. Some do not feel at home in the urban sphere, some seek to distance themselves from the crowd, and some escape from the city into dreams and imaginary worlds. Bowen's focus on the interrelationship between self and topography underscores the fact that a quest for identity in a time of crisis involves entering the unknown, in an attempt to find meaning and maintain a sense of self.

### Focalization

In my analyses I rely on narratological concepts such as narrator and reader; these are integral to critical method in the science of literature. In this context I will pay particular attention to the concept 'focalization' as understood by the Dutch narratologist Mieke Bal; this is a concept I have found particularly useful when exploring the relationship between 'who sees?' and 'what is seen?' in Bowen's work.

In his discussion of identity, Ricoeur constantly returns to the question 'who?': "In introducing the problematic of the self by the question 'who?', we have in the same stroke opened the way for the genuine polysemy inherent in this question itself: who is speaking of what? Who does what? About whom and about what does one construct a narrative?" (*Oneself* 19). This string of questions could be broadened to include: 'who sees?' and 'what is seen?' For a close analysis, these are vital questions, and the following section explores this relationship. Bal's narratological conceptualization of focalization<sup>12</sup> is a useful tool that enables us to differentiate between the different levels

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12. Bal derives the term 'focalization' from Gérard Genette, and develops the concept further in her study *Narratology: Introduction to the Theory of Narrative*. Jonathan Culler observes in the introduction to Genette's *Narrative Discourse* that "Mieke Bal [...] has argued persuasively that Genette uses *focalization* to cover two cases which are so different that to treat them as variants of the same phenomenon is to weaken his important new concept. In what Genette calls *internal focalization* the narrative is focused *through* the consciousness of a character, whereas *external focalization* is something altogether different: the narrative is focused *on* a character, not through him" (10-11).

in the text: that of narrator, character, reader and writer, and such a differentiation is central to understanding more about self and identity in the different texts.

By asking the questions: ‘who sees?’ and ‘what is seen?’, we can achieve a clearer understanding of how the different narrators and characters in the texts are perceived by others, and how they perceive themselves and other characters. Bal defines ‘focalization’ as “the relation between the vision and that which is ‘seen,’ perceived” (*Narratology* 142). Before we continue, we need to look more closely at what Bal understands by the use of ‘vision’ as a central element of focalization. Bal argues that “whenever events are presented, they are always presented from within a certain ‘vision’” (*Narratology* 142). Thus ‘vision’ relates to the perspective from which something is perceived. A central reflection in this respect relates to whether we are presented to a child’s or an adult’s vision. For my purpose here, this understanding is particularly important in *Seven Winters* where the child’s perception of the world is explored. Bal argues that “[p]erception, [...], is a psychosomatic process, strongly dependent on the position of the perceiving body; a small child sees things in a totally different way from an adult, if only as far as measurements are concerned. The degree to which one is familiar with what one sees also influences perception” (*Narratology* 142). Age, placement of the body and familiarity with what is perceived are all elements that influence the perceiving subject.

The reason why Bal argues for the term ‘focalization’ in contrast to other terms developed in narrative theory, such as point of view and narrative perspective, is that “[t]hey do not make a distinction between, on the one hand, the vision through which the elements are presented and, on the other, the identity of the voice that is verbalizing that vision. To put it more simply: they do not make a distinction between those who see and those who speak” (*Narratology* 143). Bowen’s convoluted style of writing can lead to confusion with respect to who sees and who speaks, and therefore it is necessary when close reading her texts to focus specifically on distinguishing these aspects, since it is vital to the way self and identity are presented in the different texts.

According to Bal, focalization should be understood as “the relationship between the ‘vision’, the agent that sees, and that which is seen” (*Narratology* 146). ‘Focalizer’ and ‘focalized object’ are the terms Bal coins for the seeing agent and what is seen respectively, where the focalizer “is the point from which the elements are viewed”.<sup>13</sup> When the point of focalization lies with a character, Bal understands this as a “character-bound focalizer”, thus differentiating this point from an “external focalizer” (*Narratology* 146). This differentiation also underscores an important point in Bal’s narratology where she argues that narrator and focalizer are not to be understood as the same thing (*Narratology* 147). The various analyses will show the importance of having an acute awareness of focalizer and focalized object; this is, for example, vital when we explore the role of Louie in relation to Stella in *The Heat of the Day*, where Louie as focalizer explains the main character differently from the narrator; this will be discussed in detail in Chapter 6. Focalization can be used to highlight a central feature in some of Bowen’s texts where secondary characters perceive main characters. In this study we find that this role is attributed to Louie in *The Heat of the Day* and Callie in “Mysterious Kôr”.

#### Corporeality and identity

Historically, women have been associated with body and nature. The implications of the Cartesian mind/body dualism have had repercussions for how women have been valued in society, where women have been denied an individuality because of a focus on women as corporeal objects. Elizabeth Grosz counters Cartesian dualism by inscribing the body on the scene of subjectivity. Grosz argues convincingly in *Volatile Bodies* that subjectivity and body are intrinsically interlinked, thus she is developing ideas that are central to Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy, but where Grosz’s approach takes a clear feminist perspective. She challenges various dualist approaches to subjectivity, and offers a perspective where subjectivity is dependent on corporeality. Grosz claims that “[d]ualism is the belief that there are two mutually exclusive types of ‘thing,’ physical and mental, body and mind, that compose the universe in general and subjectivity in

13. ‘Focalizer’ is the spelling of the term most often used by narratologists (see, for instance Gérard Genette and Gerald Prince), while in Bal’s usage it is spelled ‘focalizer’. In my discussion in this chapter and in my analyses I follow Bal’s usage.

particular” (vii). Grosz offers the alternative that subjectivity can be “explained using the subject’s corporeality as a framework. [...] All the effects of depth and interiority can be explained in terms of the inscriptions and transformations of the subject’s corporeal surface. Bodies have all the explanatory power of minds” (vii). Grosz transcends Cartesian dualism by presenting an understanding of identity where mind and body are placed on an equal footing, in communication with each other, and not in opposition. Thus the corporeal potential is given a place with respect to how identity is understood. Grosz offers an important feminist contribution to the discussion of identity, where the body is given the central defining position of identity. Grosz’s theory also offers an important insight with respect to the activity of working with a text, which relates to the idea that language is situated in a body who actively uses and interprets language.

Paul John Eakin refers to Grosz’s seminal work, focusing on the connection between body, consciousness and identity in the use of the concept “body image” (20): “[...], when we look at life history from the perspective of neural Darwinism, it is fair to say that we are all becoming different persons all the time, we are not what we were; self and memory are emergent, in process, constantly evolving, and both are grounded in the body and the body image” (20). Corporeality gives materiality to the concept of self; thus, losing a sense of one’s body implies loss of identity. Corporeality is central to the notion of identity in “The Happy Autumn Fields”. As I show in Chapter 4, the body of the protagonist Mary is located in wartime, firmly placed in the here-and-now. The dreamer chooses disembodiment in her rejection of Mary’s body, thus attempting to find a meaning the wartime sphere does not provide. This rejection also implies a rejection of the categories of time and space; consequently, the character dissolves identity-defining elements, and this is also why identity becomes an important aspect of the story. Seemingly, the dreamer’s sense of self is found in a rejection of the body; the problems with such a conception of self are discussed further in Chapter 4 together with a broader discussion of corporeality in “The Happy Autumn Fields”.

Grosz includes space as a necessary component in the theorization of the body in *Space, Time and Perversion*:

For the subject to take up a position as a subject, he must be able to situate himself as a being located in the space occupied by his body. This anchoring of subjectivity in *its*

body is the condition of coherent identity, and, moreover, the condition under which the subject *has a perspective* on the world, becomes the point from which vision emanates. In certain cases of psychosis, this meshing of self and body, this unification of the subject, fails to occur. (89).

Identity depends on a sense of place such that the body has a location from which the world is seen. The connection between bodies and spatiality underscores the relational aspect of subjectivity. Grosz points out the necessary connection between body and an awareness of the body's location in space: when the sense of spatial location is lacking, the individual's sense of self is threatened. Louie Lewis in *The Heat of the Day* exemplifies a character whose sense of corporeality is lacking, and this consequently contributes to Louie's confused understanding of self. Grosz's reflection on the connection between the body and space parallels Bowen's notion of the necessary connection between body and place in her texts:

Am I not manifestly a writer for whom places loom large? As a reader, it is to the place-element that I react most strongly: for me, what gives fiction versimilitude is its topography. No story gains absolute hold on me (which is to say, gains the required hold) if its background—the ambience of its happenings—be indefinite, abstract or generalised. Characters operating *in vacuo* are for me bodiless. (PC 34)

Thus, Bowen puts corporeality and place as central elements in a fictional text, and states that it is these that give identity to the fictional characters; this does not, however, imply that placeless characters do not exist in her texts. In the following we shall see that this notion of place in Bowen is diverse and rich, because of the position that nothingness and no-place also occupy in her work.

#### Place and the Bowen topography

Place in the Bowen topography must be understood as a broad concept. The Irish landscape and cities such as Dublin, London and Paris are important places in her work; each of these larger places envelops a network of smaller places that are integral to the Bowen topography. The house is one important motif that recurs in Bowen's work as an



essential component of the character's identity.<sup>14</sup> Three of the texts analysed here contrast the city and the rural landscape, and this is extended, in "The Happy Autumn Fields" and *The Heat of the Day*, where the contrast involves juxtaposing Ireland and Great Britain.

The Danish literary critic Frederik Tygstrup claims that the novels of the 1920s and the 1930s shared a conspicuous focus on the city (126).<sup>15</sup> Tygstrup argues that the city has become the central theme for a generation of novelists because they have lost their mental map of the city, and are left behind in a place to which they can no longer relate (127). Tygstrup relates this loss to the shattering experience of the First World War, where what used to be has been lost, and where the future has already started, but what this future entails is as yet uncertain (127). A similar sense of loss with respect to place, to the city, is evident in Bowen's work, and resounds in the way nothingness recurs in her work, for instance in the notion of no-place. *The Heat of the Day* and "Mysterious Kôr" are two examples where Bowen depicts the city as a landscape to which the character cannot relate, and from which they are estranged. This sense of estrangement is also present in "The Happy Autumn Fields", but the city *per se* is not portrayed in this short story.

As discussed earlier, war is central either explicitly or implicitly in the texts analysed. The characters in the different texts must relate to a time and space where war is integral to and part of the characters' understanding of identity. War must indeed be considered a time of crisis where identity is tested and challenged; the atmosphere of war carries a sense of threat, which is always present. The bombing and the blackouts alter the topography of the city, forcing Bowen's characters to relate to and move through a new space. As mentioned in Chapter 1, the critical history of Bowen's work offers several studies where the implications of the wartime city on women writers' literary production is treated in depth. These studies include Heather Bryant Jordan's *How Will the Heart Endure*, Phyllis Lassner's *British Women Writers of World War II*, Deborah

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14. For instance Danielstown in *The Last September*, Mme Fisher's house in *The House in Paris*, Mount Morris and Holme Dene in *The Heat of the Day*, Montefort in *A World of Love* and Cathay in *Eva Trout*.

15. Tygstrup refers to writers such as Michel Proust, James Joyce, Robert Musil, Franz Kafka, Alfred Döblin, Virginia Woolf, John Dos Passos and Alexander Bely (125).

Parsons' *Streetwalking the Metropolis* and Gill Plain's *Women's Fiction of the Second World War*.

### Exile and displacement

Exile and displacement are central concepts for an understanding of the Bowen topography, and for the characters' estrangement from place. The concepts displacement and exile overlap in meaning, but there can be a difference between the two in terms of choice on the part of the individual. Living in a state of exile can be a forced or elective position, and it often implies movement to a different country. Displacement, on the other hand, implies a movement where the individual is left with no choice, and it can involve displacement within one's own country.

An understanding of what displacement involves for the individual can be found in the Norwegian philosopher Anniken Greve's discussion of exile in *HER: Et bidrag til stedets filosofi*<sup>16</sup> where Greve differentiates between the notions of *here* and *there* in her discussion of the individual's relation to place:

Home, the place one lives, is the permanent site of the body, the fundamental *here*, the centre which directs and orders the world, in contrast to *there*, the strange and disorganized. Exile constitutes the fundamental outside, established because *to live* and *to be at home* have been split: *Here*, where I live, is fundamentally *there* for me.<sup>17</sup> (22)

The passage imparts a sense of dislocation that results not from a lack of place, instead the individual is living in the wrong place, a place that the body is uncomfortable with, a place that cannot be called home. In his essay "The Sense of Place", the Irish poet Seamus Heaney distinguishes between two ways of perceiving place — the conscious and the unconscious:

[...] there are two ways in which place is known and cherished, two ways which may be complementary but which are just as likely to be antipathetic. One is lived, illiterate and

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16. *HERE: A Contribution to the Philosophy of Place* (my translation).

17. My translation. "Hjemmet, det stedet en bor, er det faste punktet for kroppen, det fundamentale *her*, det sentrum som orienterer og ordner verden, i kontrast til *der*, det fremmede, det uordnete. Eksilet er det fundamentale utenfor, etablert av at å *bo* og *være hjemme* har skilt lag: *Her* hvor jeg bor, er fundamentalt sett *der* for meg."

unconscious, the other learned, literate and conscious. In the literary sensibility, both are likely to co-exist in a conscious and unconscious tension: [...]. (131)

The Norwegian philosopher Dag Andersson takes Heaney's perception of place as his inspiration in his essay "Erindringens steder",<sup>18</sup> and argues that both perceptions of place can be understood as places of memory, thus combining the conscious and the unconscious place with memory. The places of memory are not real; when we go to a real place *we* approach the place, but the places of memory come to us – the place of memory is located in the mind as a poetic place (Andersson 10). All the texts analysed here present us with the characters' encounters with places of the mind. This is found in the adult writer's reconstruction of childhood in *Seven Winters*, when the present and the past converge on the grandstands; in Stella Rodney's meeting with the past upon returning to Mount Morris in *The Heat of the Day*; in the dream in "The Happy Autumn Fields"; and in the imaginary city of Kôr in "Mysterious Kôr". My analyses explore the centrality of places of memory for the characters' sense of self and identity.

## 2.4 Genre

The texts analysed in this context belong to different genres. *Seven Winters* is an autobiographical text, "The Happy Autumn Fields" and "Mysterious Kôr" are short stories and *The Heat of the Day* is a novel. Thus we are dealing with one autobiographical text and three works of fiction. My intention in discussing genre is to explore to what extent we are in fact talking about different genres; this relates, in particular, to a discussion of whether autobiographies represent 'truth', or are they actually, at least partly, fiction? Thus the following discussion will address the relationship between life (autobiography) and fiction.

As already mentioned, theories of autobiography also have a relevance for how we understand self and identity in works of fiction. When reading an autobiography, we inherently expect that we are told the true story of the author's life; this expectation is, of

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18. "The Places of Memory" (my translation). I would like to thank Dag Andersson for suggesting an English translation of the concept 'erindring'. 'Memory' is the translation Andersson suggests for 'erindring' in contrast to 'recollection' which is Andersson's preferred translation of 'hukommelse'.

course, not necessarily fulfilled. As readers, we can, to a point, check the veracity of the narrative by reviewing the history of the life of the author. The French literary critic Philippe Lejeune argues in “The Autobiographical Pact” that “[i]n order for there to be autobiography (and personal literature in general), the *author*, the *narrator*, and the *protagonist* must be identical” (5). Lejeune’s autobiographical pact is understood as an agreement between the reader and the writer that the story told actually represents the author’s life. For works of fiction, however, we are not dealing with texts that explore the life of the author, so there is no need to verify facts, and the reader accepts the construction of a fictional universe.

Extensive research on autobiography over the last few decades has shown that Lejeune’s notion of autobiography is problematic. Literary critic Linda Anderson contests Lejeune’s idea of identity, and argues that “the difficulty is how to apply this condition since the ‘identity’ Lejeune speaks of can never really be established except as a matter of *intention* on the part of the author” (2). However, what the author’s intention is can be hard to grasp. Lejeune refers to the actual story as the central aspect of the autobiographical pact. One element that complicates the rendering of the actual story is the idea that the actual story also represents the truth. This is not an aspect that is necessarily important for Lejeune, but, as we see shortly, this is one of the reflections Jacques Derrida makes about the testimony, a genre adjacent to autobiography. For the contract between reader and writer, truth is a precarious concept. What is truth? Does the author remember all of her life correctly? Can we trust the author to tell the true story? In the act of remembering, we engage in a temporal activity where we remember *now* what happened *then*. The time that has passed between the present and the past, as well as the present itself, all influence what the author remembers and reconstructs in writing. Autobiographies depict a gradual movement from the past to the present, and this movement incorporates who the author is now as well as reconstructing who she was then, and as Jerome Bruner points out:

What after all is an autobiography? It consists of the following. A narrator, in the here and now, takes upon himself or herself the task of describing the progress of a protagonist in the there and then, one who happens to share his name. He must by convention bring that protagonist from the past into the present in such a way that the

protagonist and the narrator eventually fuse and become one person with a shared consciousness. (Bruner 27)

Bruner presents temporality at work in life narratives, showing that autobiography concerns not only telling about one's past, but also about defining the individual in the present, depicting a continuum and a development of self (the different selves in the process). This suggests that attempts at defining self are caught in the temporal movement between now and then. Paul John Eakin argues that "[w]e never catch ourselves in the act of becoming selves; there is always a gap or rupture that divides us from the knowledge that we seek" (x). In the essay "The Bend Back" Bowen comments on the importance of memory with respect to identity:

In an age when change works so fast, when each change spells so much obliteration, and when differentiation between person and person becomes less, each one of us clings to personal memory as a life-line. One might say, one invests one's identity *in* one's memory. To re-live any moment, acutely, is to be made certain that one not only was but is. (MT 56)

The essay "The Bend Back" was published in 1950 and treats the importance of the past in fiction, where Bowen contemplates the changes resulting from the First World War and the Second World War. The above passage makes the point that rapid changes in society result in a need to define personal memory as tantamount to identity. A sense of uniqueness is connected to one's memory, and this separates self from other(s).

One understanding of the idea of truth is that we are able to remember accurately what happened in the past. This is, however, a rather static perception that does not account for the activity involved in remembering, where a reconstruction of the past also takes place. In remembering we create images of what happened.

[...], students of memory today hold that past experience is necessarily—both psychologically and neurologically—*constructed* anew in each memory event or act of recall. Memories, then, are constructed, and memory itself, moreover, is plural. (Eakin 107)

We can never remember exactly what happened. Different people have different memories of the same event, thus plurality implies the idea of remembering the same

thing, but that each individual remembers it differently. In addition, plurality implies the possibility that the individual has different versions of the same memory, and that the same person can remember the same event differently. Memory is also a central concept for an understanding of the term focalization, where Mieke Bal argues that “‘Memory’ is an act of ‘vision’ of the past, but as an act it is situated in the memory’s present” (*Looking* 47). Bal’s reflection both presents memory as a temporal activity and an activity that has its place in the present: the time when the story based on the memory is told. Thus, transformation, construction and fictionality are integral elements to a story constructed on the basis of memory.

Bowen’s works of fiction often render the relationship between the past and the present as fundamental to the development of the character; this is also true for the fictional texts analysed here. As we have seen, Paul Ricoeur underscores that temporality is an important aspect of identity construction, and his understanding of the relationship between time and identity shows the complexities of this connection in a subtle way. For this purpose, theories of autobiography represent interesting reflections on the relationship between self and memory and the importance of this relationship in self-definition and identity. Thus the understandings of self and memory in autobiography theory are central to my analysis of fictional texts. Furthermore, we find that the concepts of construction and transformation are important in the interpretation of autobiographical texts; these concepts outline an important fictional element in autobiographies that allows a fictional reading of Bowen’s life narratives.

The French philosopher Jacques Derrida’s *Demeure: Fiction and Testimony* explores the centrality of fictionality in testimonies; even though a testimony is not tantamount to an autobiography, there are parallels between the two genres that relate to self and identity and how these are rendered. Importantly the example presented here implies the possibility of fiction:

[...] there is no testimony that does not structurally imply in itself the possibility of fiction, simulacra, dissimulation, lie and perjury—that is to say, the possibility of literature, [...]. If this possibility that it seems to prohibit were effectively excluded, if testimony thereby became proof, information, certainty, or archive, it would lose its function as testimony. In order to remain testimony, it must therefore allow itself to be

haunted. It must allow itself to be parasitized by precisely what it excludes from its inner depths, the *possibility*, at least, of literature. (29-30)

Derrida argues that fiction is intrinsic to testimony; the possibility of literature is always present. He takes as his vantage point Maurice Blanchot's fictional text *The Instant of My Death*, which tells the story of a young man who experiences nearly being executed by the Nazis in the Second World War. Blanchot tells Derrida in a letter that the story told in *The Instant of My Death* is autobiographical (Derrida 52). What Derrida calls testimony parallels autobiography; in both genres we are invited to believe that the story told by the first person narrator is the true story about himself. The passage suggests that the truth of what is being told is always under question: can we trust what is being told, can we trust the narrator? Derrida thus questions whether it is possible to expect that the truth will be told. The central reflection here relates to the understanding that when you tell something about yourself, the lie is always a possibility, and fictionality is related to this potential lie. To equate fiction with lying could, however, be problematic. Fiction is not the same as lying, although it shares some of its characteristics. The central notion here relates to the construction of a story and the possibilities integral to such a construction, and in that respect we find a parallel between fiction and autobiography where the boundaries between them are blurred. Seemingly, Derrida's primary interest in this context is not in the construction of meaning; this is one aspect that differentiates his thinking from Paul Ricoeur whose interest is in the construction of the story, where the story is understood as a way of creating meaningful structure in facts that were potentially chaotic at the time they took place.

Paul Ricoeur's understanding of "the narrative unity of a life" serves as a complementary and concluding comment to this discussion of the relationship between life and fiction. Ricoeur understands "literary narratives" and "life histories" as "complementary", claiming that "there is nothing absurd in speaking about the narrative unity of life, under the sign of narratives that teach us how to articulate narratively retrospection and propection" (*Oneself* 163). Thus, the relationship between literary narratives and life histories indicates the importance of fiction in helping people organize their understanding of their own lives. Ricoeur argues that:

[...] the narrative unity of a life, [...] must be seen as an unstable mixture of fabulation and actual experience. It is precisely because of the elusive character of real life that we need the help of fiction to organize life retrospectively, after the fact, prepared to take as provisional and open to revision any figure of emplotment borrowed from fiction or from history. (*Oneself* 162).

By pointing to the process that life as remembered in fact undergoes, Ricoeur challenges the idea that identity can be understood as self-contained; this is a process that necessarily involves fictional elements as part of the reconstruction, and that consequently adds to how life is understood. Fictionality, Ricoeur suggests, is integral and necessary to how the story of one's life is remembered: meaning is dependent on the structuring effect of the story.

A central reflection that has been explored in this chapter – and that unites the main theoretical discussions – is the way identity has been presented as constantly changing, and undergoing a process. Ricoeur's definition of identity into *idem*-identity and *ipse*-identity does, however, qualify this understanding. Additionally, the interrelation between the self and the other has been explored and can be captured in the notion of relationality, an aspect that will be examined further in the analyses, together with close analyses of central concepts – discussed in this chapter – such as nonentity, nothing, place and no-place, the gaze and corporeality.

As discussed in Chapter 1, the biographical tradition has a stronghold in the critical history of Bowen's work where comparisons of life and work are at the core. In my choice of Bowen's autobiographical text *Seven Winters* as part of my analysis, I do not, however, follow the established biographical tradition of the Bowen scholarship; my primary concern in analysing *Seven Winters* corresponds with my interest in analysing her works of fiction, where I show a different way of using her autobiographical texts, and where I provide a more detailed analysis of *Seven Winters* than that of previous Bowen critics. My concern in this context is not Bowen's life; my interest is to address the text as literature, giving particular attention to how identity is presented in the text.

While I have chosen *Seven Winters*, "The Happy Autumn Fields", "Mysterious Kôr" and *The Heat of the Day* as the primary texts for my analyses, all of Bowen's work serves as a backdrop and as a basis for reference and comparison. The little girl, the



adolescent, the young woman and the grown-up woman are described in the texts that I analyse, and thus illustrate identity at different stages in life. These are all wartime texts published in the period 1942–1949. That *Seven Winters* is a wartime text is not immediately evident given its subject matter, but as we shall see in the next chapter, the atmosphere of war is alluded to, and represents an important backdrop for the narrative. The question of identity permeates Bowen's work, and wartime is a period when identity is tested, where identity is constantly questioned. Dissolution and decay describe the topography of wartime, and they also fundamentally affect the inner life of the individual. Emptiness, nothingness and pessimism describe the life of many of Bowen's characters, and these are aspects that challenge the possibility of creating a sense of self. Being a body in the world and being seen as body even though one is empty inside are central aspects of identity that are explored and challenged in Bowen's texts.

## Chapter 3 Coming to consciousness: *Seven Winters*

By the time that I begin to remember, life had divided itself into winter and summer halves. Towards the end of May we came down to Bowen's Court; about half-way through October we returned to Dublin, leaving Bowen's Court to its winter sleep.<sup>1</sup>

### 3.1 Introduction

In the first part of the Second World War, Elizabeth Bowen writes an autobiographical text in which she describes her childhood winters in Dublin. And in so doing she invites us, the readers, to embark on an exploration of self and city in the adult's act of remembrance and reconstruction of childhood. I will argue that this exploration of self involves some experiences that are unique to the Bowen child; additionally, *Seven Winters* shows certain stages through which all children pass, that in *Seven Winters* assumes a particular form for Bowen. *Seven Winters* can also be read as an exploration of what inspired the writer to become a writer. Thus *Seven Winters* invites us to explore the self of Elizabeth Bowen and also self in more general terms. The child's wanderings in the city of Dublin are essential to how self is explored in the text, and the places are the central identity constructing elements of the narrative. It is from the places that the story is told and that self is explored.

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1. BC 405

### 3.1.1 Life story

*Seven Winters* was first published in a limited edition by the Cuala Press in Dublin in 1942, with no additional information in the title. The following year, however, it was republished in Britain by Longmans under the title *Seven Winters: Memories of a Dublin Childhood*. Thus the title of the second edition informs us that this is a book of childhood as it is remembered by the author; the story is set in the city of Dublin and the time perspective extends over seven winters. Consequently, information about theme, genre, time and place are derived from the title of the second edition. Elizabeth Bowen comments in the foreword to the 1962 American reissue of *Seven Winters & Afterthoughts* that: “Seven Winters could be called a fragment of autobiography. At the same time, I look on it as a self-contained work, for it is as much of my life story as I intend to write—that is, to write directly” (vii).<sup>2</sup> Thus Bowen describes *Seven Winters* as part of a possible life story, not only the story of her childhood. As readers we have certain expectations when reading an autobiographical narrative of childhood; we could argue that there is an autobiographical contract between reader and writer where we, the readers, expect to explore what made the writer a writer. Consequently we can ask: when Bowen writes the story of her childhood, what kind of life story does she present us to?

Bowen describes *Seven Winters* as part of her life story in the above comment, thus implicitly differentiating it from *Bowen’s Court*, the family history that was published the same year. She presents *Seven Winters* as personal; it is about her, whereas *Bowen’s Court* is the story of the Bowen family; it naturally involves Elizabeth Bowen, but it does not focus on the individual Elizabeth Bowen in the same way as does *Seven Winters*. The later fragment of an autobiography, *Pictures and Conversations*, does, however, qualify Bowen’s claim that she will not write more about herself directly. This reflects the writer’s need to add other aspects to her life story that were not included in *Seven Winters*.

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2. Italicized in text.

### 3.2 Focalizers

In *Seven Winters* the narrator and the protagonist are the same person, and to separate who sees in the text, I have chosen to use ‘the Bowen child’ and ‘the adult narrator’ to avoid confusion as to which ‘Elizabeth’ I am referring to. ‘The Bowen child’ will also be used when I am talking of Bowen’s childhood experiences as unique and unusual, while I use ‘the child’ when the text describes stages of maturation that are typical of what happens to children in general.

The adult narrator represents the primary focalizer who reminisces about her childhood experiences. Throughout the narrative the adult narrator keeps an ironic distance, sometimes using sarcasm, for example in describing the different governesses. The adult narrator is not, however, the only focalizer in the text. We find that the adult narrator’s present life and experiences at times converge with that of the Bowen child, and we are seemingly presented with a merging of the past and the present, which requires that we ask who the focalizer is and what we should understand to be the focalized objects. In the act of remembering childhood, the focalized objects of the Bowen child are illuminated in the narrative. Examples of focalized objects that are central to the story of childhood are streets, places, mother and governesses. There is a ‘double-voiced’ element in *Seven Winters* which is shown in the way the narrative constantly swings between the perception of the Bowen child and the understanding of the adult narrator.

### 3.3 Fiction or non-fiction?

Roy Foster comments that “*Seven Winters* is a masterpiece of non-information” (*Irish Story* 155), meaning that facts and history are left out of the book. When Foster talks of history he refers to the history of Ireland and the world, but the history we are provided in *Seven Winters* is not about the grand narratives, but is instead the history of the Bowen child, whose childhood experiences are recollected by the adult narrator. That the big events and facts are left out “gives the book an eerie intensity: we read it sealed inside a time-capsule that is also the self-referencing world of a seven-year-old’s mind” (*Irish Story* 158). Additionally, Foster points out that *Seven Winters* is misleading:

She tells us that her childhood memories are vaguer and start later than most people's; but even that is disproved on every page. We are deliberately disorientated from the start: so simple a fact as the aspect of Herbert Place (where her parents lived) is wrong – it looks much more south than east. (*Irish Story* 155)

Foster's comment suggests that even in a work of autobiography the writer is at liberty to create fiction. What the writer presents as factual information does not necessarily represent historical reality. Choice is an integral part of a work of autobiography; by this I mean that the writer makes a choice of which story she wants to tell, how she wants to tell it and what she chooses to leave out of the narrative. This affects the autobiographical contract about telling the truth, that is implicit in the relationship between the reader and the writer. This is further complicated by the process of remembering, which involves a lapse between the time when the event took place and the time when it is written down. This temporal element affects memory and what the writer eventually writes about her childhood. Memory is necessarily tainted by the passing of time and the transformation that takes place in this process. There is also a temporal movement of influence between the past and the present where the two affect each other. Consequently, the actual event in the past is transformed in the act of remembrance, thus combining autobiographical facts with elements of fiction.

Eibhear Walshe compares Sean O'Faolain's autobiography *Vive Moi!* to Bowen's *Seven Winters* and Kate O'Brien's *Presentation Parlour*, arguing that Bowen and O'Brien "tidied up their past selves, found strategies for dealing with past trauma and loss and sought to mythify their own origins". Walshe describes O'Faolain's autobiography as "honest and painfully direct" (52). Thus Walshe differentiates between the autobiographical account which allegedly deludes the reader, because the writer chooses to fictionalize her life, compared with the realist and honest narrative where the reader believes that what the writer says is true. It is also implied that O'Faolain's autobiography is a better text because of his honesty and Walshe seems to imply that truth and fictionality are irreconcilable. Walshe claims that "Bowen created an autobiographical fiction around her childhood" in *Seven Winters* (56). In contrast to Walshe's position, I will argue that the tension between truth and fiction are integral components in a work of autobiography. As we have seen in Chapter 2, fiction is a

necessary element in a work of autobiography, because in many ways memory will transform the past into the fictional. This transformation is an integral part of what happens in the act of writing, which also involves the creation of an uncertainty with respect to the actual event and how the writer remembers the event. It is the combination of fiction and factuality that makes *Seven Winters* particularly interesting in this context, adding a layer for analysis that we do not often find in works of fiction. In an autobiographical work we are sent back to the author's reality in a way that is rarely done in works of fiction. *Seven Winters* explores in a more subdued manner many of the issues found in Bowen's novels and short stories. What makes *Seven Winters* a particularly interesting text to analyse, however, is its suppression of feeling and childhood trauma, where sadness and loneliness are hidden behind the veil of a happy childhood. Compared to direct presentations of trauma and sadness, the suppressed narrative in *Seven Winters* can be said to be equally explosive. This, too, is the story of an only child whose mother and father to a great extent are absent from her everyday life, and whose governess is the main adult to whom she relates to on a regular basis after the age of four. My interest lies in the way this childhood narrative is presented to us: what are the elements that determine the Bowen child's understanding of self?

### **3.4 The child**

The childhood theme is central throughout Bowen's work. Several of her novels and short stories explore this theme, most often featuring the lonely and parentless only child. *The House in Paris*, "The Tommy Crans", "Songs My Father Sang Me" and "Maria" are but a handful of the texts in which the predicaments of the lonely child are explored. Hermione Lee comments that: "Some of the best of Bowen's stories treat childhood desolation, loneliness, exhibitionism, fantasy and terror. She wants to get back inside the eye of the child" (Bowen 145). Apart from the autobiographical element, the major difference between *Seven Winters* and Bowen's other childhood texts is that her novels and short stories are more explicit about childhood trauma than her autobiographical texts. I have thus chosen what some might argue is a rather atypical Bowen text for my exploration of the childhood theme. This choice has been motivated

by a desire to discuss this autobiographical work as seen through the lens of Bowen's fiction; additionally, there are few critical analyses of *Seven Winters*; this is an attempt to alleviate this lack of interest. Furthermore, I think it is interesting to take *Seven Winters* as an analytical starting point from which I will explore identity in Bowen's work. *Seven Winters* describes her early years, a childhood as remembered by a famous writer, which also encourages the reader to search the text for clues as to what inspired her to become a writer.

### 3.4.1 Innocence

Innocence often characterizes the child character in Bowen's childhood fictions. For example, *The Death of the Heart* depicts the destructive power of the innocent child who tries to come to grips with her new life and surroundings. Portia, having first lost her father, then her mother, is taken to live with her half-brother Thomas Quayne and his wife Anna in London. Unaccustomed to the Quaynes' life, Portia records their life in minute detail in her diary; unbeknownst to Portia, Anna reads her diary and is confronted with Portia's observations of their lives. Her naive and innocent observations are threatening and destructive because they shatter their illusion of the perfect life. In "Ivy Grippes the Steps" we discover how the childhood trauma of being deluded has perilous effects on the individual; the adult Gavin Doddington is perceived as "somebody dead who was still there — 'old' because of the presence, under an icy screen, of a whole stopped mechanism for feeling" (CS 711). The dire effects of a childhood trauma are reflected in this observation, made by an outsider, about the adult Gavin Doddington. As a child he believed that he was special to Mrs Nicholson, but he overhears a conversation where she characterizes him as "poor little funny Gavin" and furthermore equates him with a pet: "Must I have nothing? — I have no little dog" (CS 707); Gavin's perception of being special is thus undermined, and this shatters his childhood illusion of being loved. The repercussions of this trauma are dramatic for his understanding of self: he can no longer feel, he is dead while still living. The ghosts of the past fill the present, overtaking the living, leaving no place for the uncertain 'I'. In addition to the innocent character, Bowen also presents self-absorbed lonely childhood characters whose pattern of behaviour is characterized by viciousness.

### 3.4.2 Viciousness

Viciousness in this context implies a character who does not care for the pain she inflicts on others as long as she gets the attention she seeks. Some of the characters are partly motivated by a desire to stir up feelings; for example, the character Theodora Thirdman in *Friends and Relations* loves the commotion she consciously creates as a child, and when she is a grown woman the vicious streaks of childhood still remain. Maria in the short story “Maria” also exemplifies the child whose quest for attention is enacted in viciousness towards the people who surround her. Both Theodora and Maria crave, from childhood, a different position in life from the one they have been given; their understanding of self does not correspond with the life they lead, thus self-perception and self-realization collide, and they use viciousness as a means to alter their situation to match their self-perception.

### 3.4.3 Autobiographical self vs imaginary self

In the essay “Out of a Book”, Bowen muses on how childhood years and reading are formative for the writer, arguing that “[a]ll susceptibility belongs to the age of magic, the Eden where fact and fiction were the same; the imaginative writer was the imaginative child, who relied for life upon being lied to – and how, now, is he to separate lies from his consciousness of life?” (*MT* 53). The lie, the possibility of fiction, is presented as central to the world of the imaginative child. Lie and imagination are interconnected and transferred as central elements in the adult author’s imaginative life; the threat that the lie will be revealed is, however, also integral, thus representing a disintegration of the illusion the child has relied upon. Thus Bowen illustrates the closeness of lies and reality, of fiction and fact, and that this bond is not necessarily broken when one grows up. In fact she seems to argue that the magic of childhood is a necessary aspect of creative writing. This implies that there is no opposition for the writer between the imaginary self and the autobiographical self,<sup>3</sup> but rather a merging of the two. This reflection also indicates that a loss is involved if the adult loses touch with the imaginary pulse of

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3. See discussion of the autobiographical self in Chapter 2.



childhood — the source of creativity is found in childhood, and if this source is lost, one loses an important part of one's self.

The source of the creative or imaginative experience can originate from somewhere else or someone else, such as books and stories. Thus the process of writing involves re-creation of experiences that are not purely personal:

Almost no experience, however much simplified by the distance of time, is to be vouched for as being wholly my own – *did* I live through that, or was I told that it happened, or did I read it? When I write, I am re-creating what was created for me. The gladness of vision, in writing, is my own gladness, but not at my own vision. I may see, for instance, a road running uphill, a skyline, a figure coming slowly over the hill – the approach of the figure is momentous, accompanied by fear or rapture or fear of rapture or a rapture of fear. But who and how is this? Am I sure this is not a figure out of a book?  
(*MT* 53)

Bowen argues that the imaginative source of childhood never dries up, and she questions the idea that one has the ability to remember things as they happened; experience and memory are always coloured by imagination. Thus we can say that Bowen in this essay claims that the autobiographical self is always coloured/influenced by the imaginary self, that the impulse of childhood is always present as a creative force. This is a reflection she makes for the writer, but does this hold for the characters of her texts? Before we continue with the analysis of *Seven Winters*, we will take a small detour to one of Bowen's novels to discuss whether this reflection is also integral to Bowen's texts.

#### 3.4.5 *The House in Paris*

*The House in Paris* presents us with two children who are waiting in Paris in the house of Madam Fisher. Nine year-old Leopold is waiting to meet his mother for the first time. His notion of self is formed by his imaginary construction of the absent mother. Leopold's ability to create an imaginary mother saves him when, in the end, his mother does not come to meet him: "So the mother who did not come to meet Leopold that afternoon remained his creature, able to speak the truth" (*HP* 67). The narrator of *The House in Paris* comments on experience and how the child's ability to imagine new

things dominates a world where memory has not yet taken possession over imagination. The adult, however, is caught in the loop between memory and imagination:

Experience at any age has the same ingredients; the complexity of the rainbow is deceiving but its first colours are few. He has travelled less, so his imagination is wider; she has less before her but a more varied memory: referring backwards and forwards between imagination and memory she relives scenes, he sees them alive. (*HP* 68).

Leopold's lack of experience enables him to create imaginary experiences, thus inventing a possible universe where the absent proximate other (Eakin 86-88) has a place. He creates an imaginary self based on his construction, or idea of, what his mother is like. In Leopold's imaginary world, his mother becomes what Leopold wants her to be, and so does he. His mother, on the other hand, takes refuge in memory, in life lived; this ultimately prevents her from meeting her son. The world of childhood and the world of the adult are thus contrasted in their different approaches to the construction of identity and understanding of self. What is the difference between a self constructed from experience and memory, and a self constructed from imagination? Should we consider it a loss when the 'imaginary' self is gradually exchanged with an 'autobiographical' self? To remain solely in the 'imaginary' self where no autobiographical memory is developed is a perilous position for the individual, because this implies constructing a life story that does not relate to reality.

The passage from *The House in Paris* suggests not only the absent proximate other, but also history's importance in the formation of identity. To remember is an activity that relates to history. Memory and history are thus intertwined in identity formation. A central element in the texts analysed here is war, where the characters in the different texts relate to war, either implicitly or explicitly. War is a part of history, but it is also a part of the here-and-now, the world the characters live in. The passage from *The House in Paris* presents a shift from the imaginary self to the autobiographical self in the development from child to adult. In "Out of a Book" Bowen describes the connection between fact and fiction, and illustrates how real places are first given life in fiction before the place has been experienced in real life:

In reverse, there are real-life places – towns, seaports, suburbs of London – unknown to the child, though heard of, which become ‘real’ through being also in books. For instance, after *David Copperfield* I could not hear either Dover or Yarmouth mentioned, in the most ordinary context, without excitement: I had a line on them. (MT 52)

This illustrates how places are given fictional reality, where the understanding of place comes out of a book, and not from experiencing the place itself. For the child, however, this fictional universe dominates the child’s understanding of place. Thus reality is perceived through the lens of language and writing. Bowen’s reflections from “Out of a Book” imply that something is lost if one cannot hold on to the creative force of childhood, where the line between fact and fiction is blurred, implying that a purely autobiographical self is rather empty and colourless, and maybe also impossible. In the passage above, Bowen questions the notion of experience as something that is solely yours; experience and memory are always influenced by others and by what you relate to, such as the texts you read as a child. Separating fact from fiction in memory becomes a difficult task.

### 3.5 Structure

*Seven Winters* is divided into 12 short chapters or sections.<sup>4</sup> We begin with “Herbert Place” and the history of the house in Dublin. We start inside the house, in the sphere of the newborn baby, and we remain inside in the following chapter, “Nursery”. Here we are introduced to the childhood illusion that understanding the places she knows and relates to as a small child can be models for understanding other places in the world; most importantly the Bowen child lives in what the illusion describes as the biggest and the best place in the world. The childhood illusion is founded on a misconception of the world where stories told about Dublin have taken on a greatness in the Bowen child’s imagination, where *she* represents the norm, the centre, because she inhabits these places. She thus defines herself as occupying the centre, which serves as the point of departure for her movement in the text. This will be discussed more closely later.

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4. No indication of whether these are in fact chapters is provided in the Cuala press edition of *Seven Winters*, nor is this done for the 1943 Longmans republication. The Vintage edition of *Seven Winters* does, however, label them chapter 1-12.

I never looked up Sackville Street without pleasure, for I was told it was the widest street in the world. Just as Phoenix Park, grey-green distance beyond the Zoo, was the largest park in the world. These superlatives pleased me almost too much: my earliest pride of race<sup>5</sup> was attached to them. (SW 14-15)

After “Nursery” we move out of the house and onto the streets of Dublin. The walks the Bowen child and her governess undertake constitute the central part of the text, and in the final section entitled “Drawingroom” we return to Herbert Place only to be told of “[t]he end of our Dublin house” (SW 48) because of her father’s mental illness.

### 3.6 Birth

Dublin is introduced as the setting for the text in the opening of the book: “The first three weeks of my life were weeks of June – the only June I spent in Dublin until the summer when I was twenty-one” (SW 7). The opening sentence of *Seven Winters* also makes it explicit that the narrator is clearly the adult Bowen looking back. The birth took place in Dublin in summer, and for the Bowen child this is anomalous, because her summers were normally spent at the family estate Bowen’s Court, in County Cork. Dublin and the house in Dublin, Herbert Place, represent winter, and thus refer to the title of the book.

No. 15 Herbert Place, in fact, was a winter house; early dusks, humid reflections and pale sunshine seemed a part of its being. I used to believe that winter lived always in Dublin, while summer lived always in County Cork. (SW 7)

By juxtaposing summer and winter and relating the seasons to places of childhood, places are presented as important for the development of the Bowen child. Bowen’s Court and Herbert Place are compared or contrasted in the text, where the two places represent different aspects of her childhood. This is illustrated in the way Bowen’s Court

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5. Bryant Jordan’s comments on Bowen’s use of the term ‘race’ argue that it encompasses a “shared experience” that makes the Anglo-Irish distinct from the Irish and the English (xii). ‘Race’ is not merely related to the Anglo-Irish class in the quotation from *Seven Winters*. The use of ‘race’ in a meaning similar to ‘nature’ or denoting a group that was ‘genetically similar’ was quite common in the early 20th century. Thus Bowen’s use of ‘race’ in this passage should not be understood as negative.

represents tradition and the family history, while Herbert Place, in contrast, illustrates a break with tradition. By opposing the two places ambivalence is introduced in the text.

### 3.6.1 History and tradition

Herbert Place is also used as a starting point for presenting an Anglo-Irish history and tradition. We learn from the outset that Bowen's parents represent a departure from tradition, of which the house in Dublin is a symbol. Difference in this context depicts how her parents (and she herself) represent something 'other' in the Anglo-Irish class. The concept of difference in *Seven Winters* embodies an understanding of self where the Anglo-Irish class represents difference and a minority class in decline. Being different but part of the Ascendancy class, the Bowens could be described as an 'other' within an 'other'.

Being born in Dublin is not in accordance with the Bowen tradition; Elizabeth Bowen was not born in County Cork, and she also diverges from the family's expectations because she is not a boy. The whole family had expected a male heir to the family estate: "My father was the head of his family; male heirs had not yet failed for the County Cork property" (SW 8). Following the Bowen tradition her name should have been Robert. The first chapter presents several facts that are not in accordance with the Bowen tradition: her father is an individualist, and so is her mother, they live in "a world of their own" (SW 11), and into this world Elizabeth Bowen, the first female heir to Bowen's Court, is born. From the very beginning this is a book about breaking with tradition, about difference, and about creating something new. Tradition and departure from tradition are presented in the section entitled "Herbert Place"; tradition indicates stability and safety, as do the brass plates described in the section entitled "Brass Plates". Elizabeth Bowen's parents, however, chose to break with tradition to a large extent. The house in Dublin is one example, as is her father's decision to take up a profession; he was called to the Irish bar in 1888 (Glendinning 11). Thus the first part reveals the centrality of tradition and of challenging tradition, and how these are integral to the Bowen child's understanding of self and identity. Additionally, we learn that the stability of tradition is constantly undermined by family decisions and choices.

### 3.7 No-place and nonentity

The opening sentence serves as a contrast to the title of the book; although the title of the book leads the reader to expect discussions of winter, we are surprised by the fact that the first sentence mentions June, but at the same time her birth is presented as an intrusion. The beginning indicates that something is out of place, and this is further underscored by the introduction of the concept “no-place”:

A house where a child no longer is is virtually rolled up and put away. So by having been born where I had been born in a month in which that house did not exist, I felt that I had intruded on some no-place. (*SW* 7-8)

The Bowen child’s intrusion implies doing something unheard of; her right to exist is questioned from the very beginning of the text, and her lack of belonging is established.

The notion of no-place is also found in *The Last September*, as expressed by the protagonist Lois: “She shut her eyes and tried – as sometimes when she was seasick, locked in misery between Holyhead and Kingstown – to be enclosed in nonentity, in some ideal no-place, perfect and clear as a bubble” (*LS* 89). No-place represents an ideal that cannot exist. This ideal suggests a potential escape for the character. ‘Escape’ is a word loaded with meaning; for the character the escape indicates a positive solution to a situation she is uncomfortable with; on the other hand, escape could be understood as negative, because the character isolates herself from her surroundings. Escape is presented as enclosure and flight from reality. For the character, however, no-place represents a state of relief. Additionally, we seem to be presented with a non-existent individual with the notion of nonentity, where she seemingly becomes nothing. As we shall see, *Seven Winters* presents nonentity as a characterization of those who do not have a brass plate on their doors; additionally, nonentity is depicted as an expression of the adult narrator’s first meeting with London as a city inhabited by nonentities.

Interestingly, nonentity and no-place are conjoined in the quotation from *The Last September* as two ideas that are necessarily intertwined, thus implying that nonentity also constitutes some kind of ideal in the form of escape. The image of the bubble illustrates the desire to be cut off from the rest of the world, but at the same time there is always a danger that the bubble will burst, shattering the illusion, returning the individual to real

life. No-place implies escape in the quotation, possibly similar to what Kôr represents for the protagonist in “Mysterious Kôr”. Central to the notions of nonentity and no-place in Bowen, is the ambiguous quality attributed to them, a quality that creates an uncertainty with respect to how they should be perceived, and how they affect the character’s own sense of self. In Bowen’s work no-place does not represent something purely negative for the character. As has been discussed in Chapter 2, literature’s treatment of nothingness can be understood as an effective processing of cultural traumas. Bowen’s naming of nothingness by her use of concepts such as no-place and nonentity, exemplifies cultural trauma on an individual level where the individual’s processing of traumatic experiences is suggested.

The adult narrator introduces no-place at the beginning of *Seven Winters* and it constitutes a framework for the text that relates to a lack of belonging; this becomes clearer in the process of reading the text and is not evident at the outset. In addition to no-place we are also introduced to the Bowen child’s gradual process of coming to consciousness. *Seven Winters* introduces us to different stages of development where we can understand no-place in relation to early childhood as an expression of lack of power and control, thus associating something negative with the idea of no-place.

Herbert Place is established as a no-place; additionally, we are told that setting up house in Dublin represents “a departure from the Bowen tradition” (SW 8). 15 Herbert Place thus differs radically from the established Big House, Bowen’s Court, which represents safety, tradition and belonging.

Initially the Bowen child believes herself to hold a position of centrality in the world. The notion of centrality portrays the childhood illusion. The Bowen child’s sense of centrality in the world also describes a stage through which all children pass. Gradually, the text presents a movement from this illusion to an understanding of the world as being elsewhere. This movement involves a shift from centre to margin for the individual. Is there a correlation between margin and no-place? This does not seem to be the case, since marginality is indeed somewhere, while no-place relates to nowhere. The position of marginality connects to the Bowen child’s understanding of exile. No-place could possibly be connected to the childhood illusion of centrality, because centrality is also a non-existent place in the sense that it is only a figment of the child’s imagination, it is

part of an image of the world that is gradually torn apart. The Bowen child is not, however, conscious from the start that the idea of centrality is an illusion. This is a consciousness incorporated in the adult writer recollecting her childhood. The concept of no-place seems, on the other hand, to be more clearly integral to the Bowen child's notion of self and place.

Marginality and somewhere are juxtaposed with no-place and nowhere, so that in Bowen's work the notions of nothingness, nowhere and nobody are combined as has been discussed in Chapter 2, where we found that these concepts reflect an inherent ambiguity. Somewhere and nowhere are constantly played against each other in Bowen's work, including *Seven Winters*. The tension is seen in the way that understandings of identity and non-identity are presented, where there is a constant vacillation in the text between being and not being, between no-place and place, between centrality, which is no-place, and marginality, which is somewhere. It is in the vacillation between these different ideas that the Bowen child's sense of self and understanding of identity are developed.

### **3.8 Mapping and movement**

The mapping of Dublin constitutes a central part of the text and relates to how the Bowen child perceives her surroundings, and sees them as either part of or threatening to her way of life. The mapping of the city is important with respect to the Bowen child's understanding of the world and of people, history, power and meaning. These are elements that relate to the Bowen child's coming to consciousness, and shortly we shall discuss how understanding is explored in the text in the way the Bowen child meets the city.

#### **3.8.1 Spatial movement**

The Bowen child's movements in the city take the form of regular walks with her governess, Sunday walks with her parents, and occasional walks with the little Townshends. Her physical exertion is also characterized in her attendance at dance classes and going to various parties in Dublin. Additionally, movement is presented in



the Sunday afternoon tram-rides to Clontarf to visit her grandmother at Mount Temple. These visits ended before she was five years old because of the death of her grandmother. Recollecting Mount Temple, the adult narrator reflects that “I must have been old enough, in its day, to idealize, for I remember that house as being under a magic glass” (SW 46). Magic, myth and ideal are associated with the memory of Mount Temple. The adult narrator’s idealization of childhood is an integral part of the narrative, but the undertone of loneliness and no-place destabilizes this myth of an ideal childhood.

The parameter of the Bowen child’s physical movement in the city is controlled by the adult chaperone, the governess. The governess decides which routes to take on their walks, avoiding dubious areas. Thus the Bowen child relates to a limited physical space, not as an adult wanderer or *flâneur*, but as someone who is always in the company of an adult, who cannot explore the streets of the city freely and who is influenced by the adult’s perceptions of the city. The red road district of Dublin with its large mansions and rich people induces awe in her governess and a “regard for money”. Her mother, on the other hand, has a “contempt for rich people” (SW 21). The Bowen child vacillates between these two positions, not knowing which to take. This exemplifies how the Bowen child’s understanding of the world develops in dialogue with her surroundings, at the same time that it reveals that nothing is certain and unambiguous.

Phyllis Lassner argues that Bowen in *Seven Winters* “reveals how place is an environment created by parents, and then transformed by the child” (Bowen 40). The walks, as we shall see, serve as food for the Bowen child’s imaginative endeavour which represents an escape from controlled movement into an imaginary landscape uncontrolled by an adult. Here the Bowen child’s creativity is set to play, transforming her surroundings. The Bowen child transforms terms given by the adults to create a world of her own. One example that we shall discuss shortly is how she relates to the ban her mother establishes on reading, which also reflects an aspect of her selfhood-identity.

The Bowen child’s sense of self is based on the observations she makes of her surroundings and of the stories she is told. Class and religion are the most central elements that relate to the different places in the city. For the Bowen child’s sense of self, class, religion and place constitute the bases from which she understands herself and her world — a sense that is based on myths and illusions at the outset.

### 3.8.2 Temporal movement

The movement in space is also connected to a movement in time — the seven winters described. Additionally, we are introduced to a movement in time that involves the past — the history and tradition of the Bowen family — and the present time of the adult narrator. The chronology of the Bowen child's experiences is occasionally interrupted by the present time experiences of the adult narrator.

### 3.8.3 Corporeal activity

Movement through the city involves a corporeal activity for the Bowen child, which also allows for the writer to map out the city with the movement. As has been discussed in Chapter 2, Elizabeth Grosz argues for a close connection between corporeality and subjectivity. In *Space, Time and Perversion* Grosz claims that “[c]orporeality can be seen as the material condition of subjectivity” (103). However, little focus is given to the actual description of the Bowen child's corporeal relation to the world in *Seven Winters*. The movement through the city is not in itself described by the adult narrator as a corporeal encounter; instead, the main focus is on visual observations of the city. Additionally, there is a certain focus on the lack of other people in the streets of Dublin, and, as we shall see, in the Ballsbridge buildings. This is contrasted with the Bowen child's social life, in which she attends dance classes and goes to parties with other children. Their walks to St. Stephen's Green and Sunday attendance at St. Stephen's Church also contrast with the lack of people characteristic of other sections in *Seven Winters*.

#### “Dancing in Daylight”

“Dancing in Daylight” and “Society” represent the social world where the Bowen child relates to other children. These two sections also present two corporeal situations that combine dread and elation. The “Dancing in Daylight” section describes how the dancing mistress, Miss Thieler, makes the “duffers” who cannot waltz “go round the

floor in a single file” (*SW* 36).<sup>6</sup> The Bowen child experiences a strong corporeal unease at the exposure of her inability to waltz that is only alleviated when she is finally released from the line of duffers because “a spring released itself in my inside. My feet and body released themselves, without warning, from inside the noose of my consciousness” (*SW* 36). This passage depicts how consciousness loses control over the body, thus letting the Bowen child loose, enabling her to move freely without being controlled by the anguish of the mind. Corporeal unease is transformed into corporeal elation. These contrasting feelings suggest different self-perceptions for the Bowen child. Lining up with the duffers the child experiences “[a] feeling of doom and inability” that is “drawn tight like a wire noose round my brain” (*SW* 36), depicting a self-consciousness that is suffocating. Additionally, this passage reflects a resistance against being identified as one of “the duffers”, where the sameness implied in this identification exposes her inabilities.

In contrast to the suffocating prison of the mind stands the corporeal freedom the Bowen child experiences when her body is set free in the dance: “Like a butterfly free of the chrysalis, like a soul soaring out of the body, I burst from the file of duffers and went spinning smoothly, liquidly round the floor by myself. I waltzed” (*SW* 36). Corporeal liberation is equated with the liberation of the soul from the body, thus even when she exerts herself physically, the line between body and soul is drawn and put forward. The corporeal ease characterizes a sense of self that contrasts with that of the controlling power of the mind, indicating two different understandings of identity that are both present in the Bowen child’s self-perception. Her waltz symbolically expresses how selfhood-identity presents itself as something other than sameness-identity, at the same time, however, we find that these identities are both present in the Bowen child, but a conflict between the two is also suggested.

### “Society”

Another corporeal description that characterizes the Bowen child’s perception of self is found in the section entitled “Society”, where she experiences her “first really disconcerting sight” of herself (*SW* 41). This incident combines the sensuous experience

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6. Bowen’s short story “The Dancing-Mistress” explores the sadistic power of the dancing-mistress who uses her position to terrorise one of the children.

of eating her first strawberry ice and the desire to observe herself whilst doing so, standing in front of “a full-length mirror, in order to give the moment double effect” (SW 41). What she sees, however, does not correspond with her image of herself:

But the mouthful of ice froze to my palate as I saw how right my mother had been—my dress, the dress I had insisted on wearing did *not* become me. [...] Above the ornate white satin collar I saw my face harsh and brick-pink, my top-knot an iron whorl. The dress had done to my being what the ice was doing to my inside.... For years I would not eat an ice again. (SW 41-42)

She no longer expresses the self-satisfied perception often taken by children, instead she sees herself as her mother sees her. This outward perception is disconcerting because it shatters and transforms her image of self. The incident suggests, however, how the gaze of the other gradually becomes part of the child’s understanding of herself, and that this involves an image of herself that is not always pleasant. The passage is also interesting from a narratological perspective because it shows a movement from the Bowen child’s immersion in how it felt at the time, to comment on the effect the experience had on the adult narrator’s later life.

#### Corporeality and the city

The two situations presented above are explicit corporeal experiences of the Bowen child that relate to her perception of self. The corporeal experiences of moving through the city are not made equally explicit for the reader; most often corporeality relates to how the Bowen child perceives different places, and her perceptions are qualified by observations of the slowness of movement or the magnitude that the areas or buildings take in the Bowen child’s imagination. Her movement up the grandstands of the Ballsbridge buildings represents one of these corporeal endeavours that relates to her feeling of self. This will be discussed in depth shortly. Movement is in itself physical, in that it involves a body that moves through a landscape. Bowen describes a child who is dressed in such a way by her governess, Miss Wallis, that it is difficult for her to turn her head (SW 16). This suggests an imprisonment of the body that stultifies her ability to move, suggesting a child whose vision is primarily forward looking, or a body that is constantly moving sideways to be able to observe her surroundings. The freedom of moving through the

streets is thus prevented by a prison of clothing, suggesting that the Bowen child's exertions primarily take place in her imagination; this underscores how the Bowen child's imaginary powers are developed, establishing an important link between child and adult writer, since the power of the imagination is essential for the work of the writer.

### 3.9 Reading space — the spy

The figure of the spy represents the perceptual mode of the Bowen child as focalizer when she walks in the city, where she takes on and acts out the role of the spy. The walks symbolise the Bowen child's process of coming to consciousness. The act of spying is a forbidden activity. In *Seven Winters* reading and seeing are connected as forbidden activities in the role of the spy.

The Bowen child's eagerness to know more about the world is also frustrated because she is unable to find an answer to all her questions. This frustration relates to the prohibition against reading enacted by her mother.

Until I was seven—which year saw, virtually the close of my life in Dublin—I was not allowed to learn to read: my mother believed that reading would tire my eyes and brain. Actually, frustrations tired me more. I was only allowed picture-books. The pictures in these began to distend themselves, like those on the walls of my nursery and round the dado, till they took on a momentous importance: they were my only clues to a mystery. And, on my walks through familiar quarters of Dublin I looked at everything like a spy.  
(SW 19)

Attempts to solve the mystery transform the Bowen child into a spy who learns to detect what is under the surface. This parallels what the adult writer does. Being a spy involves developing a perceptual understanding of space, where she learns to interpret her surroundings. To act as a spy also involves unveiling the hidden, revealing secrets, thus the concept also incorporates negative connotations. Moving through the city as a spy thus results in an understanding of the world and of people that could also represent a point of departure for a writer.

Not being allowed to read is presented as an impediment for the Bowen child, which results in an enhanced eagerness to know more and to find other outlets for her

frustrations in which she can seek answers to her questions. The power of the spy is to discover secrets, and to take the position of the observer, as someone who is not directly involved in the action. At the same time the spy is a concealed observer, the spy does not want to be revealed. The Bowen child's role as a spy has developed as a consequence of being forbidden to read and her desire to know more. Thus through the role of the spy, she creates a world of her own by making the city into a text, which defies the ban imposed by her mother. Spying could also be seen as a way to decide who she is and where she belongs. The ability to read is connected to identity, to being someone, and for the adult narrator this is extended to the act of writing. Not being able to read can be understood as an expression of non-identity, thus the Bowen child's reading of the city becomes a quest for identity.

### **3.10 The absent parent**

The centrality of books and the notion of what reading can do for the child are directly connected to her mother as the one who does not allow her to read. The Bowen child's reaction to the ban on reading displays a lack and a desire in the Bowen child that also encompasses the person who has forbidden her to read — her mother. The Bowen child's relationship to her mother will be further elaborated on in the following discussion of the absent parent. The walks the Bowen child and her governess take become an attempt to alleviate a longing to read, to understand texts.

#### **3.10.1 The city as text**

The city is a text that is read by the Bowen child; this shows how she transforms her mother's ban. The city becomes a replacement for the text she is not allowed to read, where she uses her creativity to invent answers to her questions. Additionally, we can argue that the city as text alleviates an implicit longing for her mother, and represents a sphere for her imagination that contrasts with the confinement her rests and the ban on reading represent. The city thus constitutes an opportunity to create an alternative to her emotional and cognitive vacuum.

### 3.10.2 “Private kingdoms”

As described earlier, the section “Herbert Place” presents the background and history of her parents, concluding that they lived in “a world of their own [...] Inside this world they each ruled their private kingdoms of thought, and inside it I, their first child, began to set up my own” (SW 11). The image of private kingdoms alludes to closed spaces where the individual is in supreme control and alone; additionally, private kingdoms indicate no communication, and an attention to selfhood rather than sameness. The private kingdom could also serve to characterize the childhood illusion of centrality and the belief that she is part of the majority group. We will soon discuss the section “Horse Show” where the Bowen child sees herself as “monarch of everything” (SW 24), an image that, paradoxically, also relates to the idea of private kingdoms.

The Bowen child’s father is seldom mentioned in the everyday life of the child, and the privateness of his kingdom is underscored in the final reference to him on the last page of *Seven Winters*: “When I was seven years old, Herbert Place was given up: my father’s mental illness had to be fought alone; my mother and I were ordered to England” (SW 48). No other mention of her father’s illness has been previously given, this is one of the details the adult narrator chooses to mention only in passing. It is, however, a detail the reader wants to know more about, because it has clear implications for the Bowen child’s life. The effect of this development is the termination of her Dublin childhood, and this further isolates her from her father. Her father’s apartness underscores the fact that mother and child are left alone to fend for themselves. Additionally, we are presented with what seems to be a forced or unwelcome move away from Ireland. The father in *Seven Winters* parallels the absent fathers and men in Bowen’s work generally.

### 3.10.3 The mother

The section “Stephen’s Green” presents the most elaborate description of her mother, and also explains the function of the governess. Her mother is introduced as someone whose “most intense moments of her existence all through her life had been solitary”, and who “often moved some way away from things and people she loved, as though to convince herself that they did exist” (SW 27). This passage presents a parent whose fear of losing is expressed in a fear of continuous commitment. The parental role of scolding the child

is given to the governess because this “would have been, as she [her mother] saw it, a peril to everything”, and the narrator continues: “So, to interpose between my mother and me, to prevent our spending the best part of our days together, was the curious function of every governess” (SW 27). Thus the Bowen child spends most of her days with her governess, sometimes followed by her mother who comes looking for them in Stephen’s Green. No direct criticism is offered by the adult narrator of her mother, but the word “curious” does, however, impart a critical narratorial reflection on the role of the governess as someone intended to keep mother and child apart. This separation was instigated by the mother, thus the text describes the mother in a way that underscores parental absence. Paul John Eakin argues in *How Our Lives Become Stories*, that “one of the most striking varieties of the relational life concerns the parent who is—literally or figuratively—absent” (87-88). The parents’ absence in *Seven Winters* does not only relate to physical absence, but also to mental absence, as expressed in the statement that her parents live “in a world of their own”. Even though the adult narrator describes her own world in connection to her parents’ lives, a sense of parallel lives is imparted in the narrative, indicating that the Bowen child also creates a life of her own. Additionally, she has to depend on her mother to come to her, she cannot seek out her mother. We are not presented with a dysfunctional family, but a typical traditional family where caring for the child is left to the governess. This situation imparts a sense of sadness for the lonely child in her private kingdom.

### **3.11 Fear**

Barbara Brothers discusses the importance of the Irish landscape in Bowen’s work, where, for example, in *Seven Winters* “[a]s a child, the pattern of her life, as directly perceived, was the well-ordered, structured one of her family, but like the landscape surrounding the big houses, the landscape of Dublin just beyond her purview, which fleetingly touched her senses, reflected the forces of unreason, instability and neglect” (133). This observation suggests that the unknown, or that which cannot be seen but only imagined, serves to destabilize the child’s life. The physical movement in Dublin contrasts the familiar places with the unfamiliar places of the city:



It seems likely that we never walked on the quays—certain districts of Dublin being ruled out as “noisy”—and that we did not venture to cross the Liffey. So the North Side remained *terra incognita*. Yes, I do see the Four Courts, to which my father went every morning, and from which his black brief bag with the thick red cord made its mysterious journeys home. Otherwise, painted with that one dome, the rest of the North Side was so much canvas on which had been contrived clouds and perspectives—smoke-and-slate grey, brick-brown and distance-blue. This canvas was pierced and entered only by the lordly perspective of Sackville Street. And, till I went one day to a party in Mountjoy Square, I took it that Sackville Street had something queer at the end. (SW 17)

A sense of the uncanny, of strangeness and mystery, is associated with the areas of Dublin she does not go to. The uncanny is not only related to the unfamiliar areas outside Herbert Place, but is also integral to the Bowen child’s perceptions of the pictures on the nursery walls. The pictures provoke a fear in her that parallels the fear of the unfamiliar areas of Dublin. The nursery is a room “planned [by her mother] to induce peace” (SW 13), but instead she feels anxiety:

On the blue-grey walls hung pictures, and two of these pictures I do remember sharply—they were openings into a second, more threatening reality. The first [...] was Casabianca standing against the flames. The boy stood in ecstasy on the burning deck. In the other, a baby in a wooden cradle floated smilingly on an immense flood, stretching out its two hands to a guardian cat that sat upright on the quilt at the cradle’s foot. All round, from the lonely expanse of water rose only the tips of gables, chimneys and trees. The composure of the cat and the baby had been meant, I suppose, to rule all disaster out of the scene. But for me there was constant anxiety—what would become of the cradle in a world in which everyone else was drowned? In fact, these two pictures induced in me a secret suspended fear of disasters — fires and floods. (SW 12-13)

Instead of inducing peace, the pictures represent fear of what might happen and a fear of loss and death. Her imagination creates an unsafe world in which the Bowen child must define a place for herself, and this world can only be understood in conjunction with her mother. Her mother’s absence results in her lack of understanding of the child.

The most important setting of *Seven Winters* is the outside. However, the outside, and the inside, are both integral elements of the experience and perception the Bowen child has of the city and of her self. This places Roy Foster’s statement that “[o]utside is

irrelevant: probably because it is (or will be) threatening” (*Irish Story* 156) in a rather strange light. This statement does not correspond with the Bowen child’s perceptions of the city; the outside is highly relevant, and some areas are threatening. Additionally, we have seen that the Bowen child experiences the pictures inside in her nursery as even more threatening than the unfamiliar areas of Dublin.

### 3.12 Coming to consciousness

A process of maturing takes place in *Seven Winters* that develops parallel with the Bowen child’s movements and mappings of the city. This process can be understood as her gradual understanding of selfhood-identity that runs parallel with the presentation of sameness-identity in the text, thus changing her initial perception of self as merely sameness-identity to an identity that integrates both aspects of the dialectic. However, more attention is given in the text to the Bowen child’s development of selfhood-identity.

An external and internal mapping happens simultaneously in the Bowen child, where the text describes this as the Bowen child’s “coming to consciousness”, a process which, according to the adult narrator, had been delayed by a nurse who “put ‘stuff’ in my milk to keep me quiet” (*SW* 15):

Perhaps that resourceful nurse unnaturally widened for me the infant sleep-zone: if so, she was less unkind than my mother believed. I may owe to her the slowness of my coming to consciousness—that consciousness that stores up intelligent memories. I seem to have fewer *early* memories than anybody with whom I have ever talked, so I must have stayed much later than other children inside the womb of a half-sleep. Like my bodily birth, the birth of my mind came late. (*SW* 15-16)

The quotation describes how her coming to consciousness is prevented by “that resourceful nurse”. This passage serves to exemplify the distance of the narrator; no direct criticism is seemingly expressed in the text, either in relation to the nurse, or in relation to her mother. At the same time we see that the use of words like “unnaturally” and “slowness” are contrasted with “intelligent memories” and “birth of mind”, providing an ambivalent edge to the distanced narrative voice which implicitly expresses a sarcastic criticism. At the same time, the adult narrator gives credit to the nurse for

delaying the Bowen child's exposure to the world, thus indicating that what she will discover when she is no longer in "the infant sleep-zone" is negative. This can be understood as an implicit criticism of civilization, but the passage could also be perceived as a criticism of her mother who did not discover earlier what the nurse was doing.

With the introduction of her first governess, Miss Wallis, a fundamental change takes place for the Bowen child at the age of four: "Her coming tore across some veil and first made me realise that I was *I*" (SW 16); this marks the transition for the child from an existence that does not distinguish self from other(s), to an awareness of individuality, thus giving prominence to selfhood-identity.

### **3.13 "Monarch of everything"**

Walks with her second governess, Miss Baird, became longer, and the area of walking was expanded and, additionally: "I began to perceive, in her company, that Ireland was *not* the norm, the usual thing" (SW 23). This suggests another stage in the child's coming to consciousness, where the child's egotistical understanding of 'here' as the centre of everywhere is challenged. The entry of other people and their perceptions intrude on the Bowen child's original perception of the world and on her understanding of who she is in this world. Thus the process of the development of self as something that happens in relation with others is depicted, but this also involves tearing down the child's illusion of being the centre of the world and combining this understanding with the others' influences and perceptions.

The section "Horse Show" introduces us to her visits to the Ballsbridge buildings, where the Horse Show takes place, but when she and her governess go there the buildings are empty.

As the child of a member of the Royal Dublin Society I had permission to enter the Show buildings, penetrate glass-topped halls and ironbound passages and scale the empty grandstands above the oval of green. More interesting than a mountainside from being artificial, each grandstand gradated into the high-up darkness under its roof. Over all this, that I grew up to call the Horse Show, in these winter months a towering silence reigned. For mornings together we met no one; we heard only the echoes we raised. The void and

the echoes were theatrical: stranger for being exposed to daylight this was the first empty theatre that I saw. Looking down from the top of a grandstand I found the ideal answer to the child's wish to be monarch of everything. Proud and a little giddy I looked down. My governess remained glued to the bottom, watching phantom horses go round and round.  
(SW 23-24)

The Bowen child and her governess enter the Horse Show buildings at a time when no one else visits them. The buildings constitute a setting for the Bowen child's imagination, and since there are no horses there she instead imagines them, creating phantom horses she envisages her governess watching. Her governess is "glued to the bottom", while the Bowen child climbs the grandstand on her own. The statement "[m]ore interesting than a mountainside from being artificial" invites comments because it suggests an experience that is unique for the Bowen child, at the same time that it tells us something about how children in general see the world. The transformation of the familiar into something adventurous reflects an activity undertaken by most children. What makes the statement unique for the Bowen child is that it refers to the landscape she considers to be her own — the city — where the passage suggests a preference of the city before nature. The climbing can be perceived as a physical challenge for the Bowen child that underscores the child's physical power and control; additionally, the climbing expresses an image of maturing, of coming to consciousness, but here it seems to be understood as the reverse, as an indication of the child's original position of 'power' or self-centring.

As mentioned earlier, ambivalence is central to *Seven Winters*, which is clearly shown in this section where the Bowen child describes herself as "monarch of everything". This seems to be a positive image for the Bowen child, but a closer look reveals that it is only true in contrast to everything the Bowen child does not have access to. Standing alone at the top of the grandstand as a monarch of everything is a strong image of the lonely child surrounded by emptiness.<sup>7</sup>

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7. It is possible that the statement "monarch of everything" can be perceived as a half-echo of William Cowper's poem "Verses, supposed to be written by Alexander Selkirk during his solitary abode in the Island of Juan Fernandez" which starts with the following line: "I am monarch of all I survey" (75). The poem is spoken by Alexander Selkirk, the model for Robinson Crusoe, alone on his island, and this ties in nicely with the sense of isolation presented by Bowen in *Seven Winters*.

We find that the Bowen child describes many things that are not available to her, and that her parents' refusal to contribute to a continuation of tradition also prevents her from participating in activities that her class is traditionally involved in; this refusal also suggests her parents' rejection of sameness-identity with their class, a rejection that potentially also includes their child.

Our rule of County Cork summers—in which months, as I have said, Dublin seemed to be rolled up and put away—made the real August feast of Horse Show less than nothing to me. My father (out of some lingering opposition to *his* father, who was a hard rider) was bored by horses; my mother really disliked them. If our County Cork neighbours journeyed up for the Horse Show, it was not of it that we spoke when they came back. We were, I suppose, in Dublin during the Spring Show, but my father and mother ignored that. So, until I was grown up, the acres of Ballsbridge buildings seemed to dedicate emptiness to a sounding name. (SW 24)

Being a monarch of everything is thus negated by emptiness and silence; consequently, the Bowen child could be said to be the monarch of nothingness.

### 3.13.1 Converging past and present

The iterative narrative of the walks to the Show buildings serves as an introduction to a singular event which holds more than the moment experienced in childhood:

Hearing a clock strike, one morning, with more meaning than usual, I stopped half-way up a grandstand to realize that time held war. The hour was more than my hour; within it people were fighting; the fur and the paper people grimaced with hate at each other and let off guns. This was happening — happening as surely as I raised my right foot to put it on a new tier. This was my first vision — I mean, the first moment in which I conceived of reality as being elsewhere than in me. . . . Twelve having struck, my governess looked round. It was time for me (again) to go home and rest. (SW 25)

The past and the present converge in the text in the grandstands of the Ballsbridge buildings. The Bowen child's thoughts about the Russo-Japanese war and the adult narrator's presence in the Second World War come together in a realization that "time held war". Gill Plain comments that "[t]his moment encapsulates the loss of innocence

and the awareness of the social that marks the end of the Oedipal phase” (175), and Heather Bryant Jordan remarks that “[w]ar, loss, and destruction were familiar presences throughout Elizabeth Bowen’s life from her birth in 1899 until her death in 1973. When she visited the Ballsbridge racetrack [sic] grandstands of the Royal Dublin Society as a young child, she made a Proustian association between that place and her first awareness of war” (1). The Bowen child’s understanding of the Russo-Japanese war is presented through images the Bowen child has of the Russians and the Japanese. The Russians, in particular, are presented by the use of fairy tale images: “I knew of Russians as fur-clad people who drove in sledges pursued by wolves” (SW 24). Continuing in the imagery of fairy tales, the Bowen child, like Cinderella, has to leave the ball when the clock strikes twelve. This indicates that the child is not in control of her life; she has to leave the world of imagination to comply with the demands of the adult world.

Together with “most of England and Anglo-Ireland” the child is “pro-Japanese”, and this position is underscored by the adult narrator: “How sure it was, in those days, that still unnamed propaganda of prettiness!” (SW 25), referring to the positive image of Japanese culture in the recollection of Japanese artefacts and decoration. The adult narrator’s statement could, however, also be taken as a comment on the power of propaganda in wartime. Thus the passage encompasses not only the Bowen child’s perception of this particular war, but it also encapsulates the importance of propaganda in the Second World War, thus involving the adult narrator’s present situation in the narrative of the Bowen child. The merging of experiences in this passage makes the Second World War a focalized object that is subtly incorporated in the narrative of childhood.

### 3.13.2 Corporeal stasis

The singulative narrative is broken off by the return to the repetition of a daily routine. The “Horse Show” section ends in a description of the restlessness the Bowen child experiences when forced to stay in her room and do nothing.

My rests—[...] were my high points of restlessness. In these I most felt the vacuum, the hunger-pain, set up in me from not being able to read. [...] My eyes went gimletting through the unnatural dusk, into the pictures, into the nursery rhyme groups round the

dado, trying to force action on what I saw. The trams on the bridges loudened. Even in our quiet quarter the city-sounds of Dublin, at this hour, rose to a climax—a climax from which I was withheld. (SW 25)

The rests force the Bowen child into a state of corporeal stasis, this is strongly illustrated in a feeling of “vacuum” and “hunger-pain” resulting from the ban on reading.

“Vacuum” can be seen as an expression of emptiness within her, as an indication of a no-place, and also as a reflection of being left outside the world as nobody. Hunger-pain describes the urge, desire and craving the Bowen child feels for what she is not allowed to do. Her mother’s ban on reading accentuates an urge or a desire in the Bowen child to do the forbidden. As we have seen, spying becomes a way of ‘reading’ the city. The city as an auditory landscape is illustrated in her attempted imaginary escape from the room by the intervention of the life and the sounds of the city. Her senses are alert and activated to her surroundings, she tries to make things happen, and in so doing she uses her hearing. The sounds of the outside enter the nursery as reminders of the things she are not part of when she has to rest. A desire for freedom is expressed in the Bowen child’s longing away from the rests. The Bowen child uses her imagination to create images inspired by her walks in the city.

The physical movement through the city contrasts with the corporeal stasis that characterizes the Bowen child’s everyday rests. These two corporeal situations do employ different sensual modes that relate to different kinds of understanding. Moving through the city, the Bowen child takes on the perceptual role of the spy, incorporating the gaze in her imaginary endeavour. In contrast, the Bowen child uses hearing in the nursery in an attempt to reach out to the outside world, trying to be part of the outside action. The sounds intervene on her rests, but stasis remains. Her mother’s well-intended poor judgement arouses an anxiety in the Bowen child for what might happen when the child does not participate in the action. The Bowen child’s creative solution to her mother’s poor judgement is to activate her imagination.

Earlier in the “Horse Show” section, sound illustrated this same point. When the Bowen child enters the Show buildings the absence of other people and the silence are emphasized in the use of imagery related to sound: “For mornings together we met no one; we heard only the echoes we raised” (SW 24). This quotation also indicates an

attentiveness to her surroundings, which in writing is presented in the use of seeing and hearing as the most prominent senses of the child's process of observation. As in the previous quotation, we find that the Bowen child uses her surroundings to create stories. We find another example of the use of the sounds of the city in the section called "Stephen's Green":

The trams running round us, outside the trees and railings, according to weather sounded distant or near. The throbbing tune of a barrel-organ underran the hum and rumble of traffic: for minutes together a tune took command of the City. Everyone seemed to listen; it seemed to suspend the world. (SW 26)

The Bowen child listens to the sound of the city and observes that the sound reaches a climax which she is not part of. When she is in Stephen's Green, on the other hand, she is part of the musicality of the city; she too stops to listen. The tune that commands the city and the people also brings the world to a halt, making the musicality of the city more important than what happens in the rest of the world. This indicates a togetherness with the city that exists when she moves through it, when she is part of the city-space. It also suggests an ideal situation that parallels her "infant sleep-zone"; when everyone is absorbed in this tune, the external matters of the world do not matter, thus the tune represents a zone of comfort.

### **3.14 "Brass Plates"**

The section entitled "Brass Plates" presents us with another area of Dublin: "Between the middle of Dublin and Herbert Place lies a tract of Georgian streets and squares" (SW 29). The transition from one epoch to another is highlighted in this section; walking and observing constitute the main means by which this transition is presented. The area is depicted as follows:

The perspectives of this quarter of Dublin are to any eye, at any time, very long. In those first winters they were endless to me. The tense distances that one only slowly demolished gave a feeling of undertaking to any walk. Everything in this quarter seemed outsize. (SW 29)



As we have seen in Chapter 2, there is a nuance in the adult narrator's perception and the child's perception of the quarter that is captured in the term focalization; what an adult perceives as long, but can see the end of, seems to last forever for the child. This also suggests the different time perspectives of the adult and the child. The child's perception of endlessness is, furthermore, underscored by the slowness attributed to the walk. It is a walk that involves a physical effort for the child. Walking the streets is combined with a threat of destruction in the use of the word "demolished" to describe the slow process of moving up the streets. "Demolished" does not only depict the Bowen child's perception of walking, it also indicates that gradual changes are taking place, thus characterizing an activity that is slow and cumbersome.

The buildings are personified in the text, and the narrator presents how the Bowen child is influenced by this:

[...], the complexion of these façades humanly altered from day to day. The neighbourhood seemed infused with a temper or temperament of its own, and my spirits, on morning or afternoon walks, corresponded with this in their rise and fall . . . (SW 30)

The Bowen child identifies with the houses in the way she is affected by the temper she senses while she is in this area. The personification of the houses represents an opportunity for the adult narrator to voice emotions related to the historical changes taking place, changes that are symbolised by the houses.

But as often I felt a malign temper at work. Stories of gloom would add themselves to the houses, till these shut out the sky. The streets taunted and the distances frowned. Walking down Upper Mount Street or Lower Baggot Street I at once had the feeling of being in the wrong, and Leeson Street became a definite threat. Any human movement about the pavements showed signs of infection by nervous moodiness. But there never was much movement: though I took this for granted (as being the rule of cities) I saw too few people in view of the height and space. The tyrannical grandness of this quarter seemed to exist for itself alone. Perhaps a child smells history without knowing it — I did not *know* I looked at the tomb of fashion. (SW 30)

Walking the streets gives the Bowen child a feeling of being in the wrong; this can be seen as an expression of guilt and of doing something forbidden. The quotation also

presents the role of the spy as someone who secretly observes her surroundings and uncovers hidden things, but as a child she is unaware of what she has observed, it is the adult narrator who concludes in hindsight what the Bowen child saw.

'Emptiness' also described the Ballsbridge buildings. A parallel reflection is found in the lack of human movement that characterizes the area; additionally, human movement is presented as "signs of infection by nervous moodiness", thus presence of humans in these streets is associated with illness, implying death and destruction. The absence of human movement is presented as the rule for the Bowen child, and once again Dublin is taken as the norm for all cities, thus inviting a perception of the city as emptied of people, paralleling the city of Kôr in "Mysterious Kôr". The focus on place echoes the adult narrator's statement at the beginning of *Seven Winters*: "I find myself writing now of visual rather than social memories. On the whole, it is things and places rather than people that detach themselves from the stuff of my dream" (SW 11). This provides the narrative with a strong focus on space and place, indicating the choice made by the writer about what she wants to tell about her childhood, which relates to the autobiographical contract between reader and writer. The lack of people parallels the absence of her parents from her everyday life, underscoring the point that emptiness and loneliness characterize the Bowen child in the city.

The decline of the Anglo-Irish class is shown in the personification of the houses, and following the decline of this class, the professionals take over the area, and this is illustrated in a reflection made by the adult narrator in hindsight: "I know now it did mark the end of an epoch when the first brass plates appeared in Merrion Square" (SW 30). The professionals introduce brass plates to the area; they symbolise the change that has taken place. The significance of the brass plates is, for the Bowen child, related to reading: "The fact that I could not read made these plates with writing still more significant" (SW 32). In the "Horse Show" section we also saw how the prohibition against reading was felt as a "hunger-pain" for the Bowen child; in "Brass Plates" the longing to be able to read is expressed in the presence of the brass plates. The brass plates also represent the childhood illusion of inhabiting the centre where identity is created through naming. This is exemplified in the way she relates to the brass plate on her own front door:

At the top of the Herbert Place front steps, waiting for the front door to be opened (for my governess never carried a latchkey) I would trace with my finger my father's name. This was not an act of filial piety only; it gave him an objective reality, which I shared. (SW 32)

Since she cannot read, she instead *feels* the name of her father with her finger, as if she were blind, and through this tactile act she attempts to inscribe her father and herself in "an objective reality" which is also an expression of the opposite of no-place. The tactile reading of the brass plates indicates a different process of coming to writing where the imagination is not the prominent source, but where tactility takes precedence and connects reading and writing as central for the Bowen child's perception of the world.

By presenting the brass plates as symbols of identity and at the same time by placing herself in the group of people who have brass plates on their doors, the narrator attempts to counteract her condition at the beginning of the text, where no-place and nowhere define the individual. Naming and writing are connected in the Bowen child's feeling of identity, as a sort of rescue. The sameness-identity expressed here differs from the initial description of sameness-identity which was founded on a childhood illusion of how belonging to the Anglo-Irish class was perceived by the Bowen child. Her identification with the brass plates reflects a development with respect to sameness-identity that suggests a more realistic perception of the world, that also accepts the decline of the social class she is part of. Thus this identification corresponds with the development that has taken place concerning selfhood-identity where this identity gradually includes an understanding that also incorporates unpleasant aspects about herself.

Writing one's name on the brass plate involves claiming a place in reality, while not doing so signifies a lack of existence: "Failure to write one's name on one's door seemed to me the admission of nonentity" (SW 32). Acceptance of being a nonentity also involves an acceptance of anonymity.

I remember my first view of London—street after street of triste anonymity. So no one cares who lives in London, I thought. No wonder London is so large; all the nonentities settle here. Dublin has chosen to be smaller than London because she is grander and more exclusive. All the important people live in Dublin, near me. (SW 32)

The observation that nonentities live in London is connected to the lack of names on the doors. This observation can serve as yet another approach to understanding the concept of no-place. The Bowen child's preoccupation with the brass plates characterizes the childhood illusion where naming places the child in the centre; eventually this illusion disintegrates and the Bowen child is left with no-place to define who she is. The two cities are juxtaposed in the quotation, and Dublin is presented as the centre of the Bowen child's life where all the people who are important in her life live. However, this perception of place is ambivalent since we also know that the house in Dublin has been presented as no-place. The movement to London adds yet another understanding of no-place in the text: that of the exiled subject. London is also the city where the writer writes *Seven Winters*;<sup>8</sup> Bowen thus implicitly links herself to the nonentities who live in London.

The Bowen child is portrayed as the only one who perceives “the climatic moodiness of South Dublin” (SW 31) — stability is, in contrast, depicted as the ‘normal’ perception of the area. Stability is also what the Bowen child wants when identifying herself with the brass plates and with the possibilities these represent for her to identify herself with an objective reality. But the idea of stability is undermined by the way the Bowen child voices the temper and moodiness of the area. The adult narrator presents the Bowen child as someone who sees through the veneer and detects a sense of ‘false’ stability. These are, however, reflections made in hindsight, thus the adult narrator's reflections of the past are attributed to the Bowen child's perception of the city and of who she was.

### **3.15 The childhood illusion**

The consequence of the Bowen child's coming to consciousness is the disintegration of her childhood illusions; eventually the adult narrator portrays a child who comes to understand that she is part of the minority and not the majority.

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8. We do not learn from *Seven Winters* that Bowen lived in London while writing this book (and *Bowen's Court*), this is information we get from extratextual sources (see, for example, Victoria Glendinning's discussion of Bowen's wartime activities in her chapter “After Noon”, or Hermione Lee's discussion in *Elizabeth Bowen* of Bowen's war years in her chapter “An Awful Illumination”).

It was not until after the end of those seven winters that I understood that we Protestants were a minority, and that the unquestioned rules of our being came, in fact, from the closeness of a minority world. Roman Catholics were spoken of by my father and mother with a courteous detachment that gave them, even, no myth. [...] They were, simply “the others,” whose world lay alongside ours but never touched. As to the difference between the two religions, I was too discreet to ask questions—if I wanted to know. This appeared to share a delicate, awkward aura with those two other differences—of sex, of class. (SW 44)

This realization takes place after the end of her Dublin period, after the seven winters, and encapsulates a movement from the centre to the margin. This movement also captures how the perception of sameness-identity changes in the text, where selfhood-identity is given more prominence. Gradually a more nuanced understanding of class and religion is presented in the text, which also serves to modify the Bowen child’s selfhood-identity. As a framework for the text, the initial introduction of no-place incorporates the concluding reflections of the Bowen child’s coming to consciousness.

### 3.16 The end?

The end of Herbert Place marks the end of the narrative and of the Bowen child’s first seven winters. But the narrator remarks: “How shall I write ‘*The End*’ to a book which is about the essence of a beginning?” (SW 48), thus indicating the connection between childhood experiences and the life led by the writer, a life that is not included in the narrative. In the foreword to the 1962 republication of *Seven Winters & Afterthoughts*, Elizabeth Bowen comments on the relation between writer and what is written: “*The happenings in Seven Winters are those that I shall remain certain of till I die. Here is the external world as I first saw it. As a marvel it was at the time sufficient. Something of the marvel, however, something of the amazement, recurs when I write or read*” (vii-viii).<sup>9</sup> The narrator attempts to do away with the transformation of memory involved in the passing of time, creating an illusion. The illusion presents a perceptual mode that includes the Bowen child and the adult narrator at the same time, instead of focusing on the temporal activity involved in remembering childhood. Bowen’s evaluation of her

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9. Italicized in the original text.

childhood “as a marvel” involves a reflection on what she has written, that does not fully encompass how the text can be read and understood. The passage also illustrates the importance of re-experiencing childhood sensations as a writer. The adult sensations of marvel and amazement are connected to writing and reading; the Bowen child’s experiences of marvel and amazement were connected to an entirely different text, that of her reading of the city.

The return to Herbert Place in the last section underscores a movement from inside to outside and back inside again, which gives a circular movement to the narrative and focuses on the two important spheres of the Bowen child: the home and the city. Comfort and fear describe the feelings of the Bowen child with respect to both areas. The comfort of returning home in the end of the text is abruptly broken by the information that “Herbert Place was given up” (SW 48) when she was seven. Thus the end of the text marks the point when the Bowen child moves on to a new stage of her life, but at the same time this passage also imparts an impression of someone who does not settle down, who has the possibility to explore something new. The narrator remarks: “I have halted (not stopped) in the drawing-room” (SW 48). The Bowen child has no choice but to move on, she cannot choose to stay, just as she has not chosen the routes to walk in the city. The end of the text, however, marks the restlessness of the adult narrator as someone who is still searching, and who moves on to the next place. Imagination is the power that counteracts no-place and nonentity in *Seven Winters*, the Bowen child uses her imagination to transform situations in life that seem meaningless. The imaginary development of the Bowen child parallels the child’s process of coming to consciousness, which is reflected in the way her selfhood-identity is given a central place in the text. As we shall see in the chapters following, the adult writer’s imaginative starting point is an exploration of the meaningless through different expressions of emptiness and nothingness, where the characters’ perceptions of self are challenged and where identity is undermined.

*Seven Winters* has presented us with the perspective of the Bowen child, where a development from understanding herself as part of a social class to perceiving herself as an individual is presented. However, the narrative also presents us with the complementary perspective of the adult narrator. That the perspective of the adult

narrator is important is, as we have seen, underscored in the very first sentence of *Seven Winters*: “The first three weeks of my life were weeks of June — the only June I spent in Dublin until the summer when I was twenty-one” (465). That *Seven Winters* uses a double perspective can be seen even more clearly if we compare the beginning of *Seven Winters* with the beginning of James Joyce’s *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*: “Once upon a time and a very good time it was there was a moocow coming down along the road and this moocow that was coming down along the road met a nicens little boy named baby tuckoo . . . .”(7). Joyce’s text introduces us directly to the child’s perspective and experience of being told a story, while the beginning of *Seven Winters* introduces a reflection of what happened in the past, in her childhood, as remembered by the adult narrator.

The initial understanding of identity given in *Seven Winters* highlights sameness-identity as the Bowen child’s primary understanding of self; however, a gradual change is described where the development of selfhood-identity is forefronted; at the same time, however, we find that the gradual change that takes place for sameness-identity contributes to a modification of selfhood-identity. Standing on the grandstands, she is at the top of the world experiencing a hubris and control only possible for a child; at the same time the text conveys her loneliness and a presentation of no-place that both undermine the sense of happiness. No-place and place are interwoven in the construction of place in the text, and it is from this ambiguous place that the Bowen child creates her imaginary world. The child in *Seven Winters* uses her creativity to fill a vacuum. By using her imagination she fills the no-place with images of life; she defines herself as somebody, thus attempting to counteract the implications involved in being a nonentity. We also learn that in her first encounter with London she perceives the city to be filled with nonentities. However, the text does not reflect who she is while she is in London: has she become one of the nonentities? And is this the position from which the adult author writes? Gradually, she reaches a better understanding of self and the world; additionally, she develops her creative ability. With respect to no-place and nonentity we find that Bowen’s work generally incorporates and expresses the importance of these concepts, an aspect of Bowen’s writing that will be discussed further in the following chapters.

My analysis of *Seven Winters* suggests that it is during the process of growing up that the child develops a sense of him- or herself and establishes, or fails to establish, a distinct selfhood-identity and a sameness-identity. The fact that Bowen chooses to write about this crucial period in her own life, and the way she writes about it – focusing on place and identities – tells us something about her interest in the process of self-formation, and in the things that may go wrong with this process. The following analyses of a selection of Bowen’s fictional texts explore the challenges the characters meet in a time of crisis, and what the consequences are for her characters in light of the solutions they choose.

Escape is central to the way identity is explored in “The Happy Autumn Fields”, and escape into imaginative adventures is also important for the Bowen child in *Seven Winters*. But this imaginary escape is not wholly a happy one, and it leaves the reader with an ambivalent understanding of the possibilities of escape. The ambivalent character of the escape is also central in “The Happy Autumn Fields” and “Mysterious Kôr”, where the desire to get away is juxtaposed with the consequences such an escape potentially involves.



## Chapter 4 “The Happy Autumn Fields”: the dream as a “saving hallucination”?

In autumn, where you live touches the heart – it is the worst time not to be living anywhere. This is the season in which to honour safety.<sup>1</sup>

### 4.1 Introduction

Wartime can represent a time where everything one has believed to be safe and certain is placed in doubt and the individual no longer knows who she is. Additionally, wartime’s transformation and destruction of familiar places challenges people’s spatial perception to the extent that one’s sense of place is potentially lost.

Bowen says in the postscript to the American edition of *The Demon Lover*<sup>2</sup> that “[t]hese are all wartime, none of them *war*, stories. There are no accounts of war action even as I knew it – for instance, air raids” (MT 95). One important characteristic of the twelve stories collected in *The Demon Lover* is the emphasis on feelings. In different ways, feelings are presented as a central feature of the characters’ perceptions of war and self. For some of the characters, feelings represent an outlet from a crowded wartime where there is little place left for the individual. This applies to the initial story, “In the Square”, where a woman lives in a house filled with people she barely knows, and as she observes the crowded London streets, she reflects: ““Yes look. Now the place seems to belong to everyone. One has nothing except one’s feelings. Sometimes I think I hardly

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1. “London, 1940” (MT 23)

2. Published under the title *Ivy Grippled the Steps and Other Stories* in 1946.

know myself” (CS 615). This passage suggests that feelings potentially save her from being invaded by everyone else and from completely losing a sense of self.

A somewhat different perception of feelings is indicative of the main character’s reflections on life in the second story, “Sunday Afternoon”, where a man returns to Ireland on a visit from London during the Second World War. His flat in London has been bombed and he has lost all his possessions. He remarks about the bombings that “as it does not connect with the rest of life, it is difficult, you know, to know what one feels. One’s feelings seem to have no language for anything so preposterous.” (CS 617). The character’s ability to verbalize his feelings is suppressed by the bombing; additionally, the bombing is perceived as abnormal and, consequently, it does not connect to life in general. This illustrates the need for a sense of normality during wartime to be able to survive as a human being. The passage also reflects a resistance against letting feelings become an integral part of the character’s present life.

In one of the most heart-breaking stories in the collection, “Ivy Grippd the Steps”, we meet a man who loses his identity because of his inability to feel.<sup>3</sup> The story expresses a fear of what feelings might do to you, where the main character’s childhood story of being deluded is brought to the fore when, as a soldier during the Second World War, he visits his childhood holiday resort, Southstone. He seeks an explanation for the way he was treated as a boy, but at the same time he tries not to get emotionally involved in the story: “But also he attached himself to the story as to something nothing to do with him; and did so with the intensity of a person who must think lest he should begin to feel” (CS 688). Thus feeling is presented as a threat; the character hides behind a surface of rationality.

In both of the stories analysed here, “The Happy Autumn Fields” and “Mysterious Kôr”, the ability or inability to feel are important. An important question with respect to identity is whether life and survival depend on the ability to incorporate feelings as an integral part of one’s being. In *Seven Winters* the child’s imaginative abilities were explored, and we must also ask whether imagination is central in “The Happy Autumn Fields” and “Mysterious Kôr”. Imagination contrasts with and challenges the idea of

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3. As we have seen in Chapter 4, his inability to feel has been instigated by a childhood trauma.

rationality and the inability to feel. We recall that in *Seven Winters*, imagination was presented as a necessary condition for the development of identity for the Bowen child.

The different stories in Bowen's collection do not provide one answer as to how feelings should be perceived; variation does, indeed, characterize the presentation of feelings. We have seen that feelings can save the individual from a total loss of identity; for others the idea of what feelings represent is too threatening, but a lack of acceptance for the importance of feelings also poses a threat to the individual's sense of self. The need for the individual in wartime to create an alternative to the present is reflected in the way feelings are presented in the stories. The ability to imagine something different is another central feature of these stories. Bowen also presents the option of escape with some ambivalence, even though she often seems to offer it as a primarily positive choice, as we shall see shortly.

#### **4.2 Escape: a “saving hallucination”?**

In the postscript to the U.S. edition of *The Demon Lover*, Elizabeth Bowen describes how the atmosphere of war created the need for “saving hallucination[s]” (MT 97) for the inhabitants of wartime London. The stories depict in different ways how hallucination takes the form of escapism into dreams, recollections of the past, and the sphere of the uncanny, as is explicitly portrayed in the title story “The Demon Lover”. By using the genre of the ghost story in “The Demon Lover”, Bowen draws the reader's attention to this genre throughout the collection, reflecting a general interest at that time on the part of Irish Protestant writers in the supernatural and the occult. Roy Foster discusses why the supernatural took such a hold in the fiction of Irish Protestant writers in the essay “Protestant Magic: W.B. Yeats and the Spell of Irish History”. Foster argues that “the occult preoccupation” of Irish Protestant writers “mirror[s] a sense of displacement”, and he relates this interest to a threatened Irish Protestant identity (*Paddy* 220).

“The Demon Lover” is undoubtedly a ghost story, but it is also a story about a woman whose sense of self is defined by the demon lover's perceptions of, and power over her, which essentially makes the story a description of the character's total loss of self. Robert L. Calder sees “The Demon Lover” as an allegory that “links the Second

World War to the First and concludes horrifically that our ‘sinister troth’ with war is inescapable”. Thus he argues that Bowen describes an inescapability from war that not only envelops Kathleen Drover in “The Demon Lover”, but that “perfectly captures the feelings of millions of people who in 1941 seemed to be propelled at an increasingly frenzied pace into a European wasteland of rubble and death. Like Kathleen, they could only scream” (97). War disempowers the individual — the individual’s control over her own life is robbed; this ultimately results in an undermining of personal identity.

Elements of the ghost story are integral to both of the stories discussed here, but these elements are not as prominent in “The Happy Autumn Fields” and “Mysterious Kôr”, as they are in the title story and in other stories, such as “The Cheery Soul” and “Green Holly”. As we shall see in “The Happy Autumn Fields,” a sense of the supernatural is created in the story when the dreamer dreams of something that has actually taken place. The dreamer does not, however, know initially that her dream reflects a true story. The dreamer discovers the reality of the dream between the two dream sequences and after the dream ends.

In addition to connecting the concept of hallucination to the supernatural, Bowen also argues that:

The hallucinations in the stories are not a peril; nor are the stories studies of mental peril. The hallucinations are an unconscious, instinctive, saving resort on the part of the characters: life, mechanized by the controls of wartime, and emotionally torn and impoverished by changes, had to complete itself in *some* way. It is a fact that in Britain, and especially in London, in wartime many people had strange deep intense dreams. (*MT* 96)

In the first sentence Bowen underscores her understanding of what the hallucinations represent – they are not dangerous; indeed, Bowen presents them as a “saving resort” and a positive experience. As we have seen, the Bowen child’s imaginary world in *Seven Winters* also represented a positive experience for her. In contrast to hallucination, however, the imaginary endeavour of the Bowen child was a conscious activity. The passage suggests that, for Bowen, hallucinations represent an unconscious activity that most often takes the form of a dream. The hallucinations represent for Bowen one way of being alive. *The New Oxford Dictionary of English* defines hallucination as “an

experience involving the apparent perception of something not present”. The word hallucinate has its origins in the Latin *hallucinat*, which means to be ‘gone astray in thought’, and in the Greek *alussein* which means to ‘be uneasy or distraught’. The dictionary entry says that one sees something that is not there, which may be a disturbing experience indeed. However, Bowen’s use of hallucination in the quotation offers a different view, a positive understanding of hallucination that combines the unconscious mind and the idea of being elsewhere, away from wartime reality. Bowen presents hallucinations and dreams as interchangeable concepts, in which the delusional element of the dictionary definition is lost. Bowen clearly states that there is no “mental peril” involved in her perception of hallucination. Jeslyn Medoff comments that “[a]ccording to Bowen, people cope by dreaming, whether awake or asleep, of other times and of other places or by assuming a kind of fatalistic numbness or naive blindness” (80). This critical perspective mirrors Bowen’s reflections on what “saving hallucination” implies. However, we need to question whether the characters in these stories are more able to cope with reality when they use the dream as a means of escape.

#### 4.2.1 The dream: saving identity?

The two stories analysed here, “The Happy Autumn Fields” and “Mysterious Kôr”, are undoubtedly two of Bowen’s best, but also most disturbing, stories, which has been one motivation for my choice. Additionally, the stories combine, in different ways, the individual’s reflections on feelings and love, and they both serve as stories that relate to Bowen’s idea of “saving hallucination” in the use of the dream as an escape from wartime. My interest is to explore whether the dream actually does represent a way of saving identity. As we shall see, there is a lack of correspondence between Bowen’s explicit understanding of “saving hallucination[s]”, and the way the hallucinations are presented in the short stories.

Generally speaking, the individual’s own feelings, thoughts and inner life are aspects that play a part in retaining identity. Given Bowen’s comments quoted earlier, we can ask whether we are faced with a concept of identity that involves escape from reality through dreams. The surrealists claimed that the unconscious could be reached through the dream and that this represented ‘true’ reality (Breton 14). Their purpose was to use what was

found in the dream in their artistic activities as a means to alter reality. The surrealists were influenced by Sigmund Freud's theories of the unconscious, and believed in the power of the dream in the creative process. Altering reality is not, however, the purpose of the dream in Bowen's work, rather we are presented with an attempted escape from reality.

The collection *The Demon Lover* consists of twelve stories of which "The Happy Autumn Fields" is the eighth story and "Mysterious Kôr" the final story. In a comment on the stories' order Bowen says that "[t]hrough the stories – in the order in which they are here placed – I find a rising tide of hallucination" (MT 96). Thus, the last story, "Mysterious Kôr", represents the culmination of the "rising tide of hallucination", and it is implied that stronger means of expressing hallucination are used in the final story compared to the beginning of the collection, suggesting an escalation of hallucination in the collection. I will start by analysing "The Happy Autumn Fields", a story which unfolds in the interplay between the dream and the dreamer's wartime reality.

My analysis of "The Happy Autumn Fields" pays particular attention to how identity is presented in the wartime reality and the dream sphere described in the story. For this purpose I use Paul Ricoeur's terms sameness-identity and selfhood-identity to illuminate identity. By juxtaposing wartime and dream with respect to *idem*- and *ipse*-identity, my analysis suggests that the dialectic between the two identities are at risk in wartime reality, and the story also suggests that this dialectic is eventually threatened in the dream sphere too.

Another aspect that is central for an understanding of identity in "The Happy Autumn Fields" is the presentation of corporeality and movement and what the implications of being a body in a room are, particularly as concerns movement and stasis. My analysis of the relationship between body and corporeality is informed by Maurice Merleau-Ponty's theory as it has been presented in Chapter 2. Corporeality in the bombed-out room is, as we shall see, presented as stasis and alienation, while the dream space initially presents bodies in movement; this perspective changes, however, at the end of the story where a lack of movement is associated with Sarah and her position in the mother's room.

### 4.3 Dream or different realities?

The titles of Bowen's short stories "The Happy Autumn Fields" and "Tears, Idle Tears"<sup>4</sup> are both derived from the Victorian poet Alfred Tennyson's lyric "Tears, Idle Tears". The lyric consists of four stanzas: the reference to "the happy autumn-fields" is found in the fourth line of the first stanza:

Tears, idle tears, I know not what they mean,  
Tears from the depth of some divine despair  
Rise in the heart, and gather to the eyes,  
In looking on the happy autumn-fields,  
And thinking of the days that are no more.  
(Tennyson 114)

The theme of Tennyson's lyric is nostalgia, expressing a passion and despair for what is lost. This is emphasized by the repetition of "the days that are no more" in the final line of each stanza, a technique that underscores a lament for the past.

Martin Bidney argues that the theme of Bowen's stories "The Happy Autumn Fields" and "Tears, Idle Tears" is nostalgic narcissism, claiming that these stories rewrite the theme of nostalgia of Tennyson's poem (60). Bidney argues that regressive narcissism is acted out in the dream. But the connection between the dream and the dreamer receives little attention in his analysis. This may be a result of his perception of the two spheres as two different realities, rather than seeing the presentation of the past as a dream. In "Elizabeth Bowen's 'The Happy Autumn Fields': A Dream or Not?" Brad Hooper argues that we are presented with "dual realities, with a shared character, *not* one reality on one hand and a 'saving hallucination' (p. xi) on the other" (153). Hooper's

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4. First published in *The Listener*, 1936 (Sellery and O'Harris 131), subsequently published in *Look At All Those Roses* (1941). In Bowen's story, "Tears, Idle Tears" we meet seven year-old Frederick and his mother on a walk in Regent's Park. Frederick is in tears, but he does not know why he is crying, it is a habit of his to cry for no particular reason. His convulsive crying is his mother's shame. A destructive relationship between mother and son is acted out in the story. The character of the mother is presented as someone frozen in an ideal of social behaviour, thus becoming frozen in herself, unable to feel pain. It is clear that Frederick's mother sees keeping up appearances as more important than understanding why Frederick behaves as he does. We witness a mother's neglect or rejection of her young son in her refusal to accept Frederick. Frederick's crying seems to be caused by their loss of father and husband, and the emotional void between the two. The relationship between mother and son in "Tears, Idle Tears" represents one of many failed parent/child relationships in Bowen's prose.

argument is that the “breaks” in the narrative between the past and the present are not likely to take place in a dream, and he questions how it is possible to return to the dream “at will” (152). In contrast to Hooper, I will argue that an individual can indeed control the return to the dream. Hooper does not provide convincing arguments substantiating his idea of dual realities. He fails to observe that the dreamer rejects identification with Mary, and he does not provide any general discussion of what a dream is. Martin Bidney supports Hooper’s idea of dual realities, arguing that “he [Hooper] points out incongruous phrasings that seem to make the two stories coequal in reality-status rather than clearly Mary’s dream of Sarah” (67 5n). Bidney’s primary focus is on Sarah and Henrietta, and he disregards the dreamer’s role as the instigator of the dream. We can argue that the nostalgia expressed in the dream represents a desire on the part of the dreamer, a desire for the safety that is expressed in the love between the two sisters. In the dream of the past, the dreamer finds refuge and escape from a present that is in decay and dissolution. It is not love of one’s self that is expressed here; rather we are faced with someone who wants to get away from who she is and where she is.

Phyllis Lassner comments on the relationship between the two parts of the story and argues that:

In this contrapuntal rhythm, as history boomerangs forward and backward, present and past haunt each other with the sense that neither is complete or knowable in itself; rather, present and past are part of an ongoing process in which each is regenerated and made understandable in the other. (*Short Fiction* 106)

Lassner thus claims that meaning and understanding are created in the unfolding of the past and the present. In contrast to this perspective I will suggest that the reader cannot conclude that the character has achieved a sense of understanding by the end of the story. On the contrary, we are presented with a character who is left in a state of limbo.

Maud Ellmann comments that “the story never settles whether Mary is the dreamer or the dreamed” (170). An ambiguity is indeed established in the structuring of the story. In my analysis I argue, however, that Mary is presented to us as the dreamer. The ambiguity of the story underscores the openness of Bowen’s text and the continuous ambiguity we are faced with when reading her prose; little can be taken for granted. The reader’s conception of time and space is challenged by the structure of the story. With its



opening scenes set in the fields, we first believe that, in the fictional universe, this *is* reality, a perception that is later challenged when we are transported from the fields to a room in a dreamlike and ‘cinematic’ movement. I will, however, argue that we are in fact presented with what the character in the realistic wartime setting dreams about. To find support for this understanding of the story, the reader must observe how the story is narrated, giving particular attention to focalizers and focalized objects, how the relationships between the different characters are developed, and how the past and the present are presented in the world of the dreamer.

#### **4.4 Reality and unreality: spatial transformations**

“The Happy Autumn Fields” introduces us to four different spatial situations. The first is a wide landscape, the second a bombed-out room in a house in a city at war, the third a room in a mansion in the landscape, and the fourth is the taxi on its way from the bombed-out room. The landscape and the room in the mansion belong to a different time period than the bombed-out room and the taxi, where the time differences we are dealing with here are quite considerable, it is not just a matter of days or months, but of generations. The story starts in the wide landscape, where we follow a family procession on a farewell walk for the boys who are returning to school the next day. From the fields we move to the bombed-out room and to a woman who is dreaming about the landscape. The dream continues in the room in the mansion, a room where the mother is the central figure. The story ends in a taxi on its way from the bombed-out room to a hotel.

##### **4.4.1 The Bowen topography**

Elizabeth Bowen has remarked that the fields in the story are to her “unshakeably County Cork” (*DD* 9). There is, however, no mention in the story of any specific geographic landscape connected to the fields, nor is London ever mentioned as the location for the wartime setting.<sup>5</sup> But within the framework of Bowenesque topography,

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5. Elizabeth Bowen comments in the postscript to the U.S. edition of *The Demon Lover* that: “In ‘The Happy Autumn Fields’, one finds a woman projected from flying-bombed London, with its day-and-night eeriness, into the key emotional crisis of a Victorian girlhood.” (*MT* 97)

as mentioned in Chapter 2, Ireland and England represent the two most important spaces, within which County Cork and London often manifest themselves as the most significant settings in her work. If we do not think of it as an Irish landscape, the story becomes more universal and the polarization between Ireland and England is not so obvious. But, as mentioned, the war is implicit in the story, and this awakens the reader's consciousness of the relationship between the Republic of Ireland and the United Kingdom during the Second World War, because of its importance in Bowen's life and work. Central to this understanding is the Republic of Ireland's neutrality and the United Kingdom's participation in the war, a situation that creates a tension in the story with respect to national identity. National identity and belonging are implicitly integral to the story.

#### 4.4.2 Spatiality and temporality

The construction of the dream in relation to the wartime setting places a focus on different presentations of spatiality and temporality for the individual. The juxtaposition of the dream and the wartime setting puts the dreamer in a precarious position, where the threat facing the dreamer is the loss of self. In the perspective of the dreamer, the room is presented as fragmented and in dissolution, and the narrator's portrayal of the dreamer alludes to death. In this context, the dream represents an opportunity for the character to be someone else and to be somewhere else, but this process of escape allows us to witness an identity under threat, where the dreamer's body is presented as seemingly dead in the bombed-out room.

Spatial presentation and representation in the dream are intimately linked to character: the open fields and the family procession are controlled by the father. The mother is absent from the fields, as is the father from the drawing room where the mother is in control. Different spaces are thus assigned to the role of the father and the mother in the story, and it is in these spaces that Sarah and Henrietta move about. In the fields, Henrietta is presented as the one the father sees as rebellious, while in the mother's room we see Sarah and her feeling of being out of place, a feeling that is presented as a reluctant rebellion on Sarah's part. Sarah and Henrietta are both presented as different from the other characters. We can argue that what we dream about represents aspects of

ourselves, thus the characters in the dream can be seen as unconscious representations of self. The symbiosis between Sarah and Henrietta is initially presented as positive, but a conflict arises between the two when someone tries to come between them. The conflict between Sarah and Henrietta seems to mirror a conflict in the dreamer; while struggling to get away from a suffocating reality, the dreamer is at the same time corporeally situated in this reality.

#### 4.4.3 Reality and unreality

The dream represents the past and the bombed-out room the present, the modern world at war. The dream and the room are contrasted in the story, which involves juxtaposing the past and the present. For the dreamer the concepts of reality and unreality are central to her perception of herself and her surroundings. She perceives the room she sleeps in as unreal (*CS 677*), and in the story the ‘unreality’ of the room represents the unwanted and nightmarish situation of the dreamer. Unreality is contrasted with the dream, which represents something the character wants but that cannot be found in the bombed-out room. The dream is presented as more real for the dreamer than her waking present. Escaping into the dream, the dreamer finds refuge from a gloomy wartime setting, at the same time we find that the conflicts in the dream mirror problems experienced by the dreamer in her waking life. The narrator does, however, present both spatial situations as real, so that we are introduced to two different perceptions of the bombed-out room and the fields. It is only in retrospect that the reader realizes that the initial introduction of the fields is a dream. Thus the reader’s belief that the fields represent reality, mirrors the same belief that the dreamer experiences in her dream. The narrator introduces the family in the fields in the opening paragraph:

The family walking party, though it comprised so many, did not deploy or straggle over the stubble but kept in a procession of threes and twos. Papa, who carried his Alpine stick, led, flanked by Constance and little Arthur. Robert and Cousin Theodore, locked in studious talk, had Emily attached but not quite abreast. Next came Digby and Lucius, taking, to left and right, imaginary aim at rooks. Henrietta and Sarah brought up the rear. (*CS 671*)

This opening paragraph presents us with a situation the reader can identify with: going for a walk with your family. There is no indication at this stage that this is indeed a dream. The narrator describes the family walking party as if it were a military procession where the father, the patriarch, is in charge. Control, linearity and precision allude to a party of soldiers out patrolling. That the landscape is a product of the dreamer's unconscious only becomes apparent when we are transferred by the narrator to the wartime setting. The realism of the dream raises the question of whether or not we are actually presented with a dream in the story. Dreams take on different forms, and their material is drawn from our everyday experiences. Sigmund Freud says in one of his lectures on dreams, "Difficulties and First Approaches", that even in sleep the mind is always subjected to stimuli. A dream, according to Freud, is "the manner in which the mind reacts to stimuli that impinge upon it in the state of sleep" (89). The form the dream takes, however, cannot be controlled by the individual's consciousness. Freud comments on the diversity of dreams, saying:

As regards the dimensions of dreams, some are very short and comprise only a single image or a few, a single thought, or even a single word; others are uncommonly rich in their content, present whole novels and seem to last a long time. There are dreams which are as clear as [waking]<sup>6</sup> experience, so clear that quite a time after waking we do not realize that they were dreams; [...]. (90-91)

The dreamer in "The Happy Autumn Fields" remains in a dream-like state after she has woken up. The dreamer's perception of the room she sleeps in is contrasted with the realism and control that describe the introduction of the story:

The unreality of this room and of Travis's presence preyed on her as figments of dreams that one knows to be dreams can do. This environment's being in semi-ruin struck her less than its being some sort of device or trap; and she rejoiced, if anything, in its decrepitude. (CS 677)

The dreamer on the mattress transforms the bombed-out room by equating it to a dream, but in a stark contrast to the dream of the fields, she perceives the room as nightmarish and claustrophobic, and her only desire is to escape. In transforming the room, its

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6. Square brackets in original text.

destruction becomes less threatening to her. It becomes a room from which she can free herself through the dream. The unrealness expressed in the quotation shows that what she perceives as unreal is actually reality. The dreamer's transformation of the real into the unreal presents the character with a possible escape from the trap the room represents. The narrator allows us to see the room through the eyes of the dreamer, conveying the dreamer's alienation by following her reasoning and logic. The reader does, however, also perceive that this is indeed a room where the blatant reality of war has left its marks; bombs have destroyed it, and further explosions are imminent. This is a reality one does not want to relate to, as the dreamer's reaction reflects. Thus two realities seem to be described in the story: the fields that represent the nostalgia of the past, and the bombed-out room where the destruction of the present threatens the character's sense of self.

The sphere of the dream has at least two functions in the story. It represents an escape from the horrors of wartime reality, where the dream creates a new kind of reality that the dreamer can relate to. Wartime reality is, on the other hand, transformed by the dreamer into unreality; it resembles a nightmare. The dreamer's perception of the ruins of wartime are seen as a mockery. Unreality can be understood as a catalyst that propels the individual and the reader into the world of dreams. The dream offers a different understanding of who the dreamer is or who she becomes.

#### **4.5 "Strung like a harp"**

We can understand that pain can create identity through eliciting strength, stamina, dignity and patience, where the idea of a hero is at the core of such an understanding. However, Bowen's notion of "saving hallucination" represents a way for the individual to take care of herself by refusing to relate to wartime reality. But what are the consequences of such an escape from reality? Is it a positive escape, as suggested by Bowen, or is it more negative? The spatial situation of the dreamer in "The Happy Autumn Fields" is depicted in a comparison between dream and wartime reality at the end of the story:

‘[...] How are we to live without natures? We only know inconvenience now, not sorrow. Everything pulverizes so easily because it is rot-dry; one can only wonder that it makes so much noise. The source, the sap must have dried up, or the pulse must have stopped, before you and I were conceived. So much flowed through people; so little flows through us. All we can do is imitate love or sorrow. – [...]’ (CS 683-684)

Mary describes the present and the people of the present as lifeless: they resemble ghosts. Maud Ellmann comments that “The dead are more alive than she is; the living world, enshrouded in white dust, is ghostlier than the reanimated past” (171). In this passage, emptiness, lifelessness and death characterize the present in contrast with the past, and the past is idealized and presented as a better place to be than the present. A strong sense of nostalgia connects to the past, whilst pessimism and negativity characterize the character’s relationship to the here-and-now. The text suggests that imitation provides the only way a modern individual can assert feelings. According to Bowen, the dream furnishes the dreamer with an opportunity to feel something; in a wartime reality, however, people seem to be empty shells who cannot feel. As we have seen in the above passage, all they can do is imitate, while what is essential is the ability to feel. Loss is complete in the present, which illustrates that war provides no opportunity for the individual to exist as a person. We shall also see that Louie Lewis in *The Heat of the Day* makes use of imitation in an attempt to become part of the crowd. Additionally, we find in the above quotation a parallel reflection to Stella Rodney’s situation in *The Heat of the Day*, where the connection between the past and the present has been broken.

At the end of “The Happy Autumn Fields” the dreamer compares wartime reality with the dream:

She continued: ‘What has happened is cruel: I am left with a fragment torn out of a day, a day I don’t even know where or when; and now how am I to help laying that like a pattern against the poor stuff of everything else? – Alternatively, I am a person drained by a dream. I cannot forget the climate of those hours. Or life at that pitch, eventful – not happy, no, but strung like a harp. [...]’ (CS 684)

The idea that life can be different seems to be essential for survival. Identity is connected to the idea of living “strung like a harp”, regardless of being happy or unhappy. In

contrast, the title “The *Happy* Autumn Fields”<sup>7</sup> is ironic; strangely enough the dreamer does not seek happiness. The title also alludes to death. The individual is ideally composed with the help of the intensity of feelings; when feelings are no longer there, identity dissolves, and so does language, as a closer analysis of the story will show.

We could argue that the individual initiates his or her escape to get away from strong feelings and emotions, as is exemplified in “Mysterious Kôr”, but this is not the case in “The Happy Autumn Fields”. Instead the individual attempts to escape from reality to feel *more*. The narrative is dominated by a sense of alienation. The dreamer needs to get in touch with who she is. The escape from reality creates a meaningful space that she can be part of, but that she cannot control; in the end she is returned to the wartime reality she tried to escape from. We could question whether the dream represents a rescue for the individual, or whether she is returned to wartime reality more impaired than she was when she escaped into the dream. To desire an escape from reality is in itself not wrong; the problem arises when the escape threatens the survival of your identity.

The juxtaposition of dream and reality in “The Happy Autumn Fields” begs for a reflection of what such an escape does to the individual. In the end it is not clear what the dream leads to: it is not apparent that the dream has enabled the dreamer to deal with reality in a better way. It is, indeed, difficult to perceive how the dream represents a saving resort for Mary. Instead she is left with lifelessness, and the dream reminds us of this, but the dream also draws attention to the world Mary lives in and what it is really like. The dream, in a sense, brings Mary a consciousness of herself and her world, and in this process we are left with the pain of the individual who understands the loss she has suffered, although this realization can create a new sense of self. However, we know very little of Mary before the hours described in the story; the story presents us with the threat the wartime dissolution represents to the dreamer’s identity. We can argue that the desire to remain in the dream represents an attempt to escape from reality, but in the end reality finds its way into the dream as well. The dream cannot remain uncontaminated by the dreamer’s own existence. Both who and where she is are projected into the dream, and in the end she comes away with a contemplation of the present time by contrasting it to the past. Because of the dreamer’s rejection of wartime reality and, as we shall see shortly,

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7. Emphasis added

this involves a corporeal rejection of Mary, “The Happy Autumn Fields” locates both sameness-identity and selfhood-identity in the dream. The dreamer identifies with others nearly to the extent that sameness-identity becomes the dominating identity in the dream, at the same time, however, we find that a struggle to differentiate herself from others also takes place. In contrast to the dream, the wartime reality does not suggest a similar struggle between sameness- and selfhood-identity; indeed, imitation is presented as the dreamer’s understanding of the present, and imitation can clearly be related as a distinctive feature of sameness-identity. Imitation clearly undermines selfhood-identity. Consequently, the story seems to suggest that there is no selfhood-identity in wartime reality. We must ask what the implications are of such an understanding of identity; what are the consequences for the individual who eventually returns to the wartime setting? Usually coming to consciousness involves a positive development of identity; whether this is the case for the character in “The Happy Autumn Fields” is, however, uncertain.

#### **4.6 Corporeal detachment**

To live “strung like a harp” captures the individual’s sense of the potential of dreaming, its offer of a chance to feel. Additionally, it characterizes a physical tension. It invites the dreamer to open up to all feelings: feelings that the dreamer in her wartime room has lost touch with or has never had. In her longing for an escape and a return to the landscape of the past, the dreamer longs for a return to a romanticized rendering of the past. To desire to remain in a dream is not an unusual feeling. The dreamer’s reactions to the room and to Mary illustrate that she has not left the dream world of the fields; she has not returned mentally or corporeally to the wartime setting:

Frantic at being delayed here, while the moment awaited her in the cornfield, she all but afforded a smile at the grotesquerie of being saddled with Mary’s body and lover.

Rearing up her head from the bare pillow, she looked, as far as the crossed feet, along the form inside which she found herself trapped: the irrelevant body of Mary, weighted down to the bed, wore a short black modern dress, flaked with plaster. (CS 677)

Her refusal to identify with the corporeal Mary completes the dreamer’s escape from wartime reality. Earlier we saw that the dreamer felt trapped in the room, and in this



passage we find that the dreamer is faced with another entrapment: that of the body. The dreamer's observation of being trapped in Mary's body is presented to us as a joke. To be free of Mary's body is more difficult than to be free of the room she is trapped in, the corporeal enclosure of the dreamer is also an entrapment of self. As discussed in Chapter 2, Elizabeth Grosz argues that the body has a defining power with respect to identity, so that a refusal to identify corporeally with Mary's body threatens the dreamer's identity. The corporeal suspension of Mary enables the dreamer to identify with Sarah, the character in her dream, preferring Sarah's reality.<sup>8</sup> Her identification with Sarah suspends the elements of reality that define and confine her identity: the bombed-out room (spatiality), the present/wartime (temporality), corporeal identification (body), and Travis (relationship to others). Who she is or was in reality is radically undone in her identification with Sarah and the dream.

The dreamer rejects her real body to be able to escape to the dream, and finds 'body' in the dream and the identification with Sarah and Henrietta. The 'body' she finds in the dream is perceived as corporeal, but it is a body of dreams that does not provide her with a corporeal connection with reality. However, the characters are placed with precision in the sphere of the dream (the family in the fields, Sarah in the middle of the room). Undoubtedly the dream is an abstraction, but the placement of the characters seems to imply a body that the dreamer can relate to.

Self-image and self-experience are connected to the dreamer's body image in wartime reality. Recalling Paul John Eakin's concept of body image in Chapter 2, we can argue that the dreamer's rejection of Mary's body in the present implies a rejection of self. Feelings have a predominant place in the dream, which suggests a different kind of identity from what is found in reality. Is it possible to talk of a new construction of identity, based on the dream, or is it in the interplay between the two spheres that a new identity is constructed? The dream can be understood as an attempt to feel whole, which contrasts with a wartime reality which dries out the individuals, and where imitation is presented as the only means of expressing feelings. Thus the dream expresses the dialectic between sameness and selfhood. However, the dream is also, at the same time,

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8. A similar reflection is given by Maud Ellmann who argues that "[a]ll sense of 'proprioception,' of owning and belonging to one's body, has been transferred from Mary into Sarah." (170)

an escape from wartime reality, from the person the dreamer is in this reality in her waking state. In the end, however, the dreamer returns to the real body. We are presented with the loss she has suffered by not being able to retreat permanently to the dream; additionally, the dream has given her an opportunity to reflect on the world she lives in now, a reflection that has given her more insight into the present. But the question of what kind of person she has become is, however, left unanswered.

#### **4.7 Constructing or deconstructing the individual?**

A struggle between the dream and wartime reality is manifested in the trouble Sarah experiences in her mother's room. Sarah is unable to communicate and she has no memory of what has happened:

She drew a light little gold chair into the middle of the wreath of the carpet, where no one ever sat, and sat down. She said: 'But since then I think I have been asleep.'

'Charles the First walked and talked half an hour after his head was cut off,'<sup>9</sup> said Henrietta mockingly. Sarah in anguish pressed the palms of her hands together upon a shred of geranium leaf.

'How else,' she said, 'could I have had such a bad dream?' (CS 681)

Elements of wartime reality are drawn into the sphere of the dream, contaminating and destabilizing the illusion of a romanticized past, creating an uncanny atmosphere. In the dream, Sarah too becomes a dreamer, underscoring how the unconscious works to bring elements of the dreamer's wartime reality into Sarah's "bad dream", and the dreamer's experience of reality as nightmarish is repeated. Sarah's isolation from the others is highlighted in the quotation. Sarah's movement provides us with an image that presents us with both a sense of isolation and centrality. Is Sarah's placement in the middle of the carpet an expression of her perception of herself as different? Sarah's position in the middle of the room expresses an exposed corporeal placement, where she does something that challenges normal behaviour in a seeming attempt to make sense of what is happening to her. Sarah's comment about being asleep offers a different perspective on

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9. This sentence is often used to teach children the importance of punctuation. Correctly punctuated it is – 'Charles the First walked and talked; half an hour after, his head was cut off.'

the dream: a dream where loss is central - loss of self, loss of memory, loss of place and loss of words.

The spatial aspects of the story's presentation of unreality and dream relate to the question of identity and of who the individual becomes. The presentation also raises the question of the individual's deconstruction or construction. In the bombed-out room, imagery that describes death and lifelessness dominate, while in the dream, images of life predominate, even though death is also an integral element. Maud Ellmann argues, with respect to the fields, that "[p]ersistent references to rooks, to falling, to the stubble underfoot, and to the silence that closes in behind the company suggests that these are the Elysian fields traversed by a procession of the dead." (170). Rooks can indeed be seen as a symbol that forebodes death, but Ellmann's allusion to the Elysian fields presupposes a knowledge that these are dead people; however, this is not something the dreamer knows at the outset of the dream. For the reader, however, the title of the story could be associated with the Elysian fields. The imagery of life and death is also linked to the individual; it is as if we are dealing with two people — one who is alive, but who does not exist, and one who is described as a corpse, but who does exist.

#### **4.8 Focalizer**

The image of the fields and the family is created by the narrator in the opening paragraph. In the second paragraph, however, the focus changes from the narrator's focalization of the family as a whole, to Sarah as the focalizer who sees, feels and knows:

It was Sarah who saw the others ahead on the blond stubble, who knew them, knew what they were to each other, knew their names and knew her own. It was she who felt the stubble under her feet, and who heard it give beneath the tread of the others a continuous different more distant soft stiff scrunch. The field and all these outlying fields in view knew as Sarah knew that they were Papa's. (CS 671)

Moving from a narratorial view overlooking the fields, a 'cinematic' device of zooming in on the characters is used in the movement from the group to the individual, and ultimately the narrator centres on Sarah. The repetition of "knew", and the emphasis on

Sarah's sensuous alertness to the others and the fields serve to underscore that it is Sarah who is the focalizer in this part of the story. Seeing is related to knowledge, a knowledge that extends to the fields; nature and Sarah are connected in a common knowledge of paternal ownership of the fields. The narrator points at Sarah in the use of "it was"; she sees the others, and knows them and their relationships to each other. A strange element that breaks with the real-life portrayal of the family and the field enters, however, in the knowledge Sarah has of the others and of herself. The text's mentioning of Sarah's knowledge of her name and the names of the others is bizarre, since this is ostensibly an obvious thing to know about oneself and one's family. This is an 'unreal' element in a presentation that has so far been realistic; the sphere that we have been presented with is not necessarily as real as it seems. Indeed, Sarah's naming of the family indicates that it is *she* who creates them, thus her naming implicitly contributes to the sense of the dream.

In addition to seeing and knowledge, Sarah's corporeality is presented in her ability to feel and hear the texture of the ground she is walking on, suggesting a closeness to the fields and to nature. The dreamer's gaze is centralized through Sarah, which creates an identification between the dreamer and Sarah that in the end leads to the dreamer's rejection of her own self. We are not presented with a focalizer whose perspective is purely external, this observer is also portrayed as a character who internalizes the others' feelings and thoughts, which is yet another indicator that it is Sarah who creates the others:

It was Sarah who located the thoughts of Constance, knew what a twisting prisoner was Arthur's hand, felt to the depths of Emily's pique at Cousin Theodore's inattention, rejoiced with Digby and Lucius at the imaginary fall of so many rocks. She fell back, however, as from a rocky range, from the converse of Robert and Cousin Theodore. Most she knew that she swam with love at the nearness of Henrietta's young and alert face and eyes which shone with the sky and queried the afternoon. (CS 671-672)

The narrator introduces Sarah as the one who creates the story; this indicates that Sarah and the dreamer are the same person, the one who dreams. The narrator presents us with Sarah as the guiding voice in the dream, but at the same time we find that the dominating voice and perspective is that of the narrator, who moves back and forth between describing Sarah as the one who sees, and the general narratorial focalization. The effect

of this technique is to focus on Sarah as the voice which tells the story, and by doing so, a bond is created between Sarah and the dreamer. In the second sequence of the dream, however, Sarah no longer sees, feels and knows the others as she did in the beginning. The narrator's focalization dominates in the drawing room, and Sarah is no longer part of the group, she is instead placed apart from the group, in a position of isolation, at the same time that this is a position of centrality from which she gets everyone's attention, and where she is the focalized object.

The above quotation connects Sarah's knowledge of the others' feelings and thoughts to all in the walking party except from her father. Most importantly Sarah identifies with Henrietta; she feels a love for her that ominously excludes anyone else:

‘So long,’ said Sarah, considering, ‘as, whatever it is, it happens to both of us?’ She must never have to wake in the early morning except to the birdlike stirrings of Henrietta, or have her cheek brushed in the dark by the frill of another pillow in whose hollow did not repose Henrietta's cheek. Rather than they should cease to lie in the same bed she prayed they might lie in the same grave. ‘You and I will stay as we are,’ she said, ‘then nothing can touch one without touching the other.’ (CS 672)

The desire for everything to remain the same suggests a nostalgia for childhood, idealizing their relationship. Additionally, Sarah expresses that she would rather die than be separated from Henrietta. The idea that everything should remain unchanged is impossible; death seems to be the only option for their love — this presents their love for each other as rather uncanny; in love and death they will stay together. The love between the sisters in the dream puts the relationship between Mary and Travis in perspective. In the escape to the dream and to the love between the sisters, the dreamer denies who she is in wartime reality, and, consequently, she denies her lover. She must choose between dream and reality; to remain in the dream, however, implies choosing death. Escape is indeed positive if it suggests that you are restored to life in the end. The dreamer returns to wartime reality at the end of the story; we are, however, left puzzled with respect to whether this return is truly good for the dreamer. The dreamer's reflections of the present indicate a life without vitality and pulse, where all that is left for the characters to do is imitate, and as suggested earlier, the implications of ‘imitation’ threaten the dialectic

between sameness- and selfhood-identity. Ultimately, the story does not seem to present any stable ground for identity either in the dream or in reality.

#### 4.8.1 Symbiosis

The relationship between Sarah and Henrietta is described as symbiotic, which is depicted in their mutual transformation of the landscape that surrounds them. In fact, they look at the landscape as if they were one person:

They looked around them with the same eyes. The shorn uplands seemed to float on the distance, which extended dazzling to tiny blue glassy hills. There was no end to the afternoon, whose light went on ripening now they had scythed the corn. Light filled the silence which, now Papa and the others were out of hearing was complete. Only screens of trees intersected and knolls made islands in the vast fields. The mansion and the home farm had sunk for ever below them in the expanse of woods, so that hardly a ripple showed where the girls dwelled. (CS 673)

Sarah is the focalizer, and in this sequence Henrietta becomes part of the same focalization, thus we could argue that Henrietta becomes part of Sarah. Sarah, Henrietta, the family party and the fields are elements of the dream. In the bombed-out room the dreamer no longer accepts the boundaries of Mary's body; she longs to remain in the dream, to be Sarah, to see what Sarah has seen and to feel what Sarah has felt. The idealized vision presented in the dream is, however, not perfect, which is demonstrated when the symbiosis between the sisters Henrietta and Sarah is threatened by the intrusion of Eugene, a young man who is in love with Sarah. Sarah is portrayed as someone who is about to move from adolescence to adulthood, but in this process she is torn between Eugene and Henrietta.

Before she fell asleep, Mary unburied an "old leather box" (CS 677) that Travis finds, whereupon he shows the picture of Sarah and Henrietta to the dreamer, and on his return to the bombed-out room after the second dream sequence he reads the letter that mentions Eugene's death. The question of what "made the horse shy in those empty fields" (CS 685) remains open and serves to underscore the uncanny in the story. Hermione Lee comments on the importance of the box in "Re-reading Elizabeth Bowen" and argues that:

Through opening her Pandora's box of the past, Mary seems to dream her way into the lives of the two (perhaps twin) sisters and their apparently enchanted, safe, but doomed and vulnerable moment in the past. The papers seem to tell Mary who she is, or was, and suggest that the past may not have ended, but (as in *A World of Love* and *The Little Girls*) may be coexistent, on a parallel plane, with the present. (155)

Lee seems to presuppose that Mary has revealed the content of the box before she fell asleep; it is not, however, clear in the story how much information Mary got from the box before the dream started. The content of the box suggests that the dream indeed represents reality, but the pictures of Sarah and Henrietta, and the story about Eugene's death are unknown to her, which indicates that Mary knew little or nothing of what the box contained before she fell asleep. The box thus seems to represent an uncanny element in the story where the dreamer mysteriously receives a message from the past about something that has happened, and in the end the box serves to confirm that the dream represents people who have lived in the past.

#### 4.8.2 The reader as focalizer

That the idealized dream of the past has its flaws is also shown in the transferral, or awakening of the dreamer, when she returns from sleep to the bombed-out room:

We surmount the skyline: the family come into our view, we into theirs. They are halted, waiting, on the decline to the quarry. The handsome statufied group in strong yellow sunshine, aligned by Papa and crowned by Fitzgeorge, turn their judging eyes on the laggards, waiting to close their ranks round Henrietta and Sarah and Eugene. One more moment and it will be too late; no further communication will be possible. Stop oh stop Henrietta's heart-breaking singing! Embrace her close again! Speak the only possible word! Say – oh, say what? Oh, the word is lost! (CS 675)

This passage is interesting in many respects. For the second time in the story the narrator uses a device resembling a 'cinematic' zooming in the transition from the fields to the room. In this paragraph we move from the dream to reality, and to the present. The quotation shows that so far we have been part of a dream, but now the dream dissolves and we are about to be introduced to reality. From the beginning to the end of the passage there is a shift of focus from the narrator to a centring in on a consciousness who is

unable to communicate what she wants to say. Additionally, the use of the preposition “we” includes the reader in the movement away from the group, at the same time including the reader in the text, making the reader part of the transition, where the reader too becomes a focalizer in the text. The reader is provided with an identifying gaze in the story, a gaze that moves away from the fields in the aerial perspective presented in the quotation. “We” fly away from the fields, and in this movement we see the family, and they see us. Reciprocity is indicated in this presentation, but we are only presented to what “we” see while the family stands as if frozen.

#### 4.8.3 Loss of language

The dreamer is moved away from the scene of the dream, even though she still has a desire to remain in the dream, but it is not for her to choose. In this process Sarah’s/the dreamer’s inability to express herself is important. Central to the quotation is the loss Sarah feels with respect to Henrietta, and what Sarah wanted to say will never be spoken; language is lost in the process of waking up. Sarah’s inability to speak is connected with the “judging eyes” of the family that represent a homogenous gaze, which condemns Sarah’s deviation from a pattern of behaviour that has been decided by the father. The “judging eyes” contribute to silence Sarah, as does the movement out of the dream. There is a clear sense at the end of the passage that these are words thought of within the dream, on the way out of the dream, losing touch with the dream, trying to hold on to it, but being unable to do so. Sarah seems to know what she wants to say at the same time that she has no words to say.

*‘Henrietta . . .’*

A shock of striking pain in the knuckles of the outflung hand – Sarah’s? The eyes, opening, saw that the hand had struck, not been struck: there was a corner of a table. Dust, whitish and gritty, lay on the top of the table and the telephone. Dull but piercing white light filled the room and what was left of the ceiling; her first thought was that it must have snowed. If so, it was winter now. (CS 675-676)

The name spoken indicates that the dreamer has not entirely left the dream, as does the question as to whether the hand belongs to Sarah. The dreamer speaks Henrietta’s name



and feels the pain in her hand while her eyes are still closed. The shock attributed to the pain depicts the sudden removal from the dream, at the same time that the dreamer remains in a confused state of not knowing where or who she is. When she opens her eyes, the source of the pain is identified as the table. What she sees is a room that is very different from the fields she has left behind in the dream. The light that fills the room is “dull but piercing” in contrast to the “strong yellow sunshine” in the fields. The telephone on the table places the room in a modern setting. The dreamer’s description of the room does not, however, involve any sense of recognition of the room, nor of the season; on the contrary, we are faced with a sense of estrangement. The white light and the dust on the table allude to winter, a season associated with death and cold, but no certainty is offered to this conjecture; the narrator does not dispute the dreamer’s perception of the room. Uncertainty is also expressed with respect to corporeality: is this Sarah’s body? These elements suggest that the dreamer has not yet returned completely from sleep; she does not know who she is, when it is or where she is, the bombed-out room is less real to her than the fields in her dream are. It is important, too, that the reader shares the dreamer’s sense of uncertainty. The reader accompanies her thought-processes as she starts to make sense of where and who she is.

#### **4.9 Corporeal alienation**

The dreamer’s desire to return to the fields should be connected to the dreamer’s lack of feeling of belonging to the room and to the woman’s body lying on the bed. The dream represents a desire for the past, for something lost, and the identification with Sarah and the symbiotic relationship with Henrietta. Even when she is seemingly awake and talking with Travis, she desires to return to the dream, and to the feelings of love and loss the dream represents. As mentioned, Travis finds the box she has unburied, which contains a photograph “of two young ladies hand-in-hand in front of a painted field —” (*CS* 678). In an act of protection the dreamer demands to have the photograph:

She instinctively tried and failed, to unbutton the bosom of Mary’s dress: it offered no hospitality to the photograph. So she could only fling herself over on the mattress, away from Travis, covering the two faces with her body. Racked by that oblique look of

Henrietta's she recorded, too, a sort of personal shock at having seen Sarah for the first time.

Travis's hand came over her, and she shuddered. Wounded, he said: 'Mary. . .'

'Can't you leave *me* alone?' (CS 678)

The dreamer's instinctive response is to protect the photograph from Travis. She does not want to share the dream with him; furthermore, she signals that there is no place for him in the dream. Previously we have seen that the dreamer feels trapped in Mary's body, and in the above quotation the corporeal alienation is illustrated in the dreamer's inability to unbutton the dress. Indeed, by writing "of Mary's dress" rather than "of her dress" the passage underscores the fact that "she" does not yet think that she is "Mary". Read in isolation, this passage would suggest to the reader that "she" and "Mary" were indeed two quite separate people. There is no identification between the dreamer and Mary, but in the protective act of the dreamer, reference is made to "her body". We have to ask whose body this is; she does not identify with Mary, and the protection she offers to the photograph of Sarah and Henrietta also suspends a corporeal connection with Sarah. Additionally, the photograph provides her with the second shock after having returned to the bombed-out room. The first shock came as a shock of pain. The shock she is faced with now is that of seeing Sarah for the first time. As has been pointed out earlier, the contents of the box represent reality; thus the picture is evidence that Sarah really did exist. When she later returns to the dream she also symbolically takes the picture of the real Sarah, and what it represents with her, which allows reality to intervene and merge with the dream. In the dream we were not given any descriptions of Sarah, she personified the dreamer, and the fields were focalized through Sarah. The dreamer's identification with Sarah relates to the dreamer's desire for escape, and Sarah seems to represent the dreamer's selfhood-identity. Thus when we talk about identification between the dreamer and Sarah, we are still in the sphere of the dream, of the unreal, and not in reality where the picture of Sarah exists. The images of the fields and the family in the bombed-out room have been replaced by the photograph of Sarah and Henrietta.

Travis attempts to reach out to the dreamer; he identifies her as Mary, but this identification underscores the feeling of alienation expressed by the dreamer. The pronoun "me", highlighted in the final sentence, underscores the ambiguity that has been

created in the story with respect to identity: does the dreamer identify with Mary or is she referring to the dream sphere and her identification with Sarah? The character we are presented with in this quotation clearly tries to tear herself loose from a corporeality that has its basis in reality. But at the same time she is confused with respect to who she is. She seems to be in a state of limbo, in which the desire to return to the dream is so strong that reality is suspended. Travis accepts her wish to continue sleeping, thus giving the dreamer a chance to return to the dream before he takes her away from the room:

They were back. Now the sun was setting behind the trees, but its rays passed dazzling between the branches into the beautiful warm red room. The tips of the ferns in the jardinière curled gold, and Sarah, standing by the jardinière, pinched at a leaf of scented geranium. The carpet had a great centre wreath of pomegranates, on which no tables or chairs stood, and its whole circle was between herself and the others. (CS 678)

Upon returning to the dream, the scene has changed, we are indoors, in the drawing room in the mansion; this is the sphere of the mother. The dreamer returns to a different setting, but the theme of the dream is the same: the love and symbiosis she has previously felt with her sister Henrietta. But in the drawing room Sarah's feeling of being alone dominates, which underscores the sense of loss that ended the first dream sequence. The opening sentence of the quotation "[t]hey were back" can be understood as a return of the family walking party, but it can also imply a return to the dream for the dreamer and Sarah. The colour red characterizes the drawing room, a colour that is often affiliated with love, passion and suffering. Red is in particular associated with Eugene, the man who threatens the symbiosis between Henrietta and Sarah: "Against the white mantelpiece stood Eugene. The dark red shadows gathering in the drawing-room as the trees drowned more and more of the sun would reach him last, perhaps never" (CS 679). A sense of threat is strong in the quotation, and it is highlighted in the combination of the colours white and red, colours that together often symbolize death; this foreshadows Eugene's death in the fields on his return home in the evening. Additionally, red symbolizes his "still undeclared love" (CS 679) and this is strongly visualized in "[t]he wallpaper [that] now flamed scarlet behind his shoulder" (CS 679).

Sarah is no longer described by the narrator as someone who sees, feels and knows the others and her surroundings. Instead she is isolated from the others in the room and in

particular from Henrietta; they can no longer communicate without words. Sarah is now portrayed as a character who has no clear remembrance of their walk, and Henrietta confronts her when saying “[s]urely you have not forgotten today?” (CS 681). The dreamer seems to be confronted in the dream with a reality from which she tried to escape; the mood of the wartime setting takes possession of the mood of the dream, and what is left is a feeling of despair and dread:

However rash it might be to speak at all, Sarah wished she knew how to speak more clearly. The obscurity and loneliness of her trouble was not to be borne. How could she put into words the feeling of dislocation, the formless dread that had been with her since she found herself in the drawing-room? The source of both had been what she must call her dream. How could she tell the others with what vehemence she tried to attach her being to each second, not because each was singular in itself, each a drop condensed from the mist of love in the room, but because she apprehended that the seconds were numbered? Her hope was that the others at least half knew. Were Henrietta and Eugene able to understand how completely, how nearly for ever, she had been swept from them, would they not without fail each grasp one of her hands? – She went so far as to throw her hands out, as though alarmed by a wasp. (CS 681)

Once again a lack of language is connected to Sarah in her desire to speak in a way that she could make herself understood. Language is presented as a possible means of escape from Sarah’s situation, and as an alleviation from a feeling of “obscurity and loneliness”, but she is unsuccessful in this endeavour. The gloom of the wartime setting is transferred to the drawing room of the dream. Sarah repeats the dreamer’s movement of throwing her hands out; the alarm associated with the movement indicates a desire for Eugene and Henrietta to wake her up from the dream. The passages “the seconds were numbered” and “how completely, how nearly for ever, she had been swept from them” indicate Sarah’s lack of control, and that her existence is dependent on the dreamer, but without knowing what happens to her. In the last movement from the dream to the wartime setting, we find a similar structure with respect to language that we found in the transferral from the fields to the room:

Henrietta cried: ‘She *is* never out of my sight. Who are you to ask me that, you Eugene? Whatever tries to come between me and Sarah becomes nothing. Yes, come

tomorrow, come sooner, come – when you like, but no one will ever be quite alone with Sarah. You do not even know what you are trying to do. It is *you* who are making something terrible happen. – Sarah, tell him that it is true! Sarah —’

The others, in the dark on the chairs and sofas, could be felt to turn their judging eyes upon Sarah, who, as once before could not speak – (CS 683)

The quotation brings the deadly effects of the symbiosis between Henrietta and Sarah to the fore. Earlier in the story a sense of threat was connected to the presentations of Eugene; he threatens the symbiosis between the sisters, and in the above passage Henrietta threatens him because of the position he tries to take between them. Henrietta demands that Sarah verifies the truth of what she has said, but parallel to the first transferral from the dream to reality, Sarah has lost the ability to speak. Being the object of the others’ gaze silences Sarah; additionally, we find a sense of suffocation in the love Henrietta expresses for Sarah. The suffocating love could also be said to influence Sarah’s ability to talk, and as we saw in the first transferral from the fields, Sarah’s lack of language was connected to a desire to say something to her sister.

#### **4.10 Identity formation in “a rising tide of hallucinations”**

Sarah’s impression of being trapped in a dream is equivalent to the dreamer’s feeling of entrapment in reality. As we have seen the dreamer wishes she could remain in the dream even when she has woken up. Bowen’s understanding of the idea of the dream as a “saving hallucination” is undermined in the dream in “The Happy Autumn Fields”. The idea that it is possible to escape from reality by retreating into a dream is also undermined in this story because dreams always end. In the end the dreamer returns to the wartime setting:

– The house rocked: simultaneously the calico window split and more ceiling fell, though not on the bed. The enormous dull sound of the explosion died, leaving a minor trickle of dissolution still to be heard in parts of the house. Until the choking stinging plaster dust had had time to settle, she lay with lips pressed close, nostrils not breathing and eyes shut. Remembering the box, Mary wondered if it had been again buried. (CS 683)

The explosion brings reality to the fore; previously wartime reality has been avoided by the dreamer, but upon return the focus is set on war itself. Waiting for the aftermath of the explosion to settle, the dreamer on the mattress resembles a corpse. The quotation, however, identifies the dreamer as Mary, thus marking an end to the dream, but the loss of the dream remains, and a sense of not knowing who she is still prevails:

There being nothing left, she wished he would come to take her to the hotel. The one way back to the fields was barred by Mary's surviving the fall of ceiling. Sarah was right in doubting that there would be tomorrow: Eugene, Henrietta were lost in time to the woman weeping there on the bed, no longer reckoning who she was. (CS 683)

The dream as a possible escape has been presented in the story, but to return to the dream is barred by her not being killed in the wartime setting. Mary's survival of the explosion awakens her from the dream, but Sarah remains incorporated as part of the dreamer. But this construction does not provide the character with an understanding of who she is; in the dream there was an identification with Sarah, an identification that alienated her from Mary and from reality. Remnants of the dream still persist in the wartime reality, leaving her at a loss with respect to who she is. A total alienation and distancing from Sarah/Mary is expressed in the narrator's depersonalized use of "the woman" on the bed. The dream as a "saving hallucination" for the individual presents itself as problematic indeed, when all she is left with, is what she wanted to get away from. Maud Ellmann argues that "[i]n this story, past and present blast into one another, shattering the unity of either scene, and tearing down the walls of personal identity" (172). We find that the idealized image of the dream has been torn down, the possibility of returning to an idealized past has been undermined, she has lost the grip of who she is. At the end, the text seems to suggest that she has become nobody. Hermione Lee argues that "Mary is racked with despair. Like Stella, the heroine of *The Heat of the Day*, she is 'a soul astray'" (Bowen 157). All Mary is left with is the memory of the dream, of what it offered. She is left as one of many 'souls astray' in Bowen's prose. The idea of living "strung like a harp" (CS 684) does not apply to wartime reality. Instead, individuals in wartime are left to "imitate love or sorrow" (CS 684). At the end of the story the narrator identifies the dreamer as Mary, a woman who has lost who she is, but who reflects on the experience of the dream, comparing it to the reality she has to live in. Bowen has done everything in her power to

complicate the analysis of a rationally constructed story, where our understanding of the character is constantly challenged. This uncertainty mirrors Mary's reflection at the end of what the present can offer, where the prospects for the present are indeed bleak.

Mary's reflection does not provide any perspective for change with respect to people and the world; indeed, the story suggests that a dialectic of sameness- and selfhood-identity is not possible in wartime reality, and eventually the dreamer's/Mary's identity is locked in a dream. What conclusions does this story allow us to draw about the reactions of a Bowen character whose identity and sense of self are under threat? We have found that the dreamer's loss, or shift, of self is used in the story to highlight the alienation effect, and how a person might prefer death to a return to reality.

The direct consequences of war are more explicitly depicted in "The Happy Autumn Fields" than they are in the story that will be discussed in the next chapter: "Mysterious Kôr". There is a greater focus on the effects of war on the characters' psyche in "The Happy Autumn Fields", while the city and the threat of war are described in "Mysterious Kôr". Both stories, however, take the dream as a central setting with respect to the exploration of identity, where the movement between an idealized past and a present in dissolution and decay is presented. We shall see, however, that the notion of a "saving hallucination" is challenged even more in "Mysterious Kôr", where death seems to be the character's choice rather than returning to life and reality.

## Chapter 5 “Mysterious Kôr”: escape into myth?

You may say that these resistance-fantasies are in themselves frightening. I can only say that one counteracts fear by fear, stress by stress.<sup>1</sup>

### 5.1 Introduction

While identity is seemingly not the prominent theme in “Mysterious Kôr”; it is the primary focus in my analysis of the story. Indeed, I will argue that the story presents us with identity at risk, and that the topic of identity permeates “Mysterious Kôr” in the way that both city and self are presented and transformed. “Mysterious Kôr” introduces us to a character who attempts to escape from the trauma of reality by transforming London into the imaginary city of Kôr, which raises the question of what the character’s transformation and escape imply for her identity. I will argue that the dream in “Mysterious Kôr” expresses selfhood-identity to the extent that there is no room for sameness-identity, because the others are not, in the end, given any place in the dream. This suggests that the dream represents a threat to the dialectic of *idem* and *ipse*. Furthermore, my analysis argues that selfhood-identity is also threatened because of what Kôr represents.

#### 5.1.1 Emptiness

The setting of “Mysterious Kôr” is wartime London, a city under the spell of the moon. ‘Emptiness’ epitomizes the city in “Mysterious Kôr”; the streets of London are empty in

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1. Postscript to the first U.S. edition of *The Demon Lover* (MT 97).



the narrator's initial description, and so is the mythical city of Kôr as envisaged by the main character, Pepita. The narrator's presentation of the emptiness of London, however, proves to be an illusion; in the Underground, inside the buildings, people gather in crowds, leaving no place for the lovers, Arthur and Pepita, to be alone. Thus the inside provides no place for love, and an implicit fear of the outside is conveyed in the buildings filled with people.

The emptiness that characterizes the city-space is central to the question of identity in the story. In *Seven Winters*, emptiness was presented as central to the childhood memories of Dublin. Emptiness was related to the concepts of no-place, nothingness, and nonentity, all concepts that threatened the Bowen child's development as an individual. These were counteracted by the Bowen child's creativity, her imagination, and her development of an internal perception of space that involved the ability to see below the surface, thus creating a tension and an ambivalence in the text. With respect to "Mysterious Kôr" we must ask whether emptiness, no-place, nothingness and nonentity threaten the character.

### 5.1.2 The moon

The young couple walk the streets trying to find a place of their own, away from the crowds of the city. Wandering the streets of London, Pepita transforms London into the mythical city of Kôr. Their attempt to find a place of their own is, however, futile, and in the end they retreat to the flat Pepita shares with Callie, a young woman who has been waiting for the lovers all night. The story ends in Pepita's dream of Kôr.

The outside is the sphere of the moonlight and is presented by the narrator as an uncanny and unwelcoming space. The moonlight also makes it easier for potential enemy bombers to see the city. Pepita's room-mate Callie provides, however, a different perspective on the moon's power over the city: to her the light of the moon provides an ideal place for lovers. The lovers, on the other hand, are not comfortable in the light of the moon. But love is not only thwarted by the lack of solitary places, the couple themselves seem unable to play the part as lovers, so much so that the narrator questions whether they have a common destiny. The story also raises the question of whether there is a place for love in such a city. Furthermore, we need to ask if Pepita's desire to get

away, to find a place of her own, is motivated by her love for Arthur, or is a need for solitude and withdrawal from present day life the central motivating factor? Pepita expresses a desire to be alone with Arthur; that lovers want to be alone is not in itself strange, indeed, this is a desire many lovers dream about. The place she chooses is, however, an empty ghost city. In its initial stages, the text is devoid of human interaction and relationships. Ultimately, this is the situation Pepita prefers.

### 5.1.3 Hallucination

Dream and escape were central features in “The Happy Autumn Fields”, which is also true for “Mysterious Kôr”. As we have seen in Chapter 4, the term “hallucination” was important to Elizabeth Bowen’s understanding of the stories in the collection *The Demon Lover*. She comments in the postscript to the first U.S. edition of the collection that “the order in which the stories stand – an order come at, I may say, casually – seems itself to have a meaning, or to add a meaning, I did not foresee”. As described in Chapter 4, Bowen concludes that she finds “a rising tide of hallucination” in the way the stories are ordered (*MT* 96). We can thus argue that “Mysterious Kôr” represents the peak of hallucination in *The Demon Lover*. But how are we to understand hallucination? I argue that the central concepts in the story and the notion of hallucination connect to self and city in the way these are transformed. Gill Plain comments that “Bowen’s discovery of a ‘rising tide of hallucination’ reveals her considerable understanding of the predicament of the individual in wartime” (18), which thus exemplifies the need for escape from a reality that is too demanding for the individual. We do, however, need to question what the escape itself represents.

Taking Bowen’s own description of the collection as a starting point, we are led to expect that the notion of hallucination is even more pronounced in “Mysterious Kôr” than in “The Happy Autumn Fields”. “The Happy Autumn Fields” presents us with a dreamer who attempts to escape from the horrors of wartime by losing herself in the past. In contrast, “Mysterious Kôr” presents an unpopulated mythical dream world that the main character prefers to the wartime landscape of London. The interplay between city and self is more explicit in “Mysterious Kôr” than in “The Happy Autumn Fields”. Hermione Lee argues that “[w]hat has always characterised her treatment of place is the

loss of self. When places cease to function properly, their inhabitants lose their sense of themselves” (Bowen 152). The importance Bowen gives to place and its importance for self-formation was underscored in my analysis of *Seven Winters*. We find that both for Bowen’s autobiographical and fictional texts, place and self are inextricably intertwined, where an understanding of place is in part particular to the self perceiving that place. For an understanding of identity we need to explore the places the individual relates to and how they affect the individual.

#### 5.1.4 Dysfunctional place

The city of London in wartime represents, what I will describe as, the dysfunctional place in “Mysterious Kôr”. To better understand this, however, we need to ask what defines a dysfunctional place: what actually makes it dysfunctional and consequently leads to a loss of self? It is possible to argue that the escape into the dream represents a state of nonentity for the individual, because she no longer relates to life as it is lived. Describing the wartime city as a dysfunctional place relates to the fear of what might happen; a sense of threat is prevalent in the story. The city is no longer a safe shelter for the inhabitants of London, but constitutes a threat to their lives. They seek an illusionary shelter in buildings; the illusion connects to the idea of buildings as providing protection. The alternative place offered in the story is a non-existent place, a fictional city. That there are no other people in Kôr apart from Pepita and Arthur also implies that the dysfunctional place for the main character is a place crowded with people. With respect to identity we need to ask if a fictional and mythical place where the bonds to life and other people are severed, can represent a functional and saving place for the character.

## 5.2 *She*

Henry Rider Haggard’s novel *She: A History of Adventure* was an important reading-experience for the young Elizabeth Bowen, an experience the adult writer described in a radio programme in 1947.<sup>2</sup> Haggard’s novel serves as a backdrop for the story where the title, “Mysterious Kôr”, is the first intertextual reference provided. The title links us to

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2. The broadcast is reprinted in *Afterthought*.

Haggard's novel, where the abandoned city of Kôr is introduced. The name Kôr and the moon are the two elements from Haggard's novel that are explicitly included in Bowen's story. The goddess 'She' is, however, not mentioned in "Mysterious Kôr". 'She' represents a destructive power in Haggard's novel, while the powers of death and destruction are ascribed to the moon in Bowen's story. Bowen highlights the narrator Horace Holly as the most powerful character in her radio talk of Haggard's novel. Holly is the one who has the power to tell the story, he has "[t]he power of the pen" (*MT* 250), which is also true of the author of "Mysterious Kôr". The title of Bowen's story is, however, drawn from Andrew Lang's sonnet "She to H.R.H.",<sup>3</sup> which was inspired by Haggard's novel. "The Happy Autumn Fields" refers directly to Lang's sonnet and not to Haggard's novel, and parts of the octave of Lang's sonnet are quoted in the story.

'You know all about it,' he said, looking at her.  
 'I know, I know all about it.'  
 'What, since you read that book?'  
 'Oh, I didn't get much from that; I just got the name. I knew that must be the right name; it's like a cry.'  
 (*CS* 729-730)

Pepita identifies with the name "Kôr" and associates it with a cry. A cry is an expression of desperation, and signals a need for help and attention; all of which relate to the character who feels lost in a world where there is little or no room for her and her needs.

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3. Andrew Lang (1844-1912)  
 Not in the waste beyond the swamps and sand,  
 The fever-haunted forest and lagoon,  
 Mysterious Kôr thy walls forsaken stand,  
 Thy lonely towers beneath the lonely moon,  
 Not there doth Ayesha linger, rune by rune  
 Spelling strange scriptures of a people banned,  
 The world is disenchanting; over soon  
 Shall Europe send her spies through all the land.

Nay, not in Kôr, but in whatever spot,  
 In town or field, or by the insatiate sea,  
 Men brood on buried loves, and unforgot,  
 Or break themselves on some divine decree,  
 Or would o'erleap the limits of their lot,  
 There, in the tombs and deathless, dwelleth she!  
 (Lang 168)

Thus the name resonates for Pepita and she finds comfort in what it represents for her. The story “Mysterious Kôr” suggests that wartime dissolves individuality. Kôr offers the desired space, but it is also at the same time a dead city. Although Kôr is empty and London is full of people, they have something in common, because London is seemingly empty of human sympathy and connections.

### 5.3 The moon’s capital

“Mysterious Kôr” opens with a description of the topography of London, as seen by the light of the moon:

Full moonlight drenched the city and searched it; there was not a niche left to stand in. The effect was remorseless: London looked like the moon’s capital – shallow, cratered, extinct. It was late, but not yet midnight; now the buses had stopped the polished roads and streets in this region sent for minutes together a ghostly unbroken reflection up. The soaring new flats and the crouching old shops and houses looked equally brittle under the moon, which blazed in windows that looked its way. The futility of the black-out became laughable: from the sky, presumably, you could see every slate in the roofs, every whited kerb, every contour of the naked winter flowerbeds in the park; and the lake, with its shining twists and tree-darkened islands would be a landmark for miles, yes, miles, overhead. (CS 728)

The opening paragraph presents the moonlight as a strong and remorseless power with the ability to transform; London with its streets and houses is, in contrast, fragile in the light of the moon. The city and the people of London try to hide, but are completely vulnerable and fully exposed in the moon’s searchlight, a situation that is emphasized in the presentation of the empty roads and streets as mirrors that reflect the city’s topography and that make the map of London visible from above. Even the houses are brittle, indicating that there is nowhere to hide, no place is safe. From the perspective of the moon and potential enemy bombers, London is presented as a ghost city.

Visibility is underscored in the opening paragraph: everything can be seen from above, and the narrator mocks the idea that it is possible to hide the city by pulling down the blinds on the electric light. The story suggests a need to hide, but if the bombers come, there is nowhere to hide. The light of the moon pervades the story, a light that is

intense and in control; everything has succumbed to the destructive and dangerous power of the light. The emphasis on destruction relates to the symbolic representation of the moon as a deity that controls the cycle of life and the creation of the universe; death and rebirth are associated with the cyclical movement of the moon. The moon is often presented as a symbol of female power, where the sun is the male counterpart. The darker forces of the moon have a predominant role in the narrator's presentation.

Military vocabulary is used to describe the moon's power, thus echoing the wartime setting of the story. This use of language is illustrated in the way the moonlight "searched" the city. The power of the moon is also expressed in a language of siege and conquest, underscoring the moon's control and lack of mercy over London and its people.<sup>4</sup> The tone of the introductory paragraph establishes a feeling of insecurity and threat; no positive connotations are implied in the transformation of the city in the glare of the moon. The first paragraph introduces us to an emptiness that focuses on spatiality and topography, but also on the paradox a city emptied of people represents.

## 5.4 Transformation

The total transformation of London that takes place in the light of the moon is most strongly and ominously suggested in the statement that London looks "like the moon's capital – shallow, cratered, extinct". This suggests a wartime scenario where the horrors of war result in the demise of civilization. There is no human movement in the initial paragraph, but people are alluded to in the phrase "there was no niche left to stand in". In the moonlight London has become an unwelcoming place for humans. The word "remorseless" sets the tone for our understanding of the topographical description of London, depicting the effect of the moon's light and a sense of no turning back, that an irreversible process has started.

London's transformation conveys the threat of destruction and annihilation. This is also emphasized by the winter setting for the story; winter often symbolizes death. Jeslyn Medoff comments that "[t]he moon creates a futuristic city, exposing the ultimate threat

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4. Other examples of the moon and its powers that have a military connotation are: "dropping round the edges", "[a] search-light", "her defended window", "[l]ight marched in" (CS 734), "[t]he siege of light", "a look of survival and no more" (CS 739).

of this world war, that the earth may become a barren planet, another reflector, like the moon, ‘shallow, cratered, extinct’” (77). While the fear of what might happen if everything is destroyed is integral to the story, I will argue that the city created in the light of the moon by the narrator and subsequently by Pepita, is not a futuristic city, but a mythical city, the city of Kôr.

The description of London as the moon’s capital alludes to Kôr as it is later visualized by Pepita. We could argue that from the very beginning of the story London has already become Kôr in the narrator’s focalization, and that the transformation into the imaginary city of Kôr is merely made explicit by Pepita. The narrator sets the scene for the transformation, for the possibility of seeing London differently. The first paragraph introduces us to a city in the light of the moon that is helpless and victimized. The spatial fragility reflects on the people living in the city, where the total exposure of topography also results in fundamentally exposing and threatening people’s lives. This seems to suggest that where everything is seen and there is no privacy, there can be no identity. Identity becomes fragile in a spatial situation where death threatens. But for Pepita, the city of Kôr is a fascinating and attractive place to be; the reader, however, perceives Kôr with a feeling of ambiguity.

### **5.5 Threat, emptiness and silence**

The second paragraph explicitly introduces war: “The Germans no longer came by the full moon” (CS 728). The narrator suggests that German bombing is unlikely, indicating that the story is set after the Blitz. The Luftwaffe’s night-time bombings during the Blitz created more fear in the population of London than their daytime attacks did. Angus Calder comments in *The People’s War* that “at night, no pretence of normality was possible. Except in the depths of the tube, no one escaped the noises of the blitz, and even there those with their bodies against the walls felt its vibrations” (170). The German strategy of massive air raids during the Blitz was to scare the British into defeat. This strategy did not, however, have the desired effect; gradually a strong resistance against the German bombings rose, and Gill Plain suggests that “business as usual” (1-13) and “making sense” (13-20) were two of the strategies used by the British population to

create a sense of normality in a situation where everything is under threat. Elizabeth Bowen comments in the essay “London, 1940” that “[f]ear is not cumulative: each night it starts from scratch. On the other hand, resistance becomes a habit. And, better, it builds up a general fund” (*MT* 23), thus indicating that resistance, in contrast to fear, accumulates and becomes stronger.

The predominant tone in “Mysterious Kôr” is, however, not one of resistance, but of fear and threat. The story possibly presents feelings that were publicly more dominant at the outset of the war, while later a different sense of normality took hold. From a historical perspective, therefore, it is interesting that “Mysterious Kôr” focuses on feelings that had a stronger hold on the population during the initial stages of the war, since the short story takes place after the Blitz. Thus “Mysterious Kôr” represents a reflection of the initial responses to the war from the time before public resistance became strong, at the same time that the narrator seems to indicate that these were feelings that prevailed on the individual level throughout the war.

The threat of German bombers does not seem imminent in the story, but a sense of threat is still present, although this is a less explicit threat than what the German bombers represent: “Something more immaterial seemed to threaten, and to be keeping people at home” (*CS* 728). Thus the uncanny feeling of the beginning is emphasized in the second paragraph by the narrator; the streets are emptied of people, they seek refuge in their homes from an immaterial threat. Once again emptiness is conjured up by focusing on the lack of presence of people and buses. Other aspects that complement emptiness in the story, are the silence and tenseness that characterize human habitation:

This day between days, this extra tax, was perhaps more than senses and nerves could bear. People stayed indoors with a fervour that could be felt: the buildings strained with battened-down human life, but not a beam, not a voice, not a note from a radio escaped. Now and then under streets and buildings the earth rumbled: the Underground sounded loudest at this time. (*CS* 728)

There is a strong hidden and restrained passion in the city, as if the buildings are about to burst. But still — nothing escapes, there is no sound, no light, no sign of life from the people inside the buildings. Silence characterizes the human habitation, at the same time that an explicit feeling of nervousness is palpable. Nothing escapes to be heard outside,



while at the same time the reader has an impression that the houses are about to burst because the text conveys a sense of the repressed feelings and emotions contained within the houses. The buildings are personified as containers of repressed, restrained emotion and passion, thus exemplifying the effects of war on the citizens of London, but at the same time the uncanny has taken hold of the story, suggesting something other than the consequences of war. The only sound to be heard emerges from under the ground, and because of the emptiness that fills the streets, the sound from the Underground becomes particularly dominating and loud. The sound and the rumbling of the Underground anticipate Pepita's and Arthur's arrival, both in the sense that they arrive by the Underground, but also in that new voices are about to enter the narrative.

## 5.6 The narrator

The narrator establishes the place and the mood of the story in the opening paragraphs of the story. No characters are presented at the outset, instead they gradually appear in the third paragraph. The opening of the story thus introduces place and it presents us with the voice of the narrator.

The use of a narratorial introduction to place is not Bowen's most common opening approach. All of the stories in Bowen's first collection *Encounters* (1923), open by presenting a character. This is not to say that place is unimportant in these stories, but the direct introduction of character does not provide the panoramic view of place that we encounter in "Mysterious Kôr", where we move from the wide perspective of place, gradually focusing on the characters. The narratorial introduction and focalization ostensibly give the voice of the narrator more authority. The introduction of characters in the first paragraph is the most prominent technique used in Bowen's work as a whole. Place is, however, generally connected to character in these introductions.<sup>5</sup> Bowen only wrote three stories in the 1920s in which she structured the story around the narratorial

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5. See for example the opening of *Eva Trout*: "'This is where we were to have spent the honeymoon,' Eva Trout said, suddenly, pointing across the water" (*ET* 11), and *The House in Paris*: "In a taxi skidding away from the Gare du Nord, one dark greasy February morning before the shutters were down, Henrietta sat beside Miss Fisher" (*HP* 17).

introduction of place.<sup>6</sup> We do, however, see a gradual increase in Bowen's use of the introductory paragraph for introducing place in her work after the 1920s.<sup>7</sup>

### 5.6.1 Repetition and narratorial authority

We are introduced to a narrator who observes and listens to the city, who searches the city for movement and sound, and in so doing presents an empty city, where a sense of threat is present. The initial paragraphs establish the narrator as someone with authority to focus our attention on what is happening in the here and now. To achieve this effect, Bowen uses repetitions as a narratorial technique that highlights where we are and what we are observing. Repetition is a distinctive feature of the narrator's voice that separates it from the dialogic form, which is used to describe the relationships between the characters of the story. Repeating "every" and "a landmark for miles, yes, miles, overhead" (CS 728) in the opening paragraph presents the panoramic perspective of the moon and the visibility and vulnerability of the city. This also gives the moon and possibly the narrator an omnipotent position in the story. Lack of human movement in the streets is underscored in the repetition of "not" in the second paragraph: "but not a beam, not a voice, not a note from a radio escaped" (CS 728). The repetition accentuates the feeling of imprisonment of human life that is characteristic of the opening of the story. The spatial and temporal repetition of "[a]t this point, at this moment" (CS 728) in the third paragraph introduces the characters in the text; additionally, it emphasizes that this is happening here and now. The narratorial introduction takes up the story's three opening paragraphs, and structurally the ending of the story parallels the opening, consisting of three paragraphs in the voice of the narrator. Additionally, the technique of repetition is reiterated in the ending in the rhythmic pounding of "with him" (CS 739), and in the descriptive phrase of Kôr's "wide, void, pure streets" (CS 739-740).

A close connection between the moon and the narrator is established at the outset of the story, where the narrator provides more description of the power of the moon than

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6. These are "The Dancing-Mistress", "The Working Party" and "The Cassowary". Other examples of stories where Bowen uses this technique are: "Summer Night" (1941), "In the Square" (1941), "Ivy Gripped the Steps" (1945) and "A Day in the Dark" (1955).

7. Bowen's novels, *The Death of the Heart* (1938), *The Heat of the Day* (1949) and *A World of Love* (1955) are introduced with narratorial descriptions of place.

descriptions of the characters, which opens for an equilibrium between the narrator and the moon with respect to power and authority. The authority of the narrator is most emphatically apparent when the reader is directly placed as a focalizer in the text by the narrator, as will be discussed shortly. The beginning focuses on topography; subsequently, we observe a movement from an external perspective to an internal/individual perspective, where the focus is on the characters and their perceptions. Dialogue is the predominant narrative technique used to explore the relationships between the characters; consequently, the narrator's voice is less prominent when dialogue dominates the narrative. The function of the narrator in these sections of the story is more that of the distanced commentator. The perception of the narrator as someone who is powerful and omnipotent signals an approach to life which is radically different from that of the inhabitants of London. The sense of threat that marks the city and its inhabitants does not seem to affect the narrator.

## **5.7 The reader**

The initial external perspective introduces the voice of the narrator, a voice that attempts to focus, and possibly control, the reader's attention.

Outside the now gateless gates of the park, the road coming downhill from the north-west turned south and became a street, down whose perspective the traffic lights went through their unmeaning performance of changing colour. From the promontory of pavement outside the gates you saw at once up the road and down the street: from behind where you stood, between the gate-posts, appeared the lesser strangeness of grass and water and trees. At this point, at this moment [...]. (CS 728)

From a position outside of the park, a perspective of roads and streets is presented to us. For the first time the narrator uses the pronoun "you," which can be understood as an attempt to place the actual reader in the text, seeing what the narrator sees, or what the narrator intends the reader to see. By addressing the reader as "you" the reader is placed as an observer in the text, and thus becomes part of the text. The technique of repetition emphasizes that this is happening now. The effect of this is a sense for the reader of being present in the action as an onlooker or audience to the dialogue that will shortly take

place between Arthur and Pepita. The placement of the reader visualizes the horizontal narrative model of communication that consists of addresser, message and addressee (Jakobson 34), representing the basic narrative situation of narrator, story and reader (Aaslestad 29).<sup>8</sup>

The narrator places the reader in the text as an urban observer, thus the narrator acts as a producer who stages the scene. As a narrative technique the involvement of the reader in the text needs further comment, particularly with respect to what we understand by the concept 'reader'. The concepts of the implied reader and the actual reader<sup>9</sup> can be used to help in answering this question. The Norwegian literary critic Asbjørn Aarseth explains the implied reader as "a structural entity; a presence in the work of fiction that is independent of the historical person who has or has had a reader relationship with the text" (28).<sup>10</sup> The actual readers are historical entities with different backgrounds and knowledge; which consequently implies a difference with respect to how a reader contemporary with Bowen would approach the text, as compared to a present-day reader. Additionally, Aarseth claims that the narrator's direct approach to the reader implies that the writer, as the creator of the role of the narrator, also creates a role for the reader. As non-coerced readers, we make a conscious choice of entering this role. When we read a story or a novel we enter a world of fiction and let a part of ourselves succumb to the power of illusion; "the other part is, however, all the time aware of the essential dividing line between illusion and reality", according to Aarseth (27).<sup>11</sup> A reader can thus be a participant in the world of fiction, but is always simultaneously anchored in the world of reality. When the narrator invites the reader to feel included among those referred to as "you" in "Mysterious Kôr", this can be understood as an invitation for the actual reader to enter the role as implicit reader of the text. Aarseth argues that what the writer and

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8. Petter Aaslestad comments with reference to Wolfgang Kayser that "someone telling something to somebody" epitomizes the epical ursituation (29).

9. These are terms constructed by Wolfgang Iser and discussed in his books *The Implied Reader* and *The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response*.

10. My translation. Norwegian text: "en strukturell instans, en tilstedeværelse i verket, uavhengig av den historiske personen som har eller har hatt et leserforhold til verket".

11. My translation. Norwegian text: "mens den andre delen hele tiden er klar over det vesentlige skillet mellom illusjon og virkelighet".

reader as historical entities have in common as extra-textual entities is that they both for a period become text-immanent entities (31).

The narrator in “Mysterious Kôr” places the reader in the text, looking in one particular direction with the back turned to the park. What the reader sees is the perspective of roads, streets and traffic lights. What the reader does not see from her position in the text, and what is barely indicated by the narrator, is “the lesser strangeness of grass and water and trees” in the park, thus the narrator juxtaposes the topography of the city against the topography of the park.

## 5.8 Human movement

The explicit involvement of the reader in the text also introduces a shift in the text, which becomes evident when we continue to the next section of this paragraph:

At this point, at this moment, three French soldiers, directed to a hostel they could not find, stopped singing to listen derisively to the waterbirds wakened by the moon. Next, two wardens coming off duty emerged from their post and crossed the road diagonally, each with an elbow cupped inside a slung-on tin hat. The wardens turned their faces, mauve in the moonlight, towards the Frenchmen with no expression at all. The two sets of steps died in opposite directions, and, the birds subsiding, nothing was heard or seen until, a little way down the street, a trickle of people came out of the Underground, around the anti-panic brick wall. (CS 728-729)

Human movement is now included in the text, which negates the beginning of the story where the narrator’s emphasis was on emptiness and lack of movement in the streets. We stop to watch the Frenchmen and the wardens, as if they were actors on a stage. The narrator presents movements, facial colour and sound, and as in the introductory paragraph, this description serves to underscore the negative mood in the text. Previously we have discussed how silence was presented as a counterpart to emptiness; in this quotation, however, silence is subtly broken. That the Frenchmen were singing is only revealed to the reader after they have stopped singing and have turned their attention to the birds, and that the birds are singing is depicted in the action of the Frenchmen: they stop to listen. Stopping characterizes this passage – we stop to watch, time stops, the

Frenchmen stop to listen to the birds, the Frenchmen and the wardens stop to watch each other. With the presentation of the Frenchmen and the wardens people are introduced in the text, which anticipates the next human movement in the text: people coming out of the Underground:

[They] all disappeared quickly, in an abashed way, or as though dissolved in the street by some white acid, but for a girl and a soldier who, by their way of walking, seemed to have no destination but each other and to be not quite certain even of that. Blotted into one shadow he tall, she little, these two proceeded towards the park. They looked in, but did not go in; they stood there debating without speaking. Then, as though a command from the street behind them had been received by their synchronized bodies, they faced round to look back the way they had come. (CS 729)

Once again we encounter the moon as a violent power in the story, this time in the description of the people's disappearance from the street. Danger, destruction and death are implied in the allusion to the moon as "white acid". The narrator first presents a natural pattern of movement, but then turns to violence and the uncanny, thus upholding the illusion created in the story while a sense of destruction and death are underscored.

### 5.8.1 Love

The girl and the soldier walk towards the park, but similar to the reader's placement in the text, they remain outside the park and turn away from the park and face the streets of the city. The movement takes place in silence. Love is introduced in the notion that they "seemed to have no destination but each other"; whether love has a place is, however, immediately questioned in the next phrase of the sentence, thus establishing an uncertainty about the role of love in the text. Love constitutes an important element in the construction of identity; in Bowen's work generally, however, love is constantly undermined; this also seems to be the case for the lovers in "Mysterious Kôr". This uncertainty about love is repeated throughout the text and underscored in the final sentence of the story, where it becomes clear that Arthur is not Pepita's destination.

### 5.8.2 Kôr

Even though this uncertainty is planted in the reader, we also see that the girl and the soldier move as “synchronized bodies”, but this notion of synchronization is broken in the next paragraph where the girl moves away from the soldier and imagines London as ‘Mysterious Kôr’:

She slid her hand from his sleeve, stepped to the edge of the pavement and said:

‘Mysterious Kôr.’

‘What is?’ he said, not quite collecting himself.

‘This is –

*“Mysterious Kôr thy walls forsaken stand,  
Thy lonely towers beneath a lonely moon –”*

– this is Kôr.’

‘Why,’ he said, ‘it’s years since I’ve thought of that.’

She said: ‘I think of it all the time –

*“Not in the waste beyond the swamps and sand,  
The fever-haunted forest and lagoon,  
Mysterious Kôr thy walls ——”*

– a completely forsaken city, as high as cliffs and as white as bones, with no history  
—— ’ (CS 729)

The girl moves away to the edge of the pavement, distancing herself from her companion, thus allowing herself to observe more freely. She stands alone, seeing and transforming London into Kôr, the forsaken city, as it is presented in Lang’s sonnet. She begins by quoting the third and fourth lines of the octave, and goes on to line one, two and three in the next quotation. This circular movement and repetition highlight the title of the story. As we have seen, the narrator has already set the scene for the introduction of Kôr, we have already started to envisage London as it is presented to us in the poem. Based on this we have to ask: what does Kôr, as space, represent?

Looking back at the first paragraph London is transformed into the moon’s capital. Additionally, the use of the adjective “extinct” underscores destruction and death as central to the transformation that takes place. The above passage alludes to death; in

addition, emptiness and a lack of history are emphasized. London becomes a ghost city, and we seem to witness a movement from a war space where destruction and annihilation are visualized, to a city of death. Thus the difference between the two spatial constructions relates to how death is understood. Kôr is already a city of death; London, on the other hand, is under the threat of becoming a city of death. This implies a movement from life to death, and the text suggests that this is a movement the character seems to be willing to make to get away from the landscape of war; she thus loses touch with lived life in imagining London as Kôr. The escape does not eradicate the individual, but an essential closeness to life is threatened in the choice of a place that can only be found in dreams and the imaginary transformation of the city. Compared to *Seven Winters*, where we found that imagination represented a positive alternative for the child, imagination is not necessarily presented as positive in “Mysterious Kôr”.

### 5.8.3 Arthur

Arthur is Pepita’s companion on the walk in night-time London, and he initially questions her transformation of London into Kôr. He asks why the city was forsaken, how it is possible that it is still standing after thousands of years, and, using the sonnet as his point of reference, he attempts to argue that no such place can exist. Arthur also refers to the power of the moon and asks if the moon makes her funny (CS 729-730); he thus alludes to the moon’s special power over women and also questions Pepita’s judgement and rationality. Thus Arthur takes the logical and rational approach in his response to Pepita’s transformation of the city. Pepita, on the other hand, argues that “I see what it makes me see” (CS 730). Her rationale for seeing Kôr is based on her inner perception of Kôr, where she attributes the meaning to Kôr that she wants it to have. She does, however, relate to the way it is presented in the sonnet as the place she desires to be: emptied of people, no history, monumental, a city “white as bones” thus alluding to death. A sterile, empty and dead city is what Pepita chooses; suggesting a character who has given up on life, who no longer believes in civilization, who only believes that everything will change for the worse.

Arthur is initially doubtful about the construction of Kôr that Pepita presents to him; he is also doubtful about the desire to go there and the motivation for doing so. Arthur’s



response to Pepita's vision of Kôr underscores the uncertainty framed by the initial narratorial introduction of the couple as to whether or not they have a common destiny. They have different agendas and perspectives on life. He asks her whether she does not think about people, to which Pepita replies: "How can anyone think about people if they've got any heart?" (CS 730). This statement involves the reflection that it is impossible to think about people because of the misery they experience during wartime. Pepita thus implies that we cannot think about people because of our compassion for them. The comment could also reflect Pepita's self-pity more than anything else. To think about people would also involve a reflection on her own situation. Pepita's idea of Kôr as an escape from war seems to be motivated by the idea that Kôr will exist forever. Even when civilization as we know it has disappeared, Kôr will still be there. She thus distances herself completely from reality.

'Oh, yes, I cheered up some time ago. This war shows we've by no means come to the end. If you can blow whole places out of existence, you can blow whole places into it. I don't see why not. They say we can't say what's come out since the bombing started. By the time we've come to the end, Kôr may be the one city left: the abiding city. I should laugh.' (CS 730)

Gradually, however, Arthur is persuaded to accept the idea that London has been transformed into Kôr, and that they are there alone. But the illusion does not have enough power to convince them, there is still no place for love. In Kôr time is not accounted for in the same way as in real life, Pepita does not want Arthur to ask "What next?" (CS 731) when in Kôr. Thus spatial and temporal parameters of real life are suspended in Kôr. When Arthur introduces the idea that they should populate Kôr, Pepita has to face reality, and for the first time Pepita is the one who gives a rational, albeit ironic, response: "I suppose it would be all right if our children were to marry each other?" (CS 731). An allusion to Genesis is implied in Pepita's response, suggesting a new beginning. With this response the text suggests that Pepita's aim in escaping to Kôr is not her love for Arthur, nor is it an idea of creating a safe haven for a potential family life. Kôr represents a total escape where the bonds to a life lived in a wartime reality are severed, so that escaping to Kôr does not constitute a realization of love. This becomes blatantly clear in the final sentence of the story where Kôr becomes a place for Pepita, but not a place for

lovers. Love seems impossible in wartime London, and love is non-existent in the mythical city of Kôr.

### 5.9 The detached observer

Pepita and Arthur seek a place of their own, but in the end they must go to the flat Pepita shares with Callie, where Arthur is staying the night. Arthur is given Pepita's bed, while Pepita sleeps with Callie. Callie has been waiting for Pepita and Arthur all night, and her character introduces us to a different perspective of the city. She is one of the people who fill the houses of London; she abides by the rules of the house and of war by turning off the radio and switching off the light at the right time, and by pulling down the blinds. When all of this is done she turns her attention to the outside:

At once she knew that something was happening – outdoors, in the street, the whole of London, the world. An advance, an extraordinary movement was silently taking place; blue-white beams overflowed from it, silting, dropping round the edges of the muffling black-out curtains. When, starting up, she knocked a fold of the curtain, a beam like a mouse ran across her bed. A search-light, the most powerful of all time, might have been turned full and steady upon her defended window; finding flaws in the black-out stuff, it made veins and stars. Once gained by this idea of pressure she could not lie down again; she sat tautly, drawn-up knees touching her breasts, and asked herself if there were anything she should do. She parted the curtains, opened them slowly wider, looked out – and was face to face with the moon. (*CS* 733-734)

Once again we encounter the powerful searchlight of the moon, but this time the moon has entered a forbidden area: the flat. We have seen that the narrator's presentation of Pepita introduces us to an observer who has the power to transform what she sees. Callie, on the other hand, sees the city from the inside, from behind the curtains. Callie can be understood as an observer who is influenced or transformed by what she sees. Callie's action in this passage is a forbidden act; being drawn to the outside she opens the curtains, and thus becomes enclosed in the intervening light of the moon. The light fills the darkness of the room. Callie is captivated by the power of the moon, and in the light of the moon she sees the outside streets and houses, and the moon illuminates the things in the flat:

Light marched in past her face, and she turned to see where it went: out stood the curves and garlands of the great white marble Victorian mantel-piece of that lost drawing-room; out stood, in the photographs turned her way, the thoughts with which her parents had faced the camera, and the humble puzzlement of her two dogs at home. Of silver brocade, just faintly purpled with roses, became her house-coat hanging over the chair. And the moon did more: it exonerated and beautified the lateness of the lovers' return. No wonder, she said to herself, no wonder – if this was the world they walked in, if this was whom they were with. Having drunk in the white explanation, Callie lay down again. Her half of the bed was in shadow, but she allowed one hand to lie, blanched, in what would be Pepita's place. She lay and looked at the hand until it was no longer her own. (CS 734)

For the first time in the story the moon is related to romance and to love. In the eyes of Callie the outside is idealized as a site for lovers, thus contrasting with the narrator's presentation of the moon's destructive powers. Callie is enchanted by the moon, it is given an explanatory force that redeems the lateness of the lovers. The moon is presented as a companion for lovers, not as an adversary. Callie is, however, an example of one of the Bowen characters who has not experienced love, thus her perception of the moon's power reflects a romanticized ideal of love. The colour white alludes to the light of the moon, and earlier the narrator has described it as "white acid" (CS 729); in contrast Callie drinks in "the white explanation". Even though positive connotations are associated with the moon in this passage, the idea of destruction prevails, allowing for the idea that drinking in the white explanation involves a lethal activity. At the same time the use of military vocabulary depicts the moon's advance into the room. Everything can be seen in the light of the moon, even, rather uncannily, her parents' thoughts. The moon's power to transform is also suggested in Callie's estrangement from her hand, it is no longer part of her body, making the light of the moon instrumental in the corporeal estrangement Callie experiences. A corporeal loss also involves loss of identity, thus the power of the moon is presented as potentially dangerous for the character. This indicates that transformation takes place in an interplay between the light of the moon and an observer. The observer here is Callie, but as we have seen this interplay also takes place in the transformations made by the narrator and Pepita.

## 5.10 Finality

Late at night the light of the moon no longer has a hold on the city, everything has returned to normality, London is no longer transformed, it is no longer the moon's capital:

Indeed, the moon's power over London and the imagination had now declined. The siege of light had relaxed; the search was over; the street had a look of survival and no more. (CS 739)

The presentation of the street is disturbing; instead of imbuing comfort it indicates that survival is an illusion, destruction is not imminent, we are instead faced with a notion of destruction postponed. Having lost its grip over London in real life, Kôr still exists in the dreams, and the story ends with Pepita's dream of Kôr:

She still lay, as she had lain, in an avid dream, of which Arthur had been the source, of which Arthur was not the end. With him she looked this way, that way, down the wide, void, pure streets, between statues, pillars and shadows, through archways and colonnades. With him she went up the stairs down which nothing but moon came; with him trod the ermine dust of the endless halls, stood on terraces, mounted the extreme tower, looked down on the statued squares, the wide, void, pure streets. He was the password, but not the answer: it was to Kôr's finality that she turned. (CS 739-740)

Arthur is her companion in the dream, they walk the streets of Kôr together, and the repetition in the text underscores the topography of Kôr and creates a wave motion in the description of their walk. The wave motion is highlighted in their movement up and down the stairs of the city. Initially in the dream, Arthur is Pepita's companion, but the last sentence of the story shows that Arthur does not represent an answer to Pepita's desires. The text seemingly suggests that identity is not constructed in interaction with others, and if this is the case, sameness-identity is not part of Pepita's quest. Instead Pepita, rather ominously, turns to Kôr's finality. Does the notion of finality imply a "saving hallucination"? As we have seen, Pepita presents Kôr as the abiding city; the city that will still be there when everything else is lost, thus the imaginary city is given a permanence that is not related to the real world. The last sentence of the story contrasts with the idea of Kôr as abiding. If we were to relate the notion of finality to the city, as is

most often done, it would undermine the idea of the abiding city, and would create a possible ambiguity in the story. I will argue, however, that finality in this context does not relate to the destiny of the city, rather finality describes the consequences for the character in choosing the mythical city of Kôr. Pepita actively chooses what the alternative Kôr offers to her and finality relates to this choice. My understanding of “finality” contrasts with that of Phyllis Lassner, who claims that “Pepita is freed by the woman writer’s critical imagination. The very ‘finality’ of Kor which represents the end of imperial solutions is for Pepita the beginning of a new kind of plotting for female character entrapped in war” (*British Women Writers* 154). Lassner connects finality to the city of Kôr, while it is not conceptually connected to the character. I will argue that finality underscores the notion of Kôr as a city of death, suggesting that a threat to the character is issued in the final sentence of the story, a threat that implies death. Thus the city will survive and remain an empty, dead, sterile ghost city. The threat that Kôr represents to the individual is captured by Callie in her night-time talk with Arthur:

[...] — Well, I can’t see any harm: when two people have got no place, why not want Kôr, as a start? There are no restrictions on wanting, at any rate’  
‘But, oh, Arthur, can’t wanting want what’s human?’ (CS 738)

Callie’s response to Arthur’s reflections about Kôr goes to the core of what the mythical city represents in the story; as a place of escape it represents a threat to lived life; it is an inhuman place, a place of death. Callie is the character who makes it more evident for the reader that this is indeed a story of death. Callie is an important secondary character whose observations help us to achieve a better understanding of the other characters. In “Mysterious Kôr” Callie plays a role similar to the one played by Louie Lewis in *The Heat of the Day*. As we shall see, Louie is the character who sees Stella as she really is.

However, many critics consider Pepita’s escape to Kôr as a positive outcome for the character in escaping from the trauma of wartime; this understanding is in accordance with Bowen’s notion of a “saving hallucination” as a positive concept. Jeslyn Medoff argues that the fantasy city in “Mysterious Kôr” is a “spiritual bomb shelter, a place for the soul to seek safety when there is literally no refuge for the body” (78). If Kôr is presented as a shelter for the soul, but not for the body, this raises the problem of

corporeality and identity. Chapter 2 discussed Elizabeth Grosz's sense of the explanatory force of the body with respect to identity. Severing the bond between body and soul, as Medoff argues, damages the individual's ability to achieve a meaningful sense of self. If the "saving hallucination" represents a shelter for the soul, but not for the body, what kind of identity is the individual left with? Phyllis Lassner argues that in "Mysterious Kôr" "the imaginative possession of place" is depicted "as a possibility for the construction of the female self" (*British Women Writers* 154), and Deborah Parsons also presents the imagined city of Kôr as a rescue:

Threatened London is supported in the female imagination by a sense of eternal strength, as represented by the imagined city, Kôr. Kôr is the fantasy landscape, accessed through dreaming, that is denied to Londoners in waking life, and as such it acts as an alternative, imaginary space—London's reflection rather than its 'other', and a dream realm where the desires of everyday life can be accommodated. Pepita does not remain trapped within this dreamworld, however, [...], but remembers it in the waking world, translating it onto the moonlit London around her. (204)

Parsons presents Kôr as an imaginary escape that accommodates a female urban vision of the city. In so doing she takes the liberty of representing a chronology of events that is not in accordance with the story. Parsons claims that Kôr is first presented to Pepita and to us in a dream, when in fact Pepita does not initially access Kôr through dreaming. She transforms London into Kôr when awake, and the story *ends* in the dream of Kôr and its finality, thus implying that Pepita is indeed trapped in a dream world, which for the character is a pessimistic perspective.

To support the notion of a female urban vision Parsons argues that "Arthur is representative of a common male type in Bowen's wartime, expressing a fatalistic view of society as a result of the loss of past traditions" (205). The story does not, however, impart such an understanding of Arthur; instead, fatalism is related to Pepita and her criticism of civilization:

'What it tries to say doesn't matter: I see what it makes me see. Anyhow, that was written some time ago, at that time when they thought they had got everything taped, because the whole world had been explored, even the middle of Africa. Every thing and place had been found and marked on some map; so what wasn't marked on any map

couldn't be there at all. So *they* thought: that was why he wrote the poem. "*The world is disenchanted,*" it goes on. That was what set me off hating civilization. (CS 730)

Pepita's criticism of civilization indicates a rejection of the 'real' world. In the real world there are no illusions left, there is nothing to hope for. This implies a loss of the ability to imagine other solutions. Pepita's rejection of the world results from the sense of disenchantment she has with the world. Her escape to Kôr represents an imaginary and creative endeavour, but in the end the consequences of this escape are perilous for the individual. The narrator does not evaluate or comment on Pepita's criticism of civilization; the narrator holds a relatively neutral position.

It is possible to argue that Arthur retreats to the past and that he is presented as traditional because his desires are directed at Pepita and the idea of marriage and children, but at the same time we find that Arthur is intrigued by Pepita's idea of Kôr, to the point that he too dreams of Kôr. Waking up in the middle of the night, he describes to Callie his observation of Pepita's transformation of London into Kôr, and how this affected him:

[...] I could have sworn she saw it, and from the way she saw it I saw it, too. A game's a game, but what's a hallucination? You begin by laughing, then it gets you and you can't laugh it off. I tell you, I woke up just now not knowing where I'd been; and I had to get up and feel round this table before I even knew where I was. (CS 738)

Arthur is caught in the dream to the extent that he loses his sense of place, which suggests the power only a dream can have to suspend one's sense of place and being. To reconstruct the real world he moves around in the dark reestablishing his location by touching the table.

James M. Haule argues that "Arthur realizes that Pepita's powerful imagination ultimately will not unite, but will separate them. It is with this thought, this vague presage of the evil inherent power of the imagination, that the story ends" (213). Arthur does not explicitly voice the idea that Pepita's imagination will separate them. Separation is imparted by the narrator's presentation of the dream where it becomes explicit that Pepita seeks something other than love. Monumental buildings, openness, purity and sterility characterize the topography of Kôr, suggesting an infertile place. Neither

London nor Kôr represent welcoming places for the character. Edward Mitchell argues that “Kôr is both a product of the desiccated world and the final symbolization of Pepita’s desire to escape into nonentity” (46). The choice of Kôr as an escape from London and from Arthur, as is shown in the last sentence, raises the question of how it is possible to be someone when there is no one there to relate to; the idea of identity being created in relation to others is challenged in the escape to Kôr, implying that Pepita desires to become a nonentity who does not have to relate to life in wartime London.

Pepita’s desire for Kôr is distressing because we are presented with a protagonist who seeks the city of death to get away from civilization. The story suggests that in spite of its apparent emptiness, wartime London is a place where it is impossible to be alone, and that one of the attractions of Kôr is that it is utterly deserted. The ending is disturbing because Kôr’s finality indicates a voluntary entrapment in the dream; in fact in Pepita’s desire for privacy we could be presented with a death-wish. Creativity is clearly integral to the story; in imagining Kôr Pepita engages in a creative process. The narrator presents us with a project where creativity and death are coupled as an integral part of and threat to Pepita’s identity. Deborah Parsons has argued that the wartime setting represented a creative site for women wartime writers, while a similar line of argument is expressed by Gill Plain, who argues that Bowen’s “Mysterious Kôr” explores the possibility

[...] of thinking or writing oneself out of one place or time and into the possibility of an other. In Bowen’s story Pepita has created a fantasy which enables her both to rationalise and to opt out of the fact of war. She takes the immensity of war’s destructive power and uses it as a logic on which to base the possibility of escape into the fantastical city of Kôr: [...]. Bowen’s idea suggests an intimate connection between the forces of destruction and creation. (136)

This understanding of destruction and creation presents Pepita’s act as rational, thus indicating that the interplay between destruction and creation has a positive outcome for the character, where Kôr represents a solution. Pepita’s dream presents us to a city with “wide, void, pure streets” and with statues, pillars, archways and colonnades. The structure and buildings of the city seem to be intact, but humans are missing from the streets of Kôr. Thus the saving hallucination for Pepita is not the notion of the mythical city, but that it represents an escape from the crowds and cramped spaces of the wartime



city. Consequently, the text suggests that identity is associated with a rejection of the world, rather than an interaction with the world. The text seems to present us with an autonomous character, where identity is related merely to *ipse*-identity. This understanding of identity clearly contrasts with theoretical reflections presented in Chapter 2 where relationality was argued to be essential for identity. In light of these theoretical reflections identity as it is presented in “Mysterious Kôr” is indeed troubling.

Arthur’s depiction of their movements around the city in his night-time talk with Callie introduces us to a wanderer who avoids human contact and crowds:

[...] – tonight was the pay-off. We couldn’t get near any movie or any place for sitting; you had to fight into the bars, and she hates the staring in bars, and with all that milling about, every street we went, they kept on knocking her even off my arm. So then we took the tube to that park down there, but the place was as bad as daylight, let alone it was cold. [...] (CS 738)

We are presented with a couple who are uncomfortable in places crowded with people, a couple who perceive themselves as objects of other people’s stares, and who wander the streets of London to find a place of their own, and in this wandering the character’s creativity is engaged in transforming London into Kôr. Deborah Parsons argues that in Bowen’s texts we encounter a *flâneuse* who is characterized “not so much [by] the careful detachment from the crowd practised by her male counterpart but rather a merging with it to the extent of loss of self” (201). This perspective could possibly be applied with respect to Louie in *The Heat of the Day*, but it could not be generalized to include Pepita in “Mysterious Kôr”. If we understand Kôr as a refuge from crowds and human movement, it is hard to see how we can argue that Pepita is a *flâneuse* who occupies the urban landscape. The *flâneur/flâneuse* feels alone in the midst of crowds, while in “Mysterious Kôr” the female character is oppressed by these crowds.<sup>12</sup>

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12. Virginia Woolf’s essay “Street Haunting: A London Adventure” is one example of a text that presents us with a *flâneuse*.

## 5.11 Perilous hallucinations

“Mysterious Kôr” provides us with a character’s attempt to escape wartime reality through a dream of a mythical city. Pepita distances herself from the horrors and fears of wartime; she does not want to think about people, thus Kôr is the ideal place of escape because it only exists in one’s imagination and dreams. My analysis has argued that her retreat to the dream involves a rejection of sameness-identity, while selfhood-identity is seemingly embraced. An identity based purely on selfhood-identity suggests an introvert individual. That Kôr is a place of death does, however, pose a threat to identity. If identity is normally formulated through a dialectic of *idem* and *ipse*, identity is indeed at risk in “Mysterious Kôr”.

For Bowen the dream represents a “saving hallucination”. The analyses of “The Happy Autumn Fields” and “Mysterious Kôr” show, however, that there is a greater peril involved in hallucinations and dreams. We cannot rely on Bowen’s positive understanding of hallucination. When reading her short stories, we understand that the author may not herself have fully fathomed the richness and ambiguities of her work. Bowen also reflects on the aspects of her stories that are beyond her control: “[i]t is because the general subconsciousness saturates these stories that they have an authority nothing to do with me” (*MT* 95), and she also says that “[t]ransformed into images in the stories, there *may* be important psychological facts: if so, I did not realize their importance” (*MT* 99). The “rising tide of hallucination” we as readers experience is more uncanny and troubling than what was apparently intended by Bowen.

The presence of the uncanny is central to the way the relationship between the living and the dead is portrayed in Bowen’s wartime novel, *The Heat of the Day*. This relationship also contributes to setting the mood of the novel. That identity is challenged in wartime is in particular depicted in the two main female characters in the novel, Stella Rodney and Louie Lewis; wartime is not, however, the only element that unsettles the characters’ sense of self and identity, as we shall see in the next chapter.

## Chapter 6 Souls astray in *The Heat of the Day*

The sun rose on a landscape still pale with the heat of the day before.<sup>1</sup>

### 6.1 Introduction

Bowen's novel, *The Heat of the Day*, is not about war *per se* in the sense that wartime fighting is openly depicted in the text; we are instead presented with characters who struggle to find a sense of self and meaning in their lives — they are struggling to survive war and to survive as individuals. Published in 1949, this was Bowen's first novel since *The Death of the Heart* (1938). It is a wartime novel set in London, written during and after the Second World War. Bowen's short stories in the collection *The Demon Lover* focus on the inner life of the individual in a wartime atmosphere, and are not 'grand narratives' of the external, historical events of war. This is also true for *The Heat of the Day*. Various critical approaches highlight the importance of the individual in Bowen's wartime work. Gill Plain comments that "*The Heat of the Day* is not about war, it is about surviving war. Elizabeth Bowen was concerned neither with the realism of the chronicler nor with the fictional creation of utopias – her concern was rather with the perceived experience of the individual" (166-167). Plain's comments underscore the individual's experiences as the most important theme of the novel. Neil Corcoran argues that *The Heat of the Day* "is itself generated out of a radical sense of the destabilizations or erosions of identity consequent on wartime displacements and disorientations" (168). Corcoran's emphasis is on the central connection between the insecurity generated out of

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the wartime experience and how this affects the individual's identity in the novel. Corcoran further argues that "*The Heat of the Day* is a novel in which the panic of possibly losing identity, and of others deceiving you about their identities, operates not only as the agency of plot but as the very texture of style" (168-169). Destabilization of identity can lead to loss of identity and a fundamental insecurity with respect to others and how they present themselves to you.

The novel portrays the Blitz and the 'little' Blitz as background noise and intrusions on the conversations and meetings between people.<sup>2</sup> Additionally, the first bombings awaken the inhabitants of London to an awareness of each other that creates an uncanny atmosphere, where the boundary between the living and the dead is gradually erased: "So, among the crowds still eating, drinking, working, travelling, halting, there began to be an instinctive movement to break down indifference while there was still time. The wall between the living and the living became less solid as the wall between the living and the dead thinned" (*HD* 92). The first bombings of London dissolve the difference between the living and the dead, and between the living and the living. A new feeling of closeness and intimacy builds between the living; the fear of death also awakens a greater awareness of other people, and an urgency to live while there is still time. However, when the wartime atmosphere settles after the bombings have come to an end, and when death is no longer imminent, a sense of apathy permeates the city and its inhabitants, an apathy that is expressed by a general feeling of indifference: "it was now, when you no longer saw, heard, smelled war, that a deadening acclimatization to it began to set in" (*HD* 92). The first bombings led to a fear of death and of anonymity; you might be the next to die, and you might also die unknown, which is a frightening possibility. This desire for individuality in the face of death suggests a need to be someone, which contrasts with war's general focus on the community and not on the individual.

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2. 'The Blitz' was the name given to the heavy bombing of London which took place from September 1940 till May 1941. In January 1944 London was again under German attack, this bombing, which was not as fierce as the Blitz, lasted till the 8th April 1944 and was called the 'little' Blitz. In *The Heat of the Day* the characters Stella and Robert first meet during the Blitz, and Harrison's and Stella's last meeting takes place during the little Blitz.

## 6.2 Love, betrayal, identity

*The Heat of the Day* is a novel about love, betrayal and identity, where the main plot of the novel is unveiled in the interweaving of a spy story and a love story around the protagonist Stella Rodney. Harrison, a counter-espionage officer, tells Stella that her lover, Robert Kelway, is a traitor, a spy for the enemy. Harrison offers her a 'bargain': if she leaves Robert and instead enters into a relationship with him, Robert will go free. Harrison's story threatens Stella's world of love, and she accuses Harrison of turning her into a spy in her attempt to establish the verity of Harrison's story about Robert. We do not meet Robert until chapter 5, well after the spy story has been established, and in chapter 6 the reader is presented with Robert's family and his childhood home, Holme Dene. Robert's mother, Mrs Kelway, is portrayed as a totally empty woman who has an urgent need to talk about the possibility of change, but who never will change. Her unwillingness to change is illustrated in her reaction to the offer the Kelways get for the house. Holme Dene has "practically always" been for sale (*HD* 120), but Mrs Kelway perceives the offer as a provocation, and it is clear that the house will never be sold. Robert's seduction by fascism can be tentatively explained in terms of his feeling of claustrophobia in such a family. Robert eventually admits to Stella that he is a spy, and tries to get away from his pursuer who is supposedly waiting in the street, by escaping over the roof of Stella's flat; his death is reported ambiguously as Robert's "fall or leap" (*HD* 291) from the roof.

Interwoven in the narrative about Stella is the story of her son Roderick, a soldier waiting to be called up for war service. Roderick has recently inherited the Irish estate Mount Morris from Cousin Francis, who died on a visit to England. He died in the drawing room of a private asylum, Wistaria Lodge, where his wife, Cousin Nettie, lives as one of six mental patients. Cousin Nettie has turned her back on the world and sought refuge in madness to get away from her husband and Mount Morris, and has found her sanctuary at Wistaria Lodge.

A search for identity is most clearly articulated in one of the other subplots of the novel where Louie Lewis is the main character. In contrast to most of the other characters, Louie is not explicitly linked to Stella. Their lives intersect only at one point in the text. Louie Lewis is a young woman living alone in her flat in Chilcombe Street;

her husband, Tom, has been sent to Italy as a soldier. Left alone in London, Louie struggles to find who she is. From the novel's structural standpoint Louie begins and ends the narrative; her quest for identity is introduced to us in the first chapter, and the final pages of the novel present what seemingly represents a happy solution to her search: Louie returns with her baby boy to Seal-on-Sea, the place of her childhood.

### 6.2.1 Focus

My analysis will focus on the two female characters, Stella Rodney and Louie Lewis, and the way they represent different ways of constituting identity, where Louie's quest suggests a desire for sameness-identity, while Stella seemingly rejects sameness-identity. These approaches to sameness-identity require that we consider the consequences to the dialectic of *idem* and *ipse*: what happens to selfhood-identity when sameness-identity is embraced, and, on the other hand, what happens when it is rejected?

### 6.2.2 Narrative method

With respect to narrative method we find that, as in most of Bowen's works, *The Heat of the Day* is told in a third person narrative voice where omniscience is attributed to the narrator. Free indirect discourse is often used in the novel, which creates an uncertainty with respect to who sees and who speaks; this requires that particular attention is given to who the focalizer is at all times in the novel.

As we shall see, Louie's role with respect to narration differs from that of the other characters in the novel; her role takes on a special importance concerning the way Stella is perceived. Louie's story expresses not only a different view or version of wartime experience but, additionally, it presents us with a character who plays an important role because she provides a different perspective on Stella from the one the narrator gives. Louie's understanding functions as an implicit narratorial comment in the novel, where her understanding of Stella is more illuminating than the portrayal given by the narrator. Bennett and Royle suggest as one of their analytical twists, that it is Louie and not Stella who is the protagonist of *The Heat of the Day* (98). Both Louie and Stella are important focalizers in the novel; each, in different situations, is presented as the focalized object

of the other. What the characters perceive, is one central perspective that will be included in my discussion of identity in the novel.

### 6.2.3 Style

The depiction of Louie's quest is also important in understanding the novel as a whole, with respect to its comments on fictionality and its complicated style. Hermione Lee comments that the style of *The Heat of the Day* conveys a sense of strain, which makes it a mannered book, where the "idiosyncratic style" looks like "affectation" (Bowen 158). I will argue that to dismiss the style as mannered is to neglect a vital aspect of the novel that contributes to how identity is described. The idiosyncratic style adds to the way language is treated as being problematic for the individual. In *The Heat of the Day* language is used as an expression of the characters' state of mind. Language can be disturbing and difficult for the characters in the texts, but also for the reader.

### 6.2.4 Characters

The two characters belong to different social classes; Stella represents the middle-class, while Bowen for the first time gives a working-class woman a prominent position in a novel in her portrayal of Louie Lewis. Maud Ellmann comments that the constellation Stella/Louie is one of many examples of paired heroines in Bowen's work "where the younger tends to be unformed and inarticulate, the older stylish and eloquent" (21). Furthermore, Ellmann argues that in these constellations, "the younger woman tends to be verbally handicapped, the older gifted with articulacy, and their relation takes the form of a struggle for narration, the older woman striving to be the author of the younger, the younger resisting this authority through silence or through counter-narratives" (165). This is true in *The Heat of the Day*, where Louie is inarticulate, while Stella, on the other hand, speaks "beautifully" (HD 245). But we shall see that Louie is the one who articulates Stella's despair most clearly and who creates a different perspective on Stella.

### 6.2.5 Place and identity

Questions of topography are central in *The Heat of the Day*, as in Bowen's work generally. The correlation between place and identity is given various manifestations in the text in the portrayals of the different characters. Most clearly we find this difference in the way mobility and movement are presented. Stella is presented as a mobile character, her movements from place to place indicate the search she undertakes in trying to find a solution to the problem posed by Harrison, and her movements also suggest her search for identity. Stella has sold her home and chosen to rent a furnished flat on the top floor of a building in Weymouth Street. An idea of freedom is connected to the choice of having no ties to her past, but the novel questions this idea of freedom: does her rejection of the past really represent true freedom? In *The Heat of the Day*, we find that Stella's identity is defined and limited by her past, and, as we shall see, Stella can be perceived as a displaced person, which further undermines the idea of freedom. Stella is presented as one of the Londoners who stays on when the war breaks out: "people whom the climate of danger suited, who began, even, all to look a little alike" (HD 94). Louie is displaced in London, away from her childhood home on the Kentish coast. Her sense of physical displacement reflects an inner displacement and a lack of self. With respect to Stella, displacement is reflected in the way she chooses to position herself in the city, and in the estranged feeling she expresses when she moves through a city transformed by the blackout. This is a terrain familiar to Harrison, but Stella does not know her way about. She is a character without a home, who rejects her past and whose understanding of love is threatened by Harrison's story.

### 6.3 Setting the scene

*The Heat of the Day* opens in Regent's Park, London, in the evening, "the first Sunday of September 1942" (HD 8). We are at an outdoor concert where people slowly gather to listen to the music. The narrator's panoramic perspective shows us the people, the concert and the park, which presents us with a spatial situation where the stage is depicted as a room within the park:



That Sunday, from six o'clock in the evening, it was a Viennese orchestra that played. The season was late for an outdoor concert; already leaves were drifting on to the grass stage – here and there one turned over, crepitating as though in the act of dying, and during the music some more fell. (*HD 7*)

This is a room of music that represents a possibility for a temporary escape from war. The music is old, imparting a sense of nostalgia. It is played on a stage set in a park, surrounded by trees where the leaves are dying and falling to the ground. This is autumn, a season often associated with death. John Hildebidle comments that “[i]n Bowen’s fiction the predominant time is evening or full night (especially in *The Heat of the Day* and the stories set in wartime London). The predominant season is autumn, a time not of mellow fruitfulness but of loss and impending death” (94). That this is a stage, is underscored by the way the leaves are personified as actors who pretend to die on the stage. The scenery that surrounds the stage consists of the cultivated nature of the park; this is a room sheltered from the rest of the park, a room which acts as a magnet for the people in the park because of the music; the music satisfies a longing for something different. The opening of the novel thus expresses a longing that permeates the entire novel in the characters’ quests for identity. The magnetism of the music is, however, contrasted with a fear of what the space represents:

Many of them paused in the gateways doubtfully – all they had left behind was in sunshine, while this hollow which was the source of music was found to be also the source of dusk. War had made them idolize day and summer; night and autumn were enemies. And, at the start of the concert, this tarnished bosky theatre, in which no plays had been acted for some time, held a feeling of sequestration, of emptiness the music had not had time to fill. (*HD 7*)

Music, darkness and emptiness are combined and contrasted in the spatial situation of the stage. The people in the park are attracted to the stage when they hear the music, but the darkness that surrounds the orchestra provokes a feeling of anguish and distrust. At the beginning of the concert the music has not yet fully taken control of the stage; we are presented with an emptiness waiting to be filled with sound; this creates a tension between the possibilities the music represents and the threat of darkness. Darkness is created by the falling of dusk and by the trees that surround the theatre. Music and nature

characterize this room in the park. War and darkness are symbolically combined in the opening paragraphs, setting the stage for a spatial situation that predominates in the novel. The characters move through a city drenched in darkness where no street names are available to guide them on their way through London. *The Heat of the Day* and “Mysterious Kôr” both present a transformed city: darkness transforms the city in *The Heat of the Day*; the light of the moon transforms the night time city in “Mysterious Kôr”.

It is interesting that sound is given such an important role in the opening chapter; as we shall see when we turn to the portrayals of Louie Lewis and Stella Rodney, sound is relevant in a different way. For Louie Lewis, sound is connected to language and the ability to say the right thing, and to a lack of control of language that gives associations to a lack of musicality of the language and a lack of fluency. Silence is an important feature in the portrayal of Stella in the way it contrasts with the sounds of war outside her flat and with the sounds of the city: “there was all the time a jarring at the periphery, an unintermittent pumping of vital traffic through arterial streets into arterial roads. Nor was that quite all: once or twice across the foreground of hearing a taxi careered as though under fire” (*HD* 56). The passage presents the city as a body; this presentation of the city reflects life in a different way than the music in the park does, but we could argue that the sound that emanates from the city is the music of the city, and these sounds surround and intervene on the silence associated with Stella, making the silence in her flat “imperfect” (*HD* 56).

#### **6.4 “Crowded to death”**

Bowen’s emphasis on place in her fiction was addressed in Chapter 2, where we found that Bowen perceives place as crucial if the characters in a fictional text are to be perceived with substance; she comments that “[c]haracters operating *in vacuo* are for me bodiless” (*MT* 282). Bowen’s reflections imply that a reciprocity between place and character establishes a connection between corporeality and place. In *The Heat of the Day* we are presented with a fundamental notion of displacement, where the reciprocity between character and place is lacking. Additionally, *The Heat of the Day* is a novel

about communication, where we are faced with the perils of communication, the inability to communicate, and an inability to master language.

#### 6.4.1 Imitation and identification

Louie Lewis stands out in the transformed landscape of the wartime city because of the paradoxical way she is presented. She is first introduced to us in the opening chapter as one of the people at the concert. She does not feel at home in the urban sphere of wartime London, her home is on the Kentish coast, but because of the war, this is an area to which she is not allowed to return. Her parents have been killed by a bomb, and her husband Tom has been sent to Italy as a soldier, leaving Louie alone in London: “Left to herself, thrown back on herself in London, she looked about her in vain for someone to imitate; she was ready, nay, eager to attach herself to anyone who could seem to be following any one course with certainty” (*HD* 15). The passage suggests that Louie seeks to imitate others who have a clear purpose in life. The text presents imitation as a means of constructing identity where sameness is central, where to be like the other is what Louie desires, even though this does not necessarily happen. Consequently, the text suggests that Louie sees the other as a possible solution to her quest for identity, that the answer to who she is is not necessarily found in herself but in someone else. We have seen in “The Happy Autumn Fields” that the term ‘imitation’ was used to describe what people in a wartime reality could do, but that no positive connotations were associated with imitation in the story. When seeing the world through Louie’s eyes, however, imitation is presented as a possible solution to her problem. Total identification with the other, or sameness-identity, however, raises the question of what happens to Louie’s selfhood-identity. I will argue that the idea of imitation presented in this passage poses a threat to the dialectic between sameness- and selfhood-identity. Consequently, Louie’s identity is always threatened.

#### 6.4.2 Displacement

Louie represents a character whose quest for identity is made from a position of displacement; her quest, however, presents itself as an impossible project:

Now when she came out from the factory even dusk was over; [...]; Louie was swept along in one shoal of indifferent shadows against another. Momentarily, dimmed-down blue light from inside a bus or some flash from an opened-then-shut door brought her own eyes into being – vacant, asking, ignorant, and askance. Anything else she had with which to draw a second glance from the world – wide Jutish features, big thin-skinned lips – was cancelled: the darkness did not love her. To be seen was for her not to be. (*HD* 145)

Coming out from the factory, Louie is swept up by the moving crowd of people, and this description underscores Louie's lack of purpose. Movement and speed characterize the opening sentence of the quotation, but when the movement stops, focus is set on Louie as observer. But Louie's perspective as an observer is conflated with the narrator's description of Louie's eyes. Her eyes are brought into being by the light, but they are described as "vacant, asking, ignorant and askance", and this negates the notion of what 'brought into being' implies. What we are confronted with is an emptiness that needs to be filled; this parallels the description of the place for the concert that opens the novel. The empty self that characterizes Louie's personality indicates that displacement does not only relate to a physical place; the sense of emptiness implies a character who is displaced both externally and internally. The last phrase of the passage is indeed paradoxical; it seems to indicate that neither being seen nor not being seen gives Louie any identity. Everything Louie had to offer to the world is lost in the darkness; there is nothing about her that is worth looking at again; this suggests the world's total rejection of Louie. The crowd is indifferent to Louie, and the narrator presents the city as an acting party that does not recognize Louie, nor perceive her as part of the urban scene: "it was in the disenchanted park that London's indifference to Louie stood out most stark and bare" (*HD* 146). Indifference constitutes the city's rejection of her and highlights a lack of reciprocity between self and place, thus indicating that the necessary condition for identity is not present. The indifference imparted by the narrator is accentuated in Louie's own sense of not being part of the group of women at the factory where she works:

The actual trouble at the factory was, that you had to have something to say, tell, swop, and Louie was unable to think of anything. She felt she did not make sense, and still

worse felt that the others knew it. Women seemed to feel she had not graduated; where *had* she been all her life, they wanted to know – and, oh, where had she? It is advantageous being among all sorts if you are some sort, any sort; you gravitate to your type. It is daunting if you discover you are still no sort – the last hope gone. (*HD* 149)

Work is often understood as an important element in one's self-perception and identity. For Louie, however, her work at the factory highlights her sense of not belonging; she does not contribute to the conversation and the community feeling. Louie's inability to interact in the social context suggests no sameness-identity. Her lack of self-esteem is underscored in the passage; additionally, Louie is characterized as someone without a story or a past, thus emphasizing her fundamental sense of nothingness.

#### 6.4.3 Thwarted language

What is not worth seeing in Louie? One of the first portrayals of her is given by Harrison. This portrayal does not, however, merely present Harrison's perception of Louie, it also imparts inhumanity and mercilessness as characteristic features of Harrison's personality:

He confronted a woman of about twenty-seven, with the roughened hair and still slightly upward expression of someone who has been lying flat on the grass. Her full, just not protuberant eyes looked pale in a face roughly burned by summer; into them the top light of the roofless theatre struck. Forehead, nose, cheekbones added no more than width. Her mouth was the only other feature not to dismiss; it was big; it was caked round the edges, the edges only, with what was left of lipstick inside which clumsy falsified outline the lips turned outwards, exposed themselves – full, intimate, woundably thin-skinned, tenderly brown-pink as the underside of a new mushroom and like her eyes once more, of a paleness in her sun-coarsened face. It was the lips which struck him and could have moved him, only that they did not. Halted and voluble, this could but be a mouth that blurted rather than spoke, a mouth incontinent and at the same time artless. (*HD* 11)

Louie's eyes and mouth are singled out in the portrayal. Louie's mouth is, however, most important, not only because it is characterized as a prominent feature that in its bigness fills Louie's face, but a quality of incomprehension is attributed to the mouth in the

twisted grammatical structure used when describing it. Words seem to be lost; a chaotic impression is created, before a coherent grammatical structure is regained. The way language is used to thwart the description of her mouth foreshadows the explicit references to the problematic relation Louie has to language. The qualities attributed to Louie's mouth in the use of adjectives to describe it present us with an ambiguous image of her mouth. This is an image that combines sensual or sexual attractiveness and invitation in the presentation of the lips and is contrasted with the mouth as being innocent, uncontrollable and clumsy.

Sexuality is expressed in the lips being "full, intimate, woundably thin-skinned, tenderly brown-pink"; this characterization clearly alludes to woman as a sexually attractive object, but we find that Harrison is not moved by the way the lips look. This reaction possibly suggests that sexuality can be frightening and disgusting when it becomes too overwhelming. The characterization of her lips also implies a vulnerability and a notion of victimization. The presentation of her lips is juxtaposed with the oral qualities of her mouth as being "halted and voluble", a mouth that blurts, is incontinent and artless. The focus on orality makes the mouth unattractive because it cannot control itself. Seen in relation to its sexual attractiveness its oral qualities seemingly symbolize a threat in the sense that it negates the notion of woman as passive, as an object of art. The adjectival oxymoronic construction "halted and voluble", suggests a struggle between two opposing qualities: the condition of stopping up, being frozen, and of speaking constantly, incessantly, without stopping, underscored in the adjective "incontinent". The mouth takes control of her being, but she does not speak fluently. Renée Hoogland comments that "Louie's inarticulacy is at once foregrounded in its connection with her "artless" and "incontinent" body" (195). 'Halted' and 'voluble' stand in opposition to each other as introvert and extrovert expressions that are descriptive of the conflicts in Louie's personality. A sense of sadness is imparted in the way her lack of control of speech is presented; this supports the text's general presentation of Louie as helpless and naive. In the character Louie Lewis, Bowen presents an adult whose childishness is foregrounded. This childishness is not parallel to the way the writer sees herself as a child in *Seven Winters*. An adult's childishness is not the same as for a child, where childishness is an expression of exploration and the desire to learn new things, while

Louie's childishness describes an adult who is unable to find her way out of the problems she is faced with.

The descriptions of her "roughened hair", her "face roughly burned by summer" and her "sun-coarsened face" allude to nature, implying someone who spends a lot of time outside, who is close to nature. It also indicates someone who belongs to a rural environment; this is not a typical city dweller. The text's repetition of different allusions to nature underscores the importance of this aspect of Louie's personality, which furthermore, makes the reader question whether the text suggests that a different kind of identity is associated with people with a rural background compared to those with an urban background. Louie's falsified persona is brought forward in the portrayal, where her incongruities are presented at odds with what it implies to be an inhabitant of the city, while at the same time as it is suggested that the natural is a negative feature.

Another portrayal, this time by the narrator, singles out Louie's way of walking as a feature that differentiates her from other women:

It was a phenomenon of war-time city night that it brought out something provocative in the step of most modest women; Nature tapped out with the heels on the pavement an illicit semaphore. Alone was Louie in never being accosted; whatever it *was* was missing from her step; she walked, she strode, she bulked ahead through the dark with the sexless flat-footed nonchalance of a ten-year-old, only more heavily. (*HD* 145-146)

Her unattractive and childish manner of walking mirrors the portrayal of her problematic relation to language in the way she 'bulks' ahead. She is contrasted with "most modest women" who, when they walk, tap with their heels "an illicit semaphore," thus signalling to the world a forbidden sexual availability. Stella Rodney sees Louie as a girl who "has got her stocking-seams crooked" (*HD* 233). This feature of Louie's appearance reflects her being for Stella: "Everything ungirt, artless, ardent, urgent about Louie was to the fore: all over herself she gave the impression of twisted stockings" (*HD* 235). Her eagerness and a sense of her being out of place relate to the previous portrayals of Louie, and the twistedness we are introduced to is characteristic of Louie's erratic use of language. The character Louie presents an uncontrollable femaleness; she is clumsy and her utterances reflect a verbal incompetence. As we shall see, that Louie is artless clearly

contrasts with the portrayals of Stella, where nature is hidden behind an artificial mask and where a sense of control is imparted.

The different portrayals of Louie underscore how her corporeality counteracts her quest for identity. She does not seem at home in her body, her movements through the city highlight the discomfort she feels. Elizabeth Grosz comments on the relationship between body, space and movement that “[i]t is our positioning within space, both as the point of perspectival access to space, and also as an object for others in space, that gives the subject a coherent identity and an ability to manipulate things, including his own body parts, in space” (*Space* 92). The ability to position yourself spatially, to have a “perspectival access to space” and to be seen by others are all elements that are lacking in Louie. Thus the aspects Grosz underscores as essential for a coherent identity are not to be found in the way Louie is portrayed. Furthermore, Louie’s loss of words accentuates her displacement and complicates her quest for identity. There is a parallel between the way communication is made impossible for Sarah in “The Happy Autumn Fields” and Louie’s loss of words. Her inability to make herself understood is highlighted when Louie tries to explain to her friend Connie about her difficulty in accessing the words inside her:

‘It isn’t you only. It’s the taking and taking up of me on the part of everyone when I have no words. Often you say the advantage I should be at if I could speak grammar; but it’s not only that. Look the trouble there is when I have to only say what I *can* say, and so cannot say what it is really. Inside me it’s like being crowded to death – more and more of it all getting into me. I could more bear it if I could only say. [...] At home where I used always to be there never used to be any necessity *to* say; neither was there with Tom, as long as they let him stop here. But look now – whatever *am* I to, now there’s the necessity? From on and on like this not being able to say, I seem to get to be nothing, now there’s no one. I would more understand if I was able to make myself understood; so you know how it is, how I try everything. [...]’ (*HD* 245-246)

The passage forefronts Louie’s helplessness with language; she is unable to communicate what she wants to say, the words are lost. There was no need for words in her original relationships, instead self and meaning were related to an underlying corporeality where words were superficial and not a part of who she was. Harriet S. Chessman states that “[s]he [Louie] can gain no identity without the defining power of



words” (72). This could be perceived as a claim that relates to society’s expectations of Louie, where identity is connected to an ability to express who you are in words. However, this is not an ability that Louie masters. The text suggests that Louie’s sense of identity was found in her relationships with her parents and her husband and that these relationships initially defined Louie, but they are now lost.

Renée Hoogland argues that language and identity are intrinsically interlinked in Bowen; thus, in Bowen’s work, “a sense of self as well as of the world comes into being not only *within* the system of language but *through* language itself” (28). As described in Chapter 1, Hoogland takes her theoretical starting point in Mikhail Bakhtin’s model of dialogism and uses this to discuss the importance of language in Bowen’s fiction (28-31). Bakhtin argues in “Discourse in the Novel” that “[l]anguage —like the living concrete environment in which the consciousness of the verbal artist lives—is never unitary” (288), thus underscoring the dialogic activity of language, that language happens in relation to others, to the world surrounding one — and that identity is influenced and changed by language. Bakhtin says that “[t]he dialogic orientation of discourse is a phenomenon that is, of course, a property of *any* discourse. It is the natural orientation of any living discourse” (279). With respect to Bakhtinian dialogism, we can argue that self exists in the continual dialogue conducted with others, that self exists through language and that identity and self are always in the making. Taking a dialogic and relational approach to identity implies that identity must be understood as dynamic, and that a notion of the ‘real self’ is dispersed. The characters in Bowen’s fiction share a sense of frustration in not being able to find something they can hold on to and understand as stable; this reflects an idea that perceives the ‘I’ as stable and autonomous. Additionally, many of the characters encounter problems with establishing ‘dialogic relationships’ with satisfactory partners.

Louie’s manner of speaking is naive and childish; the sentence structure is halting and inconclusive. We shall see shortly, however, that in spite of her own struggle to find her identity, Louie is also presented as someone who sees very clearly who Stella is. We are presented with a character who is now invaded by language, and this invasion is related to a new expectation of having a language with which to express who you are. But the language Louie has is not sufficient to express an identity. The sense of “being

crowded to death” alludes to a multiplicity of voices she cannot manipulate. Louie is unable to communicate with herself, and is thus lacking the ability inherent in Ricoeur’s term “attestation” which is understood as the individual’s ability to express who she is, which is also central for selfhood-identity. Interestingly, the concept of communication seems to suggest the idea that Louie has to be able to talk about herself to be able to understand herself. An understanding of identity is connected to the actual articulation of who she is. But what she needs to understand is not explained in the quotation: what does she need to understand to make herself understood? In not being able to express herself, she becomes nothing. But articulation is also related to the notion that someone must be there for her, that someone sees her. Louie’s sense of meaning was connected to her relationship with her parents and her husband Tom, but in her relationship with Tom he did not look at her, it was she who sat “passively” and “gazed at Tom” (*HD* 146), thus Louie’s role as observer is a familiar one. There was, however, no need for language in these relationships for her to be of meaning to someone else or to herself.

The past is used as a starting point for Louie in her quest for identity. This is a point of departure that suggests how Louie defines herself in relation to others, as part of a group. It indicates a loss of identity related to the loss of others. When Tom and her parents are gone, language as a means of self-expression becomes the norm of self-presentation, where the act of telling, of articulation, supposedly implies selfhood. The dialectic of sameness and selfhood is seemingly threatened because Louie attempts to achieve identity by the means of imitating others, and at the same time she is unable to define a self. The inability to master language, and remaining in a state of thwarted speech, is thus detrimental to identity.

#### 6.4.4 Newspapers and sameness-identity

For Louie a solution to her problem comes when she takes to newspapers, a habit of her friend Connie that she imitates:

Once Louie had taken to newspapers she found peace – so much so that she wondered why they had seemed to unsettle Tom. With the news itself she was at some disadvantage owing to having begun in the middle; she never quite had the courage to ask anyone, even Connie, how it had all begun – evidently one thing must have led to another, as in

life; [...] But once you looked in the papers you saw where it said, nothing was so bad as it might look. What a mistake, to have gone by the look of things! (*HD* 151)

Among other things, Louie has been presented as an observer of the crowds, and her reading of the newspapers suggests a development in her quest that undermines the notion that observation can lead to an understanding of how things are and who she is. Neil Corcoran observes that Louie and her belief in newspapers and wartime propaganda means that “[s]he becomes, indeed, a virtual worshipper of press opinion, and a fetishist of the newspaper as object, and of newsprint itself” (172). Adam Piette argues that Connie and Louie “are [...] presented as products of different kinds of propaganda” where Connie’s interest is in “the white propaganda of fact and information” while “Louie is the reader of home-front ‘total war’ propaganda”. He concludes that “Bowen’s point is that these two ways of reacting to newspapers are fundamentally similar: one brashly independent-minded, the other fragily seeking for a sense of self, but both caught up in the war as story” (163-164). When reading, Louie avoids reality and instead uses the newspapers as a source to explain or justify who she is. Wartime propaganda offers her different roles of self-formation that present her with an opportunity of identification with, and imitation of others. When identifying with the stories in the newspapers, Louie creates a sameness-identity that supposedly makes her one of many.

The narrator’s presentation of Louie’s naive acquisition and belief in the written word suggests a different approach to language in the novel, where reading, or being the recipient of language, instead of being the producer of language, provides Louie with a source of identification. Identifying with all the different roles presented to her, of which only three are typically feminine roles, Louie finds meaning and a sense of self in the identification with groups that combined represent a collective. She becomes one of many, anonymous, she no longer has to struggle to find an answer to who she is.

Dark and rare were the days when she failed to find on the inside page of her paper an address to or else account of herself. Was she not a worker, a soldier’s lonely wife, a war orphan, a pedestrian, a Londoner, a home- and animal-lover, a thinking democrat, a movie-goer, a woman of Britain, a letter writer, a fuel-saver, and a housewife? (*HD* 152)

What we have seen is that for Louie, physically being part of the crowd does not lead to anything. It is only when she starts reading newspapers, and uses her own imagination to visualize herself as one of many that she can actually identify with the masses.

Simultaneously, Louie identifies with the wartime propaganda that presents an idealized view of the British population; consequently, other aspects of her personality that are not in accordance with the common ideal, such as her promiscuity, are suppressed. This identification with the masses and suspension of selfhood-identity comes to a head at the end of the novel where Louie, who is pregnant, is told by her friend Connie that:

[...] – You're only one of many.'

This Louie seized upon. 'Well, I *am*, only, aren't I – just one of many?' A sort of illumination widened over her features – slowly, but with a sureness from which one might have suspected that it was not new to them. And worse, in the view of Connie, this settled into a look of inward complacency, even sublimity. She admitted: 'I've sometimes thought that myself.' (*HD* 323-324)

The characterization of Louie depicts certain conditions for what is inherent in being a person; these deal with a sense of belonging both to other people and to places. Louie's loss of identity is related to a sliding between a sense of identity she used to have, but is no longer in possession of, and the state she is now in, where she has no sense of belonging. This situation is presented as an inner vacuum where she becomes nothing.

Deborah Parsons claims that Louie represents one of the *flâneuses* in *The Heat of the Day* and that "[i]t is in crowded, public spaces that the two women [Stella and Louie] feel a sense of identity and connection" (195). Louie is clearly portrayed as a wanderer and an observer, but it is also clear that being part of the crowd is not for her; nor is it possible to argue that Louie represents a character who possesses the detached gaze of the traditional *flâneur*. She can instead be seen as antithetical to the reflecting *flâneur* in the way her loss of identity is presented. Her connection and identification with the masses have taken place in a conjunction of reading the newspaper and imagination, and in the novel's characterizations of Louie we are faced with Louie's strong sense of conflicting corporeality, which in the end manifests itself in motherhood, where her body takes possession of her self. After the birth of her baby boy at the end of the war, Louie returns to her childhood town on the Kentish coast. She returns to the place that means

something to her, and readers come away with a sense of hope for Louie. She has named the baby “Thomas Victor” (*HD* 329), thus combining the stories of Louie and Stella. The name is a reminder of the lies presented in the story; “Thomas” refers to Louie’s dead husband and suggests that he is the father of the boy; “Victor” alludes to Stella’s ex-husband and underscores the lies surrounding Victor and Stella’s relationship.

*The Heat of the Day*’s characterization of Louie presents us with an empty character; she is, however, paradoxically, at the same time invaded by a language she cannot use to understand who she is. Crowded and empty, seeking completeness in an outward movement in an attempt to imitate others, her ultimate imitation is portrayed as an identification with the masses as they are represented in the newspapers. The novel describes two representations of the crowd: the indifferent crowd that moves through the streets of London, ignoring Louie, and the crowd as it is presented in the newspapers, where belonging is created by Louie herself. The notion of being “crowded to death” presents us with an ominous depersonalization of the individual. There are only roles for her to identify with, instead of family and other people.

## 6.5 “A soul astray”

Gill Plain understands *The Heat of the Day* as a “dispassionate depiction of the void at the heart of human existence” (167). The notion of “dispassionate depiction” accurately captures the narrator’s portrayal of the main character Stella Rodney’s sense of self.

More so than for Louie, the narrator keeps a distance from Stella; the corporeality we were presented with in the characterization of Louie is not given the same emphasis in the text’s portrayal of Stella. Instead, we are faced with a character who is hard to grasp, who slips away, whose elusiveness presents itself as the most prominent characteristic in the narrator’s portrayal. Plain comments that “Louie is constructed as the other; heavy, clumsy and foolish she stands in sharp contrast to Stella’s almost ethereal qualities” (184), a description that underscores the elusiveness of Stella’s character.

Stella’s search for identity takes the form of physical and mental wanderings. That these wanderings reflect Stella’s identity is most clearly captured by Louie, who perceives that “Mrs Rodney walked like a soul astray” (*HD* 248) an image that alludes to

incorporeality, and suggests associations with ghostliness and death. That this passage reflects the thoughts of Louie is indicated in the use of the formal “Mrs Rodney”, which reinforces the idea of Louie’s relationship with Stella as someone she has met for the first time. The narrator predominantly uses the characters’ first names, but the exception here are Robert’s mother, Mrs Kelway, and Harrison; his first name is left unstated until the end of the novel, when it is revealed that he too is a Robert, which suggests that the two Roberts are interchangeable. This understanding is also implied in the novel where Stella observes that “[i]t seemed to her it was Robert who had been the Harrison” (*HD* 275).<sup>3</sup>

Louie’s perception of Stella as “a soul astray” imparts a sense of being lost, which relates to the different portrayals of Stella as a character who is hard to grasp, such as in the narrator’s characterization of her:

She had one of those charming faces which, according to the angle from which you see them, look either melancholy or impertinent. Her eyes were grey; her trick of narrowing them made her seem to reflect, the greater part of the time, in the dusk of her second thoughts. With that mood, that touch of *arrière-pensée*, went an uncertain, speaking set of the lips. Her complexion, naturally pale, fine, soft, appeared through a pale, fine, soft bloom of make-up. She was young-looking – most because of the impression she gave of still being on happy sensuous terms with life. Nature had kindly given her one white dash, lock or wing in otherwise tawny hair; and that white wing, springing back from her forehead, looked in the desired sense artificial – other women asked her where she had had it done; she had become accustomed to being glanced at. That, but only that, about her was striking: her looks, after the initial glance could grow on you; if you continued to know her, could seem even more to be growing *for* you. Her clothes fitted her body, her body her self, with a general air of attractiveness and ease. (*HD* 24-25)

The narrator’s reservations about Stella’s portrayal are striking. The narrator’s constant questioning of what is true creates an ambiguous image of Stella. Thus the narrator’s characterization of Stella also includes an indication of the narrator’s guardedness and attitude to the character. On the surface we seem to be presented with a character whose

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3. Critics have also commented on the interchangeability of the two Roberts, where Gill Plain argues that “[b]y the end of the novel, the two men have become indistinguishable” (168), and Heather Bryant Jordan suggests that Robert Kelway “becomes a ‘mirror image’ of the man who turns him in” (156).

life is good and happy, but this notion is undermined by the narrator's juxtaposing of different characteristics, and by the narrator's predominant hedging in the description.<sup>4</sup> The idea that she is melancholic and the idea that she is impertinent are juxtaposed as supposedly two different aspects of Stella's temperament. The effect of this contrast creates an uncertainty with respect to how Stella should be understood. We seem to be presented with different modes of perception, where what you see if you look at Stella with a superficial glance is happiness, but looking deeper, as Louie does, the illusion of happiness wavers. The use of hedging results in an open-ended image of Stella; additionally, the narrator's reluctance to give a clear understanding of the character is puzzling, which leaves us with more questions than answers regarding who Stella is. Based on the narrator's portrayal we have to ask: who is Stella? She appears to fight a struggle against age and melancholia; she is seemingly presented as something she is not, playing a part which does not always suit her.

### 6.5.1 Artificiality

The only striking feature about Stella is her lock of white hair, a characteristic given to her by nature but which is perceived by people who see it as artificial. The notion of artificiality parallels the central reflection of modernity as it is presented in Charles Baudelaire's "The Painter of Modern Life"; this reflection expresses doubts about an artist who uses nature as his main source of inspiration. It is the illusion of the white lock as artificial that predominates in the perceptions of Stella, so that she becomes an object to be stared at, a spectacle. Desirability and artificiality are connected in the illusion of the artificiality of the white lock; this could be taken as a symbol of woman and modernity, a symbol that at the same time is undermined by the origin of the white lock, which is woman's connection to nature. Thus nature subverts the notion of modernity and woman as it is presented in the quotation.

Incorporeality is emphasized in Louie's perception of Stella, which contrasts with the narrator's portrayal of her where we find that corporeality is indeed an integral part of the narrator's presentation of her face, eyes, lips and skin. What is brought to the fore

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4. E.g.: "seem to reflect", "could grow on you", "if you continued to", "could seem [...] to be growing *for* you".

in these characterizations is, however, a sense of something hidden. Stella's eyes give the impression that she is reflecting on something, but this idea is undermined by the narrator. Her lips express the same kind of insecurity with respect to expression that we found in the portrayal of Louie, at the same time as the sense of something hidden is imparted in "that touch of *arrière pensée*"<sup>5</sup> attributed to the lips, thus indicating something underlying or hidden. In the portrayal of her skin, nature hides behind a mask of make-up — an expression of artificiality — but these characteristics are also at the same time presented as identical, being "pale, fine, soft".

### 6.5.2 The elusive character

To some extent the narrator's portrayal of Stella corresponds to the different characterizations of Louie; for example, Stella's lips are described as uncertain. We seem to be presented with Stella's desire to speak, where her inability to say the right thing parallels Louie's inability to find the right words. Like Louie, Stella is glanced at; thus a sense of superficiality is attributed to the glance; consequently, who she really is, is not captured by the observer or the narrator. The first glance's possible development into knowledge, however, indicates not a reciprocity between seer and seen, but that the object of the gaze accommodates the desires of the seer. This is indeed disturbing with respect to the individual's possibilities of self-development. The last sentence of the quotation seems programmatic, in line with the notion of living a happy life, but incongruous with the general portrayal we have been presented with. How melancholia and impertinence can be said to correspond with an idea of ease in the final sentence is not clear, instead this description serves to support the notion of a narrator who undermines the portrayal of the protagonist, leaving us, the readers, with an elusive understanding of her character.

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5. *arrière pensée*: mental reservation, hidden motive, underlying design.



### 6.5.3 Louie as focalizer

Louie's reflections about Stella after their meeting contrast with the narrator's reluctant portrayal of Stella:

The effect of this person? ... Invisible powder, mutiny, shock, loss; sparkle-clip on black and clean rigid line of shoulders; terror somewhere knocking about inside her like a loose piece of ice; a not-young face of no other age; eyes, under blue-bloomed lids, turning on you an intent emptied look, youth somewhere away at the back of it like a shadow; lips shaped, but shaping what they ought not; hat of small type nothing if not put on right, put on right, exposingly; agony ironed out of the forehead; the start, where the hair ran back, of one white lock – What had been done to her? Where had she got herself? (*HD* 247)

Internal and external characteristics interrelate to express a clearer understanding of Stella than the one given by the narrator. Louie is given the role as the one who sees Stella; in view of the fact that Louie has been presented as a naive and anti-intellectual character it is interesting that she is chosen as the one who voices who Stella is more accurately than the narrator does. Why is this done? What does Louie represent? In addition to her being naive and anti-intellectual, Louie's corporeality and closeness to nature are foregrounded in the portrayals of her. Maybe what she represents could be considered to offer a more healthy approach in terms of seeing and understanding others than what intellectualism implies? It is possible that we are presented with a romanticizing of the intuition of a naive human being, of someone who is able to impart a corporeal and immediate understanding of others. Louie explicitly voices Stella's pain and agony in the quotation in a way Stella herself seems unable to do. Louie observes the inner mechanisms of fear and terror, and her reflection presents us with a character (Stella) who is paralysed and rebellious at the same time. Patricia Coughlan comments that Louie has the capacity "alone among the novel's characters, for intuiting Stella's despair" (121).

The notion of mutiny that is expressed parallels the narrator's observation of Stella's face as impertinent. But mutiny is internalized in contrast to impertinence, which presents itself as a surface impression. Louie repeats the narrator's observation of Stella's complexion where nature and make-up neutralize each other in the portrayal of

the “[i]nvisible powder” covering Stella’s face; nature cannot be completely covered up by the mask of make-up. The oxymoronic construction that characterizes Stella’s eyes implies a concentrated emptiness, which suggests a purpose in the emptied look: is she refusing to show or to be seen? Mutiny is reflected in the way the lips are described, where resistance and rebellion are indicated in saying what one ought not say. Louie’s observation of Stella is furthermore accentuated in their walk home from the bar where Stella’s manner of walking reflects her personality:

Out of all the communicativeness during the zigzag walk back to Weymouth Street, there had risen not one reference to Harrison: instead, the talker had been dashing patchily back through her own past – partly as though to know by the spoken sound of it if it *were* true, partly as though she could not put too great a distance between herself and what had happened half an hour ago. She had come back and back to a son she had in the Army. Anxious? – why not; this was her only son. ‘He should be a comfort to you,’ Louie had interposed. ‘Oh, yes, *he* is a comfort to *me!*’ Having been walking fast, the talker had from that point on walked faster; Louie had been put to it to keep up with her even with her own famous big flat stride. Fast? – no, it had been something more than that: Mrs Rodney walked like a soul astray.

Those three words reached Louie imperatively, as though spoken – memory up to now had been surface pictures knocked apart and together by the heavings of a submerged trouble. Now her lips seemed bidden. ‘A soul astray,’ they repeated with awe, aloud.  
(*HD* 248-249)

Stella’s pace through the streets of London suggests a person who is haunted; this is underscored by Stella’s choice of conversation topics. Cousin Nettie has told Roderick the true story about Stella’s divorce from Victor; Stella was the one who was abandoned by Roderick’s father, Victor. Stella has, however, told Roderick that it was she who left Victor, thus presenting herself as a *femme fatale*: “a monster” instead of a “fool” (*HD* 224). Living the lie, Stella is now confronted with the true story of her past, a past she has refused to relate to and has cut herself off from. We are thus faced with a character who is haunted by her own past. Consequently, the text portrays a character who does not try to come to terms with her past. As we have seen, the past is a determining factor for the characters in *The Heat of the Day*. Even though Stella dismisses her past, the text clearly states that the past is essential for Stella’s quest for identity. The ability to assert

who you are is also clearly problematic for both Stella and Louie. The awe expressed in Louie's repetition and actual articulation of her observation of Stella can be perceived as an expression of the fact that Louie too is "a soul astray". But Louie could also be awestruck by the way that words crowded into her mind have been given substance and reality in the actual articulation of her observation.

More space is devoted in the novel to Louie's perception of Stella than to Stella's observations of Louie. Stella's reflections on Louie are, however, very accurate; there is a reciprocity between Stella's and Louie's observations of each other. Louie's voice is important in the narrative both in the way her own quest for identity is presented and in her reflections on Stella's personality. Louie's depiction of Stella as someone who walks like "a soul astray" profoundly captures Stella's personality. Walking like "a soul astray" suggests a character without a direction or a course in life; it depicts a wandering that does not lead to anything positive for the character. That Stella is "dashing patchily" through her past reflects the way her speech imparts not only walking like "a soul astray", but also *being* "a soul astray", in the manner that she voices her own past to a stranger.

Stella's struggle carries with it elements of self-destruction where death is challenged in the way she is positioned at the end of the novel; she is sitting in her rented flat on the top floor while bombs are falling over London. Stella's position at the end of the novel contrasts with Louie's quest for sameness-identity. At the end, Stella distances herself from the world and from others, and in contrast to Louie, Stella suggests a character whose distance from the world indicates a sense of resignation and apathy with respect to the outside world, where a sense of fatalism is connected with Stella's personality at the end.

## **6.6 Displacement**

We have discussed a fundamental notion of displacement with respect to Louie Lewis' character. For Stella, London is home, it is her sphere. In spite of this, displacement is still a problem for Stella. She has sold her house and now lives in a rented flat where none of the things or furniture belong to her. Stella's choice can be perceived as an

expression of freedom, but at the same time the idea of displacement is reflected in Stella's lack of belonging; the flat becomes emblematic of the choice Stella has made of cutting herself off from her past. As a spatial site the flat is not described as "home", which is underscored in Roderick's reflection when he visits Weymouth Street: "This did not look like home; but it looked like something – possibly a story" (*HD* 47). Spatially Roderick's description places the flat in the realm of 'unreality', and its fictionality is underscored when he transforms the sofa into a boat:

The reality of the fancy was better than the unreality of the room. In a boat you were happy to be suspended in nothing but light, air, water, opposite another face. On a sofa you could be surrounded by what was lacking. Though this particular sofa backed on a wall and stood on a carpet, it was without environment; [...]. (*HD* 54-55).

Nostalgia, longing, displacement and emptiness describe Roderick's need of an imaginary transformation of the room. But what kind of space are we presented with? What are the functions of Stella's flats in the novel? These are spaces that are implicitly contrasted with what used to be: the home of Stella and Roderick. No traces of Stella's past are found in the flats, a sense of freedom is, as mentioned, connected with these spaces, but there is also an element of escape in the choice Stella makes. Maud Ellmann asks: "Who is Stella without her furniture? Does her identity belong to her belongings? Marooned in the 'effects' of other people, does she remain herself or turn into another person, like an actress in a stage set, her 'fine things' timed to vanish on the stroke of midnight?" (146). To what extent does identity depend on one's own things and belongings? Does Stella create a world of illusion when she prefers a life that lacks a foundation in her past and the things that belonged to the life she used to live? The image of Stella walking like "a soul astray" is reflected in the rooms she occupies, in the sense that they symbolically represent the idea of having no place, of belonging nowhere. We recall that these reflections also resemble being a nonentity. Displacement is illustrated in the actual spatial situation of the flats, and in Louie's observation of Stella's personality. Displacement also encapsulates how Stella relates to her own life, to her past, to the story she chooses to live.

## 6.7 Fatalism

Stella's understanding of herself is directly related to the time she lives in:

For a deception, she could no more blame the world than one can blame any fellow-sufferer: in these last twenty of its and her own years she had to watch in it what she felt in her – a clear-sightedly helpless progress towards disaster. The fateful course of her fatalistic century seemed more and more her own: together had she and it arrived at the testing extremities of their noonday. Neither had lived before.... The reappearance of Harrison with the glass of milk reminded her that her own extremity was in this being bargained for. The situation was such-and-such, as he indeed said. (*HD* 133-134)

Fate decides the destiny of the character; this suggests that the character cannot decide for herself, where the passage suggests that there is no turning back. Stella and her time are equated, and both seem to be spatially severed from the past, with what has gone before being irrelevant. The passage describes the close connection between Stella and the time she lives in. Stella's understanding of herself relates to apathy, but at the same time Harrison's return to the room awakens a pragmatic resolution in her that represents the possibility of negotiating her situation. But her actual chance of changing her situation is limited; at the end of the novel fatalism controls Stella's understanding of herself.

### 6.7.1 Mount Morris

When Stella visits Mount Morris, she imagines the women of the past sitting in the drawing room, and she imagines their lives. She also attempts to envisage a future wife for Roderick entering the same room. Even though Stella has rejected her past, she is inevitably confronted with a past that is not hers when she visits Mount Morris:

[...], was it not chiefly here in this room [the drawing-room] and under this illusion that Cousin Nettie Morris – and who knew how many more before her? – had been pressed back, hour by hour, by the hours themselves, into cloudland? Ladies had gone not quite mad, not quite even that, from in vain listening for meaning in the loudening ticking of the clock. (*HD* 174)

When imagining the women of the past and the woman of the future Stella sees herself representing the generation that broke “the fatal connexion between past and future [...] – what else could this be but its broken edges that she felt grating inside her soul” (*HD* 176). Stella denies her own past, but is able to understand the women of the past. But she declines to acknowledge her own past, thus the broken connection between past and future is identified in the text in her inability to accept her place in the past. The history she imagines for the women of the past suggests that inertia and standstill dominate this sphere. “[T]he loudening ticking of the clock” underscores the silence of the room, and an ominous emphasis to time is given in the passage; additionally, the quotation alludes to a bomb that is about to detonate. Bowen’s short story “The Inherited Clock” depicts the trauma associated with living a life controlled by waiting, where waiting epitomizes an imprisonment in time. The women at Mount Morris are associated with time and madness; Gill Plain claims that time is “the symbol of patriarchal oppression” in the novel (174). Bowen’s work often presents time as a stifling presence. Stella is not one of the ladies of Mount Morris, but even though she has not lived there, nor has she been part of the silent and suffocating atmosphere of the drawing room, we can still detect a sense of identification with the women of Mount Morris. This identification relates to the way silence, listening and fatalism create a sense of inertia of “still lives”.<sup>6</sup>

Heather Bryant Jordan presents a relatively positive perspective on Stella’s visit to Mount Morris when she argues that “*The Heat of the Day* recaptures Stella’s birthright as an Anglo-Irish woman in its invocation of Mt. Morris as a place where the past can enlighten rather than defile the present” (161). Jordan’s understanding of Stella as Anglo-Irish is problematic. There are no indications in the novel that Stella herself is of Anglo-Irish heritage, which indicates that the link created between the women of the past and Stella is not found in their belonging to the same social class; rather, we are presented with a general identification between women that surpasses the boundaries of class and nation. Standstill dominated the lives of these women of the past, and time presents itself as a negative factor that prevents the individual’s development and understanding of self.

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6. “Still life” is a central notion in Bennett and Royle’s study of Bowen’s work that explores character and identity in Bowen’s texts, see Chapter 1.

### 6.7.2 Cousin Nettie

Stella is not the only character who represents a break with the tradition of Mount Morris. Cousin Nettie also takes this role in the novel. Leaving the quietude of Mount Morris, Cousin Nettie sees her choice as either “here or there” (*HD* 213), where “here” is Wistaria Lodge, a home for mental patients, and “there” is Mount Morris. Cousin Nettie seemingly supplants one life in quietude and standstill with another life that represents the same thing. The difference between these two lives is, however, that Cousin Nettie is no longer controlled by someone else’s expectations and perceptions of who she ought to be; she is no longer supposed to fill the role of a lady of Mount Morris.

Roderick perceives Wistaria Lodge as a “powerhouse of nothingness, [a] hive of life in abeyance, [that] seemed to Roderick no more peculiar than any other abode” (*HD* 203). Roderick’s reflection of the place connects it to nothingness, but his reflection also encompasses all other places, so that the passage establishes an allusion to a fundamental sense of nothingness as descriptive of all other places. Roderick’s perception of nothingness is also reflected in the narrator’s portrayal of Cousin Nettie:

One could argue, she had chosen well. Here in this room her own existence could be felt condensing round her in pure drops; inside this closed window was such a silence as the world would probably never hear again – [...]. *Here* was nothing to trouble her but the possibility of being within reach: seated on the sofa with the back to what she had ascertained to be nothing, Cousin Nettie was well placed. (*HD* 215)

To get away from Mount Morris, Cousin Nettie chooses madness and a life outside reality; she has no desire to be confronted with it again. She has turned her back, physically and mentally, on the world, to defend her own inner life. Silence dominates Cousin Nettie’s sphere, as it does for the rooms Stella lives in. Both Stella and Cousin Nettie have chosen to reject the past; Cousin Nettie even chooses to reject the world; she is incarcerated in her chosen cocoon, but the text imparts that Cousin Nettie’s choice has given her a sense of contentment. Bennett and Royle argue that “Cousin Nettie provokes a powerful and affirmative destabilization of those assumptions of self and meaning, of society and order, that are elsewhere shown as coercive and constraining” (83), suggesting that Cousin Nettie finds meaning by choosing a life of seclusion from the world, contrary to the prevailing ideal that everyone would want to be part of society. We

need, however, to question whether Cousin Nettie's choice represents an opportunity for woman to find a self. This would imply that identity and meaning can only be found in a rejection of the world.

### 6.7.3 Spatial seclusion

Stella's choice of flats mirrors Cousin Nettie's choice of spatial seclusion from the world; the two flats represent important insights into the relationship between space and identity:

This fairly old house in Weymouth Street, of which her flat took up the top floor, was otherwise in professional – doctors' and dentists' – occupation and was accordingly empty at week-ends: below her now were nothing but empty rooms; [...]. Silence mounted the stairs, to enter her flat through the door ajar; silence came through the windows from the deserted street. (*HD 23*)

The spatial situation of the flat underscores emptiness and silence; emptiness relates to a sense of isolation, where living on the top floor illustrates a remoteness from the city, from the streets, as if the flat is placed floating up in the air detached from the city. The flat's placement on the top floor also alludes to living in a tower. Spatial emptiness can possibly be equated with the inner emptiness, or the vacuum we are presented with in Louie. Silence characterizes space in the quotation; the streets are deserted, which represents the same kind of emptiness: no neighbours, no sounds, no movement. Silence is personified and presented with a corporeal quality; silence moves into the flat, walks up the stairs, enters the open door and fills the flat with its presence. At the same time that silence is given a sensuous quality, it brings with it the smell of the empty rooms below the flat, epitomizing the particular smell of activities that take place during the week; this is a smell that saturates the offices of the dentists and that seeps into the corridors and spreads through the rest of the building. Silence and hearing are intrinsically related: nothing can be heard; her senses are tuned into listening, awaiting the arrival of Harrison. Silence moves in from the outside, combining the outside and the inside, which suggests a reciprocity between the inside and the outside spheres. Emptiness and silence characterize an abandoned space where the only character left is



Stella, which repeats a sense of abandonment that we also found in “Mysterious Kôr” where London was transformed into the abandoned city of Kôr. Abandonment is repeated at the end of the novel where Stella, now residing in a new flat on the seventh floor, sits while the bombs fall, in a building emptied of people, where the streets are empty too; people are ostensibly underground (*HD* 315):

The guns rested her by opening up once more: she leaned back to hear them, acquiescent, against the cushions. The bulb of the lamp in its socket and frames of the window shook – otherwise, this room remained a dark-lined kernel of silence under the flare-pale resounding sky. (*HD* 319)

Strangely enough silence characterizes the room in this quotation too, sound relates to the outside; the room is sheltered off from the world and keeps a sense of silence within itself. At the same time Stella hears the bombs, they offer her a rest from her conversation with Harrison. But why stay on the seventh floor of a building when the bombs are falling? It is Harrison who points out the hazardous position she is in:

[...] What do you think you're doing, skittering round in a top-floor flat on a night like this, with this heavy stuff coming down all over the place? Far from fair on the chap: you should think of him. You might not give a damn *what* happened – I must say, you gave me that impression, first. Does that make sense, now you've got prospects?

‘Prospects have alternatives.’ (*HD* 322)

Stella's answer is ominous; the text's last presentation of Stella presents no positive solution. The final sentence echoes the fatalism we found in Stella's view of herself. The alternative that presents itself is to let destiny decide the outcome for the character, an alternative that indicates death. Lis Christensen argues that the last two chapters represent a narratorial change of voice with respect to Stella; where the change involves an “externalization” of the protagonist (109). Christensen claims that “to find the narrative voice in the last pages of the book speaking as ‘we’, [...], forces the reader out of a comfortable, accustomed identification with Stella and confirms the demise of the heroine” (111). Although I agree with Christensen's observation that a change of voice occurs at the end of the novel, I do not accept that the previous chapters have provided a “comfortable, accustomed identification” with the protagonist; rather, I would argue that

we have been faced with an opaque character. The end of the novel confirms in its narratorial shift the impression that has been crafted since the beginning of the novel of a character who has lost her sense of identity. This is particularly expressed in her stasis at the end of the novel, where nothing any longer matters.

#### 6.7.4 Silence

Silence is, as we have seen, a descriptive feature of Stella's flats, and it is accentuated and emphasized in the spatial relationship depicted between the inside and outside. This underscores a sense of isolation and displacement. The passages that portray Weymouth Street depict silence seeping in from the outside and filling the room; in her second flat the noise from the outside strangely enough highlights the silence of the room. Silence is not only a feature that characterizes space, it also extends to encompass the character and the relation between characters as it is depicted in a narratorial comment on Harrison's second visit to Stella: "two persons speechlessly at a window became as anonymous as the city they overlooked. These two, though fated to speak again, could be felt to be depersonalized speakers in a drama which should best of all have remained as silent as it essentially was" (*HD* 140). Silence suspends individuality. Lack of speech and silence are connected with anonymity and loss of personality; additionally, a spatial bond is established between the two at the window and the city that they are overlooking but can barely see, suggesting that something might happen between the two.

Anonymity and depersonalization are underscored in the passage. Silence is connected to a drama, placing the two on a stage, thus repeating the notion of acting and the novel as a stage that was presented to us in the first chapter. A place that is not reality is created by presenting this as a drama, equating this setting with the concept of no-place. As in Roderick's imaginary transformation of the sofa into a boat, we witness a narratorial transformation of the spatial situation of the two characters, where a different outcome of their meeting is presented as a possibility. This possibility is, however, negated in the same sentence where reality and life intrude on the illusion, modifying the possibility of a fictional escape. Silence is also a feature that constitutes Stella, as exemplified in the following passage, where we are presented with a suppression of the

past and the consequent choice of silence as the preferred mode of behaviour to keep the past submerged:

[...]. – Oh, I should doubt,’ she exclaimed, ‘whether there’s any such thing as an innocent secret! Whatever has been buried, surely, corrupts? Nothing keeps innocence innocent but daylight. A truth’s just a truth, to start with, with no particular nature, good or bad – but how can any truth not *go* bad from being underground? Dug up again after years and laid on the mat, it’s inconvenient, shocking – apart from anything else there’s no place left in life for it any more. To dig up somebody else’s truth for them would seem to me sheer malignancy; to dig up one’s own, madness – I never would.’ (*HD* 228-229)

Truth and innocence have existed, but in Stella’s reflection there is no longer room for them. Once a truth has been buried, or silenced, it becomes contaminated and has lost its innocence. Truth and innocence are no longer possible in this life, which seemingly results in a loss of meaning. Furthermore, silence and secrecy are connected and equated; silence furnishes the secret with a continued existence; the two forces work together in keeping truth and innocence submerged. In suppressing the past and leaving the secret in the dark, the true story remains untold. Stella’s rejection of the past hides the betrayal she has been subjected to by her husband Victor. Her suppression of the past provides her with an opportunity to let a different story surface, thus paving the way for fictionality, and as for a drama, something new is created. The characterization of Stella intrinsically connects silence and rejection. If silence constitutes Stella, we are at the same time faced with a paradox, because we need to ask how it is possible for silence to constitute a self when silence at the same time also erases personality and individuality. What this seems to indicate is that Stella is not alive or real, but empty, and this understanding suggests a non-existence of the dialectic of sameness-identity and selfhood-identity. Paradoxes are at the core of *The Heat of the Day*, not only in the portrayals of the characters, but in the novel’s style, which also accentuates a sense of paradox and confusion.

## 6.8 Rejection

Victor’s rejection of Stella, along with his claim that she did not have “the remotest conception [of] what love was” (*HD* 223) have led to her dismissal of the past. Victor’s

initial refusal of Stella ties in with the overall theme of betrayal in the novel as it is presented in Robert's betrayal of the country. Ultimately his treason involves a rejection of Stella and of their love. Furthermore, Harrison denies Stella when she agrees to become his lover to save Robert. The story of love and rejection starts with Victor and the memory of him is revitalized when Harrison visits Stella the second time:

Why of Victor now? One could only suppose that the apparently forgotten beginning of any story was unforgettable; perpetually one was subject to the sense of there having to be a beginning *somewhere*. Like the lost first sheet of a letter or missing first pages of a book, the beginning kept on suggesting what must have been its nature. One never was out of reach of the power of what had been written first. (*HD* 133)

The story of Victor and Stella represents the beginning and is implicitly equated with the love story between Stella and Robert; this is a story where the beginning is lost: "Most first words have the nature of being trifling; theirs from having been lost began to have the significance of a lost clue" (*HD* 96). Stella rejects her past by not relating to it, by trying not to include it in her life. Her rejection, however, closely connects to the past and what it represents, and we find in the text that there is a crucial connection between the past and the character: a connection that is necessary for the character to reach an understanding of self. The lost beginning of Stella's and Robert's relationship symbolizes the past in the sense that it points out what they lack: knowledge of each other and of themselves, of who they were before they met. One central characteristic of sameness-identity is that it outlines a continuum in time that serves to illustrate a connection between the present and the past that relates to the individual's social identity. This sense of continuum is lacking in Stella's and Robert's relationship. Instead of living in the 'real world,' the lovers inhabit a "hermetic world" (*HD* 90) where no intrusions from the outside seem possible. The "hermetic world" contains the power of love, a power that sustains the illusion that nothing can threaten their love. One of the first events we are faced with in the novel, however, is Harrison's intrusion into Stella's life, when he questions the truth about Stella and Robert's love story. This subverts Stella's world, a world where Robert has been her "habitat" (*HD* 90), her place. Harrison's story thus bereaves her of her place in life; from the beginning of the text she is a displaced person.

The significance of a beginning as a necessary component in the continuum of life is shown in the way the relationship between Stella and Victor is presented in the text: “The beginning, in which was conceived the end, could not but continue to shape the middle part of the story, so that none of the realizations along that course were what had been expected, quite whole, quite final. That first path, taken to be a false start – who was to know, after all, where it might not have led?” (*HD* 133). A similar reflection cannot be found in Stella’s relationship with Robert, where their lost beginning questions whether there ever was a chance for their love; the key to their relationship was lost at their first meeting, or as Maud Ellmann comments: “Deprived of a beginning, their love affair is also robbed of its conclusion” (153). In the end no existence is given to the hope love represented. There seems to be no possibility for love to exist in any form; destiny or reality will always catch up with you. We are shown that when it comes to love, truth will always surface; it cannot be suppressed. Stella’s romantic illusion of love is eventually broken in the novel.

## **6.9 Crowds: the erasure of individuality**

The portrayal of Stella introduces us to a character who lacks an understanding of herself; furthermore, she lacks a sense of belonging. Louie’s solution to her own quest for identity is to feel a part of the masses. This longing eventually ends in a depersonalization of the character. For Stella, however, belonging to a group does not present itself as a solution; instead, what we are left with is passivity and death. As mentioned, Deborah Parsons claims that the figure of the *flâneuse* suitably describes both Stella and Louie, and she argues that Stella feels at home in the city and in the crowds. The quotation below, however, imparts a feeling of discomfort that counteracts the idea of the *flâneuse*. Indeed, we are not presented with a character who feels at home in the public sphere, instead a sense of threat more accurately describes the relation between self and space:

Wherever she turned her eyes detail took on an uncanny salience – she marked the taut grimace with which a man carrying two full glasses to a table kept a cigarette down to its last inch between his lips. Not a person did not betray, by one or another glaring

peculiarity, the fact of being human: her intimidating sensation of being crowded must have been due to this, for there were not so very many people here. The phenomenon was the lightning, more powerful even than could be accounted for by the bald white globes screwed aching to the low white ceiling – there survived in here not one shadow: every one had been ferreted out and killed. (*HD* 225)

This is the “bar or grill” (*HD* 225) Harrison takes Stella to, and Stella’s perceptions and feelings of the room and the people in the room are presented to us. Stella feels intimidated by the way each person in the room shows his or her humanity, which results in Stella’s feeling of being crowded. To a certain extent this parallels Louie’s sense of being “crowded to death” by language. In contrast, however, Stella’s sense of crowdedness relates to people and not to language. There seems to be a paradox in this passage, however, that relates to the way the people in the bar are transformed into a crowd that constitutes a homogenous mass. For Stella there is no comfort in being part of a crowd. Additionally, the light has the effect of total exposure, an exposure that connects with death. In this light there is nowhere to hide, everything is revealed.

### **6.10 A unified self?**

“‘What *is* a person? Is it true, there is not more than one of each?’” (*ET* 193). Eva Trout’s questions provokingly address the notion of a unique self. These questions also go to the core of *The Heat of the Day*, where the complexity of identity is of paramount importance, and the idea of a unified self is undermined in the different portrayals of Louie and Stella, and in the text’s general questioning of identity. My purpose in focusing on the two main female characters has been to illuminate how their stories relate to each other and interact in the exploration of identity. Differences and similarities between the two characters have been presented in the various portrayals and in the reflections the two characters give of each other. We have seen that Louie’s role as an implicit narratorial comment is important to how Stella’s sense of identity is presented. Additionally, the idea that wartime represents a sphere of liberation and empowerment for women, as posed by Phyllis Lassner and Deborah Parsons,<sup>7</sup> is challenged by the

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7. See Chapter 1

novel's portraits of Stella and Louie. I have argued that the idea that Louie and Stella represent wartime *flâneuses* is questioned rather than confirmed.

*The Heat of the Day* establishes a parallel between Stella and Cousin Nettie in Stella's repetition of Cousin Nettie's solution to life: she too turns her back on reality. Louie's quest for a identity presents a more fundamental way of dealing with life, but in the end we understand that her quest has led her to live an illusion. Heather Bryant Jordan takes a very optimistic perspective in her concluding remarks on *The Heat of the Day* where she comments that "[p]resumably, Roderick will go on to refurbish Mt. Morris, Stella will contentedly marry a member of her race, and Louie will devote herself to bringing up a fine young son who may better the future" (168). Jordan's reflections do not relate to the idea of liberation stated by Lassner and Parsons; indeed, her conclusion suggests a perspective that avoids a discussion of the problems posed in *The Heat of the Day* with respect to women's sense of self and identity. *The Heat of the Day* presents us with traditional feminine solutions; Louie becomes a mother, and Stella intends to marry, but both solutions are undermined in the story of Cousin Nettie. The roles of mother, wife and lover represent different groups women belong to. Individuality is not, however, debarred when belonging to one of these groups, but in *The Heat of the Day* a lack of individuality is implied by these choices. My analysis has described Louie's quest for identity as a desire for sameness-identity, which in Louie's case involves an identification with the masses to the extent that the dialectic of sameness-identity and selfhood-identity is dysfunctional. In contrast to Louie we have found that Stella rejects identification with others; she seemingly rejects sameness-identity; and who Stella is remains elusive in the end. The dialectic of sameness- and selfhood-identity seems to be non-existent in both characters' quest for identity. Considering the texts analysed in this study, we seem to be left with the question as to whether nonentity and nothingness threaten all women in Bowen's texts.

## Chapter 7 Conclusion

Anyhow, what a slippery fish is identity; and  
what *is* it, besides a slippery fish?<sup>1</sup>

In this study, I have argued that identity is constantly undermined in Bowen's work. I have taken Paul Ricoeur's understanding of identity as a dialectic of sameness-identity and selfhood-identity as my theoretical starting point. Ricoeur's conceptualization of identity posits a central connection between social identity and individual identity, where these two aspects of a fully integrated self-in-the-world are mutually interdependent and, in their self-supporting interaction, support and modify each other in the well-balanced individual to construct a secure sense of self, a fully functioning identity. The theoretical framework I have chosen allows for the possibility of discussing, on a more abstract level, what takes place in the texts. By paying attention to particular details, ambiguities and ambivalences in the different texts, the analyses have shown that, in various ways, the dialectic between social and individual identity is dysfunctional in Bowen's work, which means that a well-balanced identity for her characters is impossible.

I have taken Bowen's autobiographical text *Seven Winters* as my textual starting point; my aim in doing this has been to illustrate central elements in the Bowen child's constitution of identity that are of interest for the analyses of the fictional texts. Central to *Seven Winters* is the emphasis Bowen gives to the connection between the individual and place, and how this connection is of importance to the individual's sense of self. *Seven Winters* illustrates the process the Bowen child undergoes to develop a sense of herself, and by means of this illustration Bowen also highlights what can potentially go

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1. *ET* 193.



wrong in this process. In Bowen's autobiographical text of her childhood, the Bowen child is presented as a character who initially sees herself as the centre of the world, which is a common perception for most children, where this perception is gradually changed in the interaction with other people and her surroundings. My analysis of *Seven Winters* has shown, however, that relational life for the Bowen child also limits her development; the governess decides where they should walk and how she should dress, and her mother does not allow her to read. Thus the adults' physical and mental restrictions on the Bowen child's life, constrain her development, but they also provoke the Bowen child's imaginative capacity to create a world free from constraints. The narrative of the Bowen child depicted in *Seven Winters* does not represent the best conditions for a child. This is, however, unknown to the Bowen child, and she finds a solution to her predicament. The adult narrator represents a different perspective, and has more knowledge than the child. The text portrays a child who finds comfort in her imaginary escapes; at the same time, however, the child's escape to the imaginary world suggests a lonely child. *Seven Winters* concludes positively, because it suggests a future where the imaginative ability of childhood is nurtured in the adult's profession as a writer. The positive conclusion of *Seven Winters* is not, however, reciprocated in the fictional texts, where we have found that imagination and dreams cannot help the individual to find a way out of the difficulties of wartime.

Imagination and no-place are two terms that have been of particular importance in *Seven Winters*. These are also terms that have been incorporated in the analyses of the three fictional texts I have included in my study. The analyses show that imagination, dream and lies are the means by which the characters attempt to escape from a reality characterized by emptiness and nothingness. We have seen that imagination, dream and lies are presented to represent a solution for the characters, but that these do not ultimately represent a solution. The concepts of no-place and nonentity have clear negative connotations for the reader, but there is no necessary correspondence between how the narrator presents these concepts and how the characters understand them. My analyses have shown that no-place and nonentity are indeed ambiguous concepts in Bowen's texts, and that they are understood differently at different levels of the texts.

When exploring the dialectic of sameness-identity and selfhood-identity we have found that different constructions of identity are presented in the texts, and that the characters in Bowen's prose are rarely, if ever, involved in a construction of identity which represents a dialectic of sameness-identity and selfhood-identity, which has been identified as the condition for a consistent and integrated identity. We have found that in "The Happy Autumn Fields", "Mysterious Kôr" and *The Heat of the Day* the characters are either submerged in an expression of individuality that excludes social identity or, as is the case of Louie Lewis' quest for identity, selfhood-identity is given no place because her understanding of identity is found only by relating to others. The characters Mary and Pepita refuse to relate to the real world; Mary finds a sense of self and identity in her dream of the past, and in identification with the imaginary figure Sarah; Pepita identifies with Kôr in her dream, and this identification is directed at Pepita's individual identity, and no desire for social identity is expressed at the end of the story. The end of *The Heat of the Day* suggests that Stella, like Cousin Nettie, turns her back on people and the world.

A central aspect of my analyses has been to differentiate between 'who sees?' and 'who speaks?' in the texts. I have used Mieke Bal's understanding of the term 'focalization' for this purpose. The attention I have paid to focalizer and focalized objects has been central to how identity is presented in the texts, because these terms serve to underscore the different understandings of identity that are expressed; that there is no necessary correspondence between the narrator's focalization and the characters' focalization of different focalized objects. This is, for example, shown in *The Heat of the Day* where the secondary character Louie Lewis plays an important role as the one who perceives Stella, who sees Stella more clearly than the narrator does. By localizing this perception in Louie, her role in the novel at the same time becomes more prominent. I believe the method I have used when analysing Louie's role in relation to the main character of *The Heat of the Day* can also be used fruitfully in the reading of other works by Bowen. It could, for example, be interesting to explore the role of minor male characters in novels such as *The Last September* and *The House in Paris* with respect to how the main characters in these novels are presented by different focalizers. In a sense 'who sees?' and 'who speaks?' are partly analogous to individual identity and social

identity. When we see, we observe others; when we speak, we present our inner self to others to react with.

I have taken an unconventional approach in selecting *Seven Winters* as a starting point for my analyses. My approach to the autobiographical text differs from how most Bowen criticism treats Bowen's autobiographies, and I have also provided a more comprehensive analysis of *Seven Winters* than, to the best of my knowledge, exists in Bowen criticism. *Seven Winters* presents us with a story in which the cracks in the veneer of happiness reveal a lonely child, in which the question of no-place and place is presented as important for her perception of herself and the world. As mentioned above, imagination and no-place are the most prominent concepts in *Seven Winters*, where the child's use of her imagination enables her to fill the no-place with meaning by creating a virtual reality, a world of fiction. In *Seven Winters* the interweaving of no-place and imagination are given positive connotations. Since Bowen emphasizes the significance of place in her work, the introduction of no-place necessarily adds a new and intriguing dimension to how place should be understood in her work. No-place in the different fictional texts is expressed through escape into dream or imagination. These represent escapes from reality, where the characters create a world of fiction and a virtual reality, that ostensibly represents an alternative to their reality. The fictional texts show, however, that this escape is impossible. As we have seen, there are various critical approaches to how the escapes can be understood, where many critics perceive the escapes in the fictional texts as positive for the characters. My analyses show, however, that these escapes threaten the dialectic of sameness-identity and selfhood-identity, because the individual is prevented from experiencing herself as whole. This suggests a split self, in which each split-off half-identity atrophies because of a lack of fruitful interaction with the other.

Chapters 4 and 5 challenge Bowen's notion of a "saving hallucination", where I argue that the dream does not represent a saving hallucination for the characters in Bowen's texts. At the end of "The Happy Autumn Fields", the character can no longer return to the dream; indeed, what remains is a reflection of what the modern world cannot offer to the character, which becomes a criticism of civilization. In my analysis of "Mysterious Kôr", I contest the idea that the mythical city of Kôr represents a place of

rescue from war for the female protagonist. The different characters express different values or norms, where the author explores identity in different contexts. For example, in “Mysterious Kôr”, it is not clear whether the emptiness Kôr represents is a problem for the character; Pepita perceives Kôr as a solution, an escape, but the text, more fundamentally, presents this emptiness as problematic and destructive for the character, as is indicated in the text’s presentation of Kôr’s “finality”. I have suggested that the character’s escape to a mythic dream world ultimately presents itself as a death-wish. The dreamer in “The Happy Autumn Fields” attempts to escape from her body by finding refuge in her dream. As readers, we know that such an escape is not possible, and the text offers either death or a return to reality as the character’s ultimate choices.

My analyses of the two female characters in *The Heat of the Day* were presented and juxtaposed in Chapter 6, where their different attempts at achieving a sense of self and developing an understanding of identity ultimately raise the question of whether it is possible for women in Bowen’s texts to develop an identity. The lie is one of the central concepts explored in the novel, and it is the lie that ties the stories of Stella and Louie together. The text suggests that the life Louie creates for herself is a construction based on a lie. The text’s presentation of the lie is, however, ambiguous, because Louie finds solace and comfort in the lie, while the narrator implicitly imparts the problems attached to the lie. Thus the text alludes to one of the other lies presented in the novel: Stella’s lie to her son. *The Heat of the Day* seemingly has a happy ending, with Louie’s return to the place of her childhood, and with the prospect of Stella’s marriage to a “cousin of a cousin” (HD 321). The text, however, suggests that the lie encapsulates Louie’s life, and that fatalism captures the pessimistic mood that describes Stella’s position when the novel comes to an end. The two female characters in *The Heat of the Day* express two different approaches to identity, where Louie’s desire to be one of many fundamentally suggests an identity that is located in sameness-identity, while Stella, on the other hand, does not seek sameness. Stella’s positioning at the end of the novel suggests a rejection of sameness-identity because she seeks away from the others. Louie’s desire to be ‘the same’ articulates a perception of identity where an understanding of who you are is established by mirroring others. Louie desires sameness to the extent that she is depersonalized, thus her identity is dissolved in her struggle to be ‘the same’.

The texts I have analysed in this study are all implicitly or explicitly wartime texts, and I have argued that wartime is a time of crisis in which identity is tested. I will, however, end with a reflection on whether the approach I have taken is also applicable to other works by Bowen. Is identity undermined in Bowen's work generally or is this most clearly explicated in her wartime texts? For this purpose, I have chosen to discuss briefly Bowen's last novel *Eva Trout*.

### **7.1 *Eva Trout*: A manifesto of identity**

As the various analyses in this study have shown, the dialectic of sameness-identity and selfhood-identity is made impossible in the texts in question, and this is also the case when we consider identity in *Eva Trout*. Elizabeth Bowen presents what can be understood as a manifesto of identity in her last novel *Eva Trout*, although identity is in fact a constant theme in Bowen's *oeuvre*. The elusiveness of identity as a concept is expressed by the book's eponymous Eva, depicting not only her own predicament, but also the struggle Bowen's characters generally undertake in their attempts to understand self and identity. Bennett and Royle argue that "[t]o recognize that identity is a slippery fish, is to catch, at least in part, a sense of the slippery, fishy identity of Eva's name (Trout), and the fishy nature of Bowen's last novel (*Eva Trout*)" (152). Furthermore, they relate the sense of slipperiness attached to Eva's identity to a more fundamental questioning of identity *per se* where "the very possibility of identity" is tested and where they argue that "we might speak rather of an imperson" (152-153). Understanding Eva as an imperson parallels the notion of nobody discussed in Chapter 2, but for Eva the notion of nobody does not represent an escape. Bennett and Royle underscore that identity is undermined in *Eva Trout* to the extent that Eva is depersonalized. Consequently, the concept of identity is left without meaning and content for Eva. In a similar vein, Ellmann argues that "[w]hile the fish is associated with the proper name, the signature of selfhood, it also implies the slipperiness of personal identity" (220). Ellmann does not question as strongly as Bennett and Royle the very premise of identity, but these critics share a common ground in highlighting the fundamental insecurity ascribed to identity in this text. So, what is this slippery fish called identity?

‘[...] The way one is envisaged by other people – what easier way is there of envisaging oneself? There is a fatalism in one’s acceptance of it. Solitude is not the solution, one feels followed. Choice – choice of those who are to surround one, choice of those most likely to see one rightly – is the only escape. But for some of us, it is an escape difficult to make. [...]’. (ET 223)

The professional voice of Doctor Bonnard in *Eva Trout* construes identity as relational: who you are is how you are perceived by others. Identity is not created in a vacuum, but in relationships with other people, thus underscoring the importance of sameness-identity. This suggests one way in which seeing is central to identity, where to be seen by someone defines who you are. The preference is, of course, that your understanding of self depends on the perspective of someone who sees you *as you are*, but such a construction of identity may not be easily achieved. How are you to determine who sees you rightly, especially if you do not know yourself? To see someone rightly seems to allude to an essential understanding of identity, suggesting that identity can be seen and pinpointed as a stable entity. The passage presents the perspective of the other as an escape from having to define who you are in an active way. But, the acceptance of the other as the one who defines who you are also necessarily involves a self-reflection that represents the basis for selecting the ones who see you rightly. The ‘easy way out’ is complicated by the choice the individual has to make. Self-definition has already begun to take place in the search for the ones who see you rightly. Ultimately, the question remains as to whether the perception of the other and the individual’s self-definition correspond, whether both are given a place in the individual’s sense of identity and whether they are allowed to come into contact and to modify each other.

As discussed in Chapter 2, the notion of nothing connects not only to place in Bowen, but also to character, as demonstrated by Stella’s reflection on the Kelways in *The Heat of the Day*: “She saw the Kelways suspended in the middle of nothing. She could envisage them so suspended when there *was* nothing more” (114). In *Eva Trout*, Eva blames Mrs Arble for having “sent me back again – to be nothing” (185). In the passage from *The Heat of the Day*, the first sentence combines the notion of nothing and nowhere, while nowhere seems to be negated in the second sentence, implying that people like the Kelways will survive even when nothing remains but nothingness. The

quotation suggests presence even when presence seems impossible. Thus the notion of nothing as presence is brought to the fore.

“[N]othing” in the quotation from *Eva Trout* implies Eva’s unfulfilled desire to learn; to be someone is connected to knowledge, and when Mrs Arble does not complete her project of teaching Eva, Eva becomes nothing once more. Thus Eva must be filled with meaning by someone else. Nothingness in *Eva Trout* equals lack of identity.

Doctor Bonnard’s reflection on identity attributes the defining power of the other to seeing, and we often find that Bowen’s female characters are the objects of the other’s gaze. Eva exemplifies a character who does not easily accept the definitions of others, and her attempts at defining herself take refuge in lies and fictions. Thus Eva creates a life narrative with no basis in reality, where her selfhood-identity is indeed fictional, expressing more what she wants to be than what she really is.

The analyses of *Seven Winters*, “The Happy Autumn Fields” and *The Heat of the Day* have shown that the ability to express – in language – who you are, is central to how you are perceived as a person, thus language and identity are closely interlinked. Eva is a character who does not master language; she prefers a way of living where language is not necessary:

[...] – Oh come, Eva, who would not wish to speak?’

‘I have never wished to. What is the object? What is the good?’ (ET 155-156).

Eva’s unwillingness to communicate indicates her difference and apartness from others; this underscores her abnormality. Additionally, her corporeal abnormality is central to the understanding of her identity. She is a striking person who stands out because of the way she looks, behaves and refuses to speak. Her behaviour and looks are at odds with accepted ideas about normal behaviour and appearance. Ellmann points out that “[i]n the middle of *Eva Trout* Eva gives up language altogether, retreating with her deaf-mute adopted son into a ‘cinematographic existence with no sound-track’ “(205). What are the consequences of giving up language and retreating to a world of images for a character?

*Eva Trout* sets up a contest between ‘pictures and conversations’: the charming phrase from *Alice in Wonderland* that provided Bowen with the title of her unfinished autobiography. Are pictures superior to conversations? What can words achieve that

images cannot? The answer to the second question is interiority: Bowen makes it clear that only language can endow us with an inner life. (Ellmann 206)

Ellmann thus argues that, in Bowen's texts, language is central to the character's inner life. All of Bowen's characters have a language of some sort, but their lack of comprehension of themselves, reflects their chaotic inner life. Portia in *The Death of the Heart*, Eva in *Eva Trout*, and Louie in *The Heat of the Day* are all examples of characters who struggle with language, and with an understanding of self. Eva, Portia and Louie are all outsiders to language.

## 7.2 Identity at risk

So, what is this slippery fish called identity? As we have seen, the understanding of identity as essential, was reflected in Doctor Bonnard's conception of identity in *Eva Trout*. But do we, in fact, encounter characters in Bowen's prose who accept the others' perception of who they are, or are the characters struggling to achieve a sense of identity that is not controlled by the perception of the other? The individual lives in a society where who you are is formed by where you are and who you relate to; the understanding of identity is thus constantly changing and challenged. Identity is not fixed and predefined.

Bowen's work is generally characterized by a pessimistic undertone with respect to the possibility of maintaining a stable identity; a pessimism that has been underscored in the different analyses, and that has been shown in Bowen's constant attention to the chaos in which the characters live and in the repercussions such a situation has for identity. In Bowen's work pessimism is expressed as dissolution of identity, and not as an expression of pessimism with respect to change. *Eva Trout* confirms the understanding we have derived from the different analyses of Bowen's wartime texts: that identity is threatened in Bowen's work; indeed, we seem to be witnessing the dissolution of self in *Eva Trout*. Dissolution is highlighted by the novel's ending, where Eva is shot and killed by her deaf and mute adopted son, Jeremy. Dissolution is also the logical outcome when sameness-identity and selfhood-identity are not integrated. The novel suggests that neither one of these identities is developed in the main character.



It is my contention that Bowen's last novel, *Eva Trout*, represents Bowen's most pessimistic narrative of identity by addressing the character's precarious situation in modern society, thus reflecting an important motif of modernism. Indeed, compared to the wartime texts, Bowen's last novel expresses an even more radical perspective on the individual's exposed situation in the world. Thus Bowen's development as a writer with respect to the understanding of identity expresses an even stronger criticism of civilization than the criticism we find in her wartime texts. The protagonist in Bowen's last novel exemplifies how the problem of identity is closely connected with displacement and an inability to make use of language, and in this respect we find a parallel between Louie Lewis and Eva Trout.

What does it mean to have an identity? Traditionally, women are often perceived to be very receptive to their surroundings, sometimes to the extent that *ipse*-identity is erased. This understanding of women is not, however, necessarily applicable to the women portrayed in Bowen's work in this study. The exception in this connection is Louie, whose receptiveness to her surroundings results in an idea of herself based purely in sameness-identity. The other women discussed here do not, however, establish sameness-identity; they place themselves outside of the community, which ultimately leaves them without the dialectic inherent in the definition of identity suggested in this thesis.

Ultimately, we must ask what the consequences of "the uncertain 'I'" are: does it prevent the individual from realising who she is? We have found, in the analyses, that if the character's 'I' is too receptive, this results in a vulnerable position where the 'I' is invaded by others to the extent that *ipse*-identity is given no place. On the other hand, if the 'I' is too strong, the individual is unable to relate to others. Both of these situations represent extremes which contrast with a balanced identity where both *idem*-identity and *ipse*-identity are given a place. My study shows that Bowen portrays women who achieve no such balance, and my discussion of Bowen's last novel, *Eva Trout*, confirms that identity for women is at risk in Bowen's work.

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