

# A World of Lost Innocence



A World of Lost Innocence:  
The Fiction of Elizabeth Bowen

By

Nicola Darwood

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P U B L I S H I N G

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The Fiction of Elizabeth Bowen,  
by Nicola Darwood

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## DEDICATION

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# CONTENTS

|  |     |
|--|-----|
| Acknowledgements .....   | ix  |
| Introduction .....   | 1   |
| Chapter One.....   | 20  |
| Innocence and Violence: <i>The Last September</i>                                    |     |
| Chapter Two .....  | 48  |
| “Passion knows no crimes”: <i>Friends and Relations</i> and <i>To the North</i>      |     |
| Chapter Three .....  | 81  |
| “The crack across the crust of life”: <i>The House in Paris</i>                      |     |
| Chapter Four .....   | 110 |
| “Incurable strangers to the world”: <i>The Death of the Heart</i>                    |     |
| Chapter Five .....   | 138 |
| Hallucinations and Innocent Secrets: <i>The Heat of the Day</i>                      |     |
| Chapter Six .....  | 166 |
| Buried Treasures, Hidden Secrets: <i>A World of Love</i> and <i>The Little Girls</i> |     |
| Chapter Seven.....   | 196 |
| “A concatenation of circumstance”: <i>Eva Trout, or Changing Scenes</i>              |     |
| Last Words .....   | 223 |
| Appendix .....   | 225 |
| Unpublished Letters and an extract from <i>Anna</i>                                  |     |
| Bibliography .....   | 233 |
| Index .....  | 245 |





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## INTRODUCTION

It is, according to Elizabeth Bowen, “not only our fate but our business to lose innocence, and once we have lost that it is futile to attempt to picnic in Eden” (Bowen 1946, 264). This book charts Bowen’s employment of the motif of innocence as a recurrent theme in her novels and short stories, and notes the transition from innocence to experience which plays a significant role in the epistemological journey faced by Bowen’s characters so that they do not remain “incurable strangers to the world” (*DH*, 106), a journey often precipitated by a moment of recognition. Bowen’s treatment of innocence is not simply one of a binary opposition between “innocence” and “experience”; Bowen’s manipulation of the narrative and her complex use of syntax subverts such a reading as she avoids the conventional trope to be found in earlier fiction such as Blake’s *Songs of Innocence and Experience* and *Auguries of Innocence*, the *bildungsroman* novel or the nineteenth century realist novel. The endings of Bowen’s novels also complicate this reading as they fail to provide the closure associated with earlier teleological novels; by denying the reader such a closure, Bowen’s fiction resists the notion that she is enforcing any moral judgement about innocence and its loss on her readers.

Innocence has, of course, been a pervasive theme in story-telling since stories from the Old Testament were told and retold around fires and from the pulpit. As a literary concept, the origin of ideas of innocence can be found in the story of the fall of Adam and Eve and their consequent expulsion from Eden, ideas later built on by, for example, the novels of Henry James and, ultimately so far as this book is concerned, the fiction of Elizabeth Bowen. However, over the centuries, social rules have changed and, with these changes, society’s perceptions of the meaning of innocence have also altered. This is particularly apparent when one considers changing attitudes to childhood and innocence from the Middle Ages to the nineteenth century: from an era where there was little recognition of childhood as a distinctive state, to one of the romantic idealisation of the child, an idealisation disrupted by Freud’s violent and sexualised picture of childhood. As a writer in the twentieth century, Bowen would have necessarily absorbed these changing perceptions. Writing over five decades (her first book of short stories, *Encounters*, was published in 1923 and her last complete novel, *Eva Trout, or Changing Scenes* in 1968), her

novels and short stories were published during a period in which notions of innocence were themselves continually destabilized by cultural, intellectual, national and international events. Bowen's proposition that it is "futile to attempt to picnic in Eden" once innocence is lost raises the question as to whether loss of innocence is equally vital for both the individual and society. Of equal importance is the transition from innocence to experience in the epistemological journey faced by Bowen's characters and the role of recognition in that journey, together with the part that the increasingly complex narrative plays in Bowen's fiction. The narration of these journeys, however, unsettles the notion of moral certainties prevalent in realist or *bildungsroman* fiction and so I address two central concerns: the innocence of the characters within the texts, and the epistemological journey of the reader.

Deriving from the Latin word "*nocens*",<sup>1</sup> "innocence" is defined by the Oxford English Dictionary as "[t]he quality or fact of being innocent"; the definition continues, innocence is "[f]reedom from sin, guilt, or moral wrong in general; the state of being untainted with, evil; moral purity [...] Freedom from specific guilt [...] Freedom from cunning or artifice, guilelessness, artlessness, simplicity". The dictionary further defines the term "innocent" in relation to a person as "[d]oing no evil; free from moral wrong, sin, or guilt [...] pure, unpolluted [...] Having or showing the simplicity, ignorance, artlessness, or unsuspecting nature of a child or one ignorant of the world" (995-996).<sup>2</sup> These parts of speech—the noun and the adjective—thus provide a point of departure for a discussion of innocence. From the original meaning of word as not causing harm, one usage of the word "innocence" is associated with a person's state before sexual intercourse; questions of childhood innocence are irrevocably tied to notions of sexuality and morality for, from one point of view (both in Bowen's fiction and in society), childhood innocence is lost once there is an awareness of sexuality, an awareness that can also highlight issues of morality.

In 1999, Hermione Lee noted "I think there is more to be said about sex in Bowen—repression, danger, ambivalence" (1999, 4): certainly coming to terms with sexuality is one of the major contributory factors on the journey from innocence to experience and Bowen's concern with the ending of innocence in young girls and women is a favourite theme throughout her fiction (though, of course, treated from a variety of angles), its loss arising from a transition which is often associated in Bowen's fiction with moments of recognition. Drawing on Terence Cave's work, I borrow Aristotle's concept of *anagnôrisis* (recognition) to analyse its role in the journey from innocence to knowledge, from childhood to adulthood.

Recognition of one's own sexuality is an important part of this process and it is in this context that the impact of Freudian notions of sexuality is apparent in Bowen's work; social perceptions of innocence, particularly childhood innocence, changed irrevocably after Freud's publication of his theories and, although Henry James' literary influence can also be seen in Bowen's fiction, her novels were all written in a post-Freudian context. In *English Novelists* Bowen acknowledges the importance of sexuality and class as themes in fiction:

One cannot deny that, with the nineteenth century, a sort of fog did begin, in the English novel, to obscure vital aspects of life. It became more difficult to write greatly because it became less possible to write truly. There was facetiousness on the subject of class, squeamishness on the subject of sex (1942b, 32).

Such a stance echoes her belief that human interest is needed in a novel, in particular the psychological conflict that occurs between two people (ibid, 13).

Discussing the role of violence in relation to innocence, Frederick Karl notes that "the innocent and the good suffer for the crass casuality of the guilty and the evil" (1964, 107) and that "even the author's sense of good and evil will tend to merge them one into another; the conflict will become resolved less in clear colours than in various shades of darks-and-whites, in muted greys" (ibid, 108). He continues his argument:

we find, also, that the innocent, good person is very often the cause of evil and guilt that is manifest in his antagonist. Frequently, the good person is drawn to the evil one, for good and evil in this scheme lie within the framework of what are considered "normal" human relationships; and humiliation becomes the sole vehicle of evil action. (Ibid.)

This particular aspect of Karl's reading of Bowen's fiction echoes the narratorial comment in *The Death of the Heart*: "[i]n love, the sweetness and violence [the innocent] have to offer involves a thousand betrayals for the less innocent" (*The Death of the Heart*, 106). In Bowen's fictional world violence and chaos often occur as a result of the actions of a character who might be regarded as "innocent", for example Portia Quayne (*The Death of the Heart*), Emmeline Summers (*To the North*), or Jeremy, Eva Trout's son (*Eva Trout, or Changing Scenes*), while the impact of death has a large part to play in the transition from a state of innocence to its loss. Violence, chaos and death occur as a culmination, or as Eva Trout's guardian, Constantine Ormeau, puts it, a "concatenation" (*ET*, 267) of events, which may act as the antithesis to the state of

innocence depicted throughout Bowen's novels and in many of her short stories.

My approach in this book owes much to the work of various critics, specifically the work of Hermione Lee. Lee's approach to Bowen's work (*Elizabeth Bowen*, originally published in 1981), which highlights the importance of Bowen's life in relation to her fiction, provides a model for this book in which biographical detail, including material obtained from previously unpublished letters, is used to help to establish the context for the novels and selected short stories. Although many of Bowen's letters have been published in *The Mulberry Tree* (edited by Lee) and in Victoria Glendinning's edited collection of the letters and diaries of Bowen and Charles Ritchie (*Love's Civil War: Elizabeth Bowen & Charles Ritchie: Letters and diaries from the love affair of a lifetime*: 2008), there remain a number of letters that have yet to be published and some of these can be found in the libraries of Manchester University and Durham University. These letters, written to L.P. Hartley and William Plomer respectively, discuss Bowen's thoughts about her life, her novels and the novels of others. A number of her letters to L.P. Hartley specifically refer to the time in which she wrote *The Little Girls* and describe her feelings of loss and melancholy following the death of her husband, Alan Cameron, emotions that can be read into Dinah's distress as she discovers that the coffer is empty when, for her, "the game's collapsed. We saw there was nothing there" and she asks the question "So where am I now?" (*LG*, 163). Conversely, Bowen's correspondence with William Plomer provides both an understanding of how she saw her own work, particularly in relation to *The Death of the Heart*, *The Little Girls* and *Eva Trout*, or *Changing Scenes*, and the importance to Bowen of Plomer's approval of her writing.<sup>3</sup>

Lee's approach is not unique in the study of Bowen's fiction, nor was it the only model I used when writing this book. Phyllis Lassner (*Elizabeth Bowen*, 1990) provides biographical details of Bowen's life before turning her attention to Bowen's fiction through the application of feminist theory, an approach used by Lis Christensen (*Elizabeth Bowen: The Later Fiction*, 2001). Maud Ellmann also applies this model in her study, *Elizabeth Bowen: The Shadow Across the Page* (2003), indeed Ellmann's stated desire is to show how Bowen's "fiction literally houses her experience" (2003, 8). Andrew Bennett and Nicholas Royle's reading of Bowen's novels (*Elizabeth Bowen and the Dissolution of the Novel*, 1995) provided another framework which I found useful when deciding on my approach. Their identification of a single motif in each novel, which is then used as a springboard for a discussion of that particular text, provided the impetus for my work in which the common thread of the notion of innocence is

utilised in an exploration both of this theme and the narrative strategies employed by Bowen. However, whilst adopting certain elements of these studies I have not consciously adopted their theoretical approaches, although in common with all these critics I have drawn on a close textual analysis of the texts and appropriated aspects of historical, structuralist and psychoanalytic theories in my reading of Bowen's fiction. Whilst I primarily utilise elements of narratological and Lacanian theory I would not, of course, suggest that this is the only valid approach to Bowen's fiction; these are just two theoretical tools that can be applied to Bowen's fiction. I haven't, for example, followed Renée Hoogland's study (*Elizabeth Bowen: A Reputation in Writing*, 1994) in which she reads Bowen's fiction through a feminist lesbian theoretical perspective, a reading which appears to preclude other valid interpretations of Bowen's work. Lee, in her introduction to the second edition of *Elizabeth Bowen*, suggests that Hoogland's approach "seems a flattening, intractable model for Bowen's slippery and complex fictions" (1999, 11); my hope is that my methodological approach avoids providing an "intractable" and reductive reading of Bowen's fiction.

Karl argues that "the large issues of the day, whether treated directly as in the sociological novel, or indirectly as in the psychological novel which generalizes on the sociologist's particulars, will not be present in Miss Bowen's canon" (1964, 111), but his view has since been contradicted by more recent critics, notably Phyllis Lassner. She notes that Bowen's novels are concerned with the major issues of the period, and she cites, in particular, *The House in Paris* where she observes that Bowen deals directly with the question of Jewishness in a post-Nuremberg Law setting. Lassner shows that Bowen highlights Nazi anti-Semitic attitudes through her characterisation of Max Ebberth as victim (1998, 203-204). Allan Hepburn's collection of Bowen's essays (*People, Places, Things: Essays by Elizabeth Bowen*, 2008) provides added illumination to Bowen's thoughts throughout the twentieth century. Although many of the essays concentrate on the "lighter side" of Bowen, others speak of her impressions of the Paris Peace Conference in 1946, of Hungary, Prague and, of course, Ireland—each essay providing an insight to the work of the Conference or her fascination with the post-war complexities faced by people in Europe. Her eye for detail can also be seen in her fiction and I would argue that the larger issues of the twentieth century are reflected in Bowen's novels and that an analysis of their cultural context adds to our understanding of Bowen's continued and developing use of innocence throughout her *oeuvre*. Individual chapters therefore investigate the cultural context of the particular novels and short stories under consideration

as an introduction to the changing treatment of innocence. Such an approach extends to a consideration of changing cultural consciousness over the five decades of Bowen's fiction, as well as to Bowen's own responses to cultural changes and political events.

This structure also provides an opportunity to observe the development of specific aspects of innocence as well as the wider development of Bowen's style as I would argue that Bowen's treatment of individual character and of innocence as a central theme, whilst comparatively superficial in her earliest short stories and novels, became more elaborate through her more complex narrative structure and characterisation in her later fiction. By drawing selectively on the theories of narratology of Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan, Gérard Genette and others, and Terence Cave's study of recognition (classical *anagnôrisis*), the role of the unfolding narrative itself is examined in the development of Bowen's representation of innocence. Bowen's narratives deliberately manipulate the reader's own journey from innocence to experience during the process of reading and thus individual chapters also examine this journey by interrogating the narration of the novels. Bowen's views on questions of innocence can be read in the authorial comments to be found throughout her novels: Jennifer Breen argues that "although the world of a novel is not an embodiment of the author's beliefs about her actual world, a fictional world often implies a world-view that can be deduced from the way the behaviour of the characters is constructed in that fictional world" (1990, 11) and such a view is particularly useful when considering Bowen's own responses to notions of innocence.

Her representation of innocence and experience is not simply one of binary opposites and her choice of narrative strategies further complicates such a simplistic trope; this is particularly so in relation to the roles of the narrator and the narrative and the authorial manipulation of the reader's epistemological journey. In this book I identify a number of ways in which Bowen manipulates the narrative: the manipulation of time, the changing focalisation (or point of view) of the narrative, the use of authorial voice and the open endings of her novels, each one having an effect on the reader's comprehension of the text as they often delay understanding or confuse the reader's perceptions of the characters' journey from innocence to experience.

Bowen's manipulation of time within her novels is probably the easiest one to recognise. Whilst there is such manipulation in her earlier novels, specifically moments when the reader is informed about events that have taken place before the narration of the "present" and particular episodes when the narration appears to move forward by a considerable period of



time, *The House in Paris* is the first novel in which the manipulation of time is particularly apparent. The tripartite structure of the novel and its non-linear narrative provides the opportunity to discuss not just the “present” but also the “past” and, in doing so, the structure also allows the narrator to present the narrative from varying points of view. A similar strategy is used in *The Little Girls* where the past is framed by the narration of contemporary events; such manipulation, of course, has the potential to further confuse the reader.

Bowen believed that the manipulation of time in the narrative was an important factor in fiction, stating that “[t]he either concentration or even or uneven spacing-out of events along time is important.” (1945b, 258). As is discussed in chapter six, this a narrative tool she used to great effect in her ninth novel where the longest chapter in the novel, running to just over thirty seven pages, narrates the events of just one day. In his work, Genette discusses the “isochronism of a narrative”, which he defines as “*steadiness in speed*” (1972, 87). He continues,

The isochronous narrative [...] would thus be here a narrative with unchanging speed, without accelerations or slowdowns, here the relationship duration-of-story/length-of-narrative would remain steady. It is doubtless unnecessary to specify that such a narrative does not exist, and cannot exist except as a laboratory experiment: at any level of aesthetic elaboration at all, it is hard to imagine the existence of a narrative that would admit of no variation in speed – and even this banal observation is somewhat important: a narrative can do without anachronies, but not without *anisochronies*, or, if one prefers (as one probably does), effects of *rhythm*. (Ibid, 88)

Building on and providing a further explanation of Genette’s work, Rimmon-Kenan states that “we can discern two forms of modification [to the narrative speed]: acceleration and deceleration. The effect of acceleration is produced by devoting a short segment of the text to a long period of the story [...]. The effect of deceleration is produced by the opposite procedure” (1983, 53), an effect particularly seen in the final chapter of *The Little Girls*. She concludes her explanation by stating that “the pace [of the narrative] is accelerated through a textual ‘condensation’ or ‘compression’ of a given story-period into a relatively short statement of its main features” (ibid).

Throughout Bowen’s fiction the variable and multiple viewpoint of the narration is important, becoming particularly evident in *The House in Paris*. Genette highlights the role of “focalisation” or point of view of the narrative, an element which Rimmon-Kenan defines as “the angle of vision through which the story is filtered in the text” (1983, 43). Such a

manipulation manifests itself in a variety of ways from, for example, Matchett's explanation to Portia of the events leading to the divorce of Thomas Quayne's parents which is at variance with the version offered to St. Quentin by Anna (*The Death of the Heart*) to the use of diaries and letters as a narrative tool in many of Bowen's novels. Bowen's use of letters, which further manipulates the reader's understanding of the text, can be seen particularly in *A World of Love* where Guy's letters are interpreted and then re-interpreted by the main protagonists, each reading either adding to the reader's comprehension or, conversely, leading the reader to doubt the veracity of the text. Bowen takes this strategy further in *Eva Trout, or Changing Scenes* as the reader is confronted by letters which never reach their intended destination. Indeed, Professor Holman's letter, which forms the central section of that novel, is written with the knowledge that it might never reach Eva; providing a subjective view of Eva, the letter adds to the reader's understanding of her character as it discusses Eva's own presentation of her character to the professor on their flight to America.

The use of authorial voice in Bowen's fiction manifests itself in direct addresses to the reader about, for example, the nature of innocence, the chaos that the innocent can cause and the role of innocence in society, such addresses appearing to embody Bowen's own thoughts about these specific issues. Susan Snaider Lanser argues that

[a]s a narratological term, "voice" attends to the specific forms of textual practice and avoids the essential tendencies of its more casual feminist images. As a political term, "voice" rescues textual study from a formalist isolation that often treats literary events as if they were inconsequential to human history. When these two approaches to "voice" converge in what Mikhail Bakhtin has called a "sociological poetics" it becomes possible to see narrative technique not simply as a product of ideology but as an ideology itself: narrative voice, situated at the juncture or "social position and literary practice", embodies the social, economic and literary conditions under which it has been produced. (1992, 5)

Lanser is concerned with one specific aspect of narration which has a bearing on the fiction of Elizabeth Bowen, "the distinction between private voice (narration toward a narratee who is a fictional character) and public voice (narration directed toward a narratee "outside" the fiction who is analogous to the historical reader)" (1992, 15) and such a distinction is important in relation to the direct addresses to the reader in Bowen's fiction. Lanser adds that a

major element of authorial status [is] a distinction between narrators who engage exclusively in acts of representation – that is, who simply predicate the words and actions of fictional characters – and those who undertake “extrarepresentational” acts: reflections, judgements, generalizations about the world “beyond” the fiction, direct addresses to the narratee, comments on the narrative process, allusions to other writers and texts. (ibid, 16-17)

This becomes important in a work where the authorial voice is frequently heard. Rimmon-Kenan highlights the problems of an approach which is over-simplistic and distinguishes between the author, the implied author, the narrator and the narratee, cautioning against identifying the views of the implied author with those of the actual author for

the two need not be, and in fact are often not, identical. An author may embody in a work ideas, beliefs, emotions other than or even quite opposed to those he has in real life; he may also embody different ideas, beliefs and emotions in different works. (1983, 89)

It remains, of course, impossible to state categorically that any direct narratorial addresses found in Bowen’s fiction represent her own opinions; however, they often convey similar messages to the reader and so, in this respect, her work does not demonstrate the variation that Rimmon-Kenan notes in other works of fiction.

The question of viewpoint or focalisation of the narration leads directly to the issue of a gendered approach to narrative: Margaret Homans, for example, suggests that

[i]n recent years there has been an unusual consensus, amongst feminist critics who consider themselves to be doing narrative theory, about the problems posed by conventional sequential narrative for representing women. Starting from a psychoanalytic and/or structuralist premise, virtually all these critics take it as axiomatic that the structure of narrative itself is gendered and that narrative structure is cognate with social structure. (1994, 5)

Homans cites Nancy K. Millar’s assertion that “a variety of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century women writers critique the standard, teleological novelistic plots of courtship that offer women marriage or death as outcomes” (ibid) and suggests that the teleological novel can be seen as a male construct (ibid, 7). However, Homans also observes that “[t]hose who write about the twentieth century sometimes note that the feminist break with convention [from the accepted outcomes of a teleological novel] overlaps with the goals of modernism” (ibid, 6). Whilst Bowen would not have considered herself a feminist, it can be argued that though

she continued, in the main, to use the masculine-gendered teleological narrative, Bowen chose not to provide closure with the ending of her novels, and thus followed in the footsteps of feminist writers such as Virginia Woolf (although of course Bowen would not have made such a claim herself). The question of the acquisition of knowledge, the epistemological journey experienced both by the character and the reader of her novels is of particular importance in Bowen's fiction. Epistemology, "the theory of knowledge", can be defined by asking three questions: what is knowledge, what can we know and how do we know what we know? Linked to the reader's journey is the desire to know, "the satisfaction of epistemophilia" (Bennett and 1995b, 57), the desire which impels the reader to continue reading the text. Peter Brooks interrogates the importance of the "function of the end" of a text (1984, 92) and states that

Barthes makes explicit an assumption common to much thought about narrative when he claims that meaning (in the "classical" or "readable" text) resides in full predication, completion of the codes in a "plenitude" of signification, which makes the "passion for meaning" ultimately desire for the end. It is at the end – for Barthes as for Aristotle – that recognition brings its illumination, which then can shed retrospective light. The function of the end, whether considered syntactically (as in Todorov or Barthes) or ethically (as in Aristotle) or as formal or cosmological closure (as by Barbara H. Smith or Frank Kermode), continues to fascinate and to baffle. (Ibid)

However, as Bennett and Royle observe, some texts (and they specifically cite Virginia Woolf's story "The Mark on the Wall") deliberately withhold the answers sought by the reader, denying the reader the satisfaction associated with the denouement of a murderer unmasked, a marriage, or the death of the hero (1995b, 57); Bowen too often denies the reader the satisfaction associated with full knowledge, since she leaves many questions unanswered, questions that could be vital in the reader's journey from innocence to experience.

All these narrative techniques result in texts which effectively deconstruct conventional approaches to innocence, both for Bowen's protagonists and for her readers. Her syntactical choices, which show some similarities to the syntax of Henry James, add to her complex treatment of the notion of innocence as many of her sentences resist a simplistic reading<sup>4</sup> and the reader has to read and re-read some paragraphs in order to understand the complexities of both the syntax and the subject matter. The manipulation of the narrative adds further to the complexities of her texts as does Bowen's use of authorial voice in her fiction and the

lack of closure found in her novels, a lack which adds to the argument that Bowen resists forcing moral judgements on her reader. Such a resistance arises, perhaps, from her own unconventional views on marriage, reflected by her own marriage and late sexual development (the treatment of sexuality in her novels of the thirties and forties particularly corresponds to the apotheosis of her own sexuality<sup>5</sup>); thus it could be argued that her avant-garde approach to conventional morality arises from her own sexual experiences and complicated lifestyle. Indeed, there is no suggestion in her fiction that a conventional relationship, that is marriage between man and woman, was the only acceptable existence for her protagonists. However, as much of her work can also be read in a Modernist context, it could also be suggested that her resistance to the conventional trope to be found in realist fiction, particularly seen in the light of the lack of closure to be found in the final pages of her novels could, in fact, result from a desire to encourage her readers to participate in a journey of uncertainties.

While I draw upon narratological theory throughout this book, one particular concept from Aristotle's *Poetics* has also been used as part of the theoretical framework, that of *anagnôrisis* or recognition, a narrative tool that is fundamental in creating a transition from innocence to experience, from childhood to adulthood. Throughout Bowen's novels it is possible to identify specific moments within the plot which would appear to have a momentous effect on the protagonist. Lois' realisation of the possibility of an adult sexual relationship (*The Last September*), for example, provides the impetus which thrusts her out of her innocent existence into a world of adult experience. Conversely, in *The House in Paris* Karen's sudden jolt of recognition of the possibility of her aunt's impending death brings the recognition of the inevitability of her own mortality. Terence Cave's *Recognitions: A Study in Poetics* (1998) provides the starting point for a discussion of *anagnôrisis*. He traces the literary history of the term by first defining it:

Recognition (*anagnôrisis*) is unquestionably the least respectable term in Aristotelean poetics [...]

Recognition is a scandal. The word may seem excessive, but it is appropriate even in its most ordinary, vulgar sense, since recognition plots are frequently *about* scandal – incest, adultery, murder in the dark, goings-on that the characters ought to know about but usually don't until it's too late. [...] In Aristotle's definition *anagnôrisis*<sup>6</sup> brings about a shift from ignorance to knowledge; it is the moment at which the characters understand their predicament fully for the first time, the moment that resolves a sequence of unexplained and often implausible occurrences, it makes the world (and the text) intelligible. Yet it is also a shift *into* the

implausible: the secret unfolded lies beyond the realm of common experience. (1998, 1-2)

Cave explores two aspects of *anagnôrisis*: the first he describes as “the supposedly trivial nature of the recognition scene as a contrivance” (ibid, 2), scenes which often lead to laughter, associated with the discovery of items within a plot such as “the birthmark, the scar, the casket, the handbag”, items which are “local and accidental details on which recognition seems to depend, yet which seem unworthy of serious attention” (ibid). Cave’s second “face of recognition” is

a scandal [...] that takes us directly to what is most crucial to our sense of the literary, to the capacity of fictions to astonish us, upset us, change our perceptions in ways inaccessible to other uses of language. Recognition delivers a shock (ibid).

Bowen’s fiction often demonstrates the use of this latter narrative ploy; *anagnôrisis* provides those pivotal moments in the plot when recognition, whether partial or complete, changes a character’s understanding of the world in which s/he lives, although often such a change is brought about through a series of smaller recognitions which, when considered with hindsight by the reader, can be seen to have cumulatively effected this change. Cave adopts F.L. Lucas’s definition of *anagnôrisis* as “the realization of the truth, the opening of the eyes, the sudden lightening flash in the darkness [...] This flash of revelation may appear, as Aristotle points out, either before it is too late, or after [...]” (Lucas 1928, 95).<sup>7</sup> Lucas continues “[...] Or the flash may come after the catastrophe, serving only to reveal it and complete it, as when Ædipus discovers his guilt” (ibid). While Terence Cave uses the notion of “recognition” both in relation to a revelation of identity and the discovery of facts (that is *anagnôrisis*),<sup>8</sup> Lucas is uneasy with the word “recognition” as a definition for *anagnôrisis*:

“Recognition” is a mistranslation. We associate the word too closely with the narrow sense of discovering a person’s identity ; where *anagnôrisis* may equally well signify the discovery of things unknown before, and applies alike to the recognition of Imogen by Posthumus and the realisation by Othello of the true facts of the situation. “Realisation” indeed would be a possible translation of the word. (1928, 95)

Bowen’s use of *anagnôrisis* is patently influenced by Henry James’s practice but while Bowen never formally acknowledged her use of this device in her fiction, her brief survey of the English novel, *English*

*Novelists* (published in 1942 and which discusses fiction from the seventeenth century to the novels of Virginia Woolf), indicates that the recognition which arises from the impact of the actions of one character on another is an important element in English fiction. She states that the novelists of the eighteenth century used character and plot, but

a third was needed, to merge these two. What was this? – interest in human relationships. The tract in which men and men, or women and men, affect, act on and conflict with each other was still waiting to be explored. It had been accepted that it is from a man's character that his actions spring. One had now to see the effect that one man or woman, by acting in character, had on the action or character of another. It had, too, to be seen that human behaviour seldom follows a set course (or course planned in the head), being often deflected by accidents. The nature and cause of accidents that deflect behaviour might be called the stuff of the novel. Most often, these are psychological: conflicting desires between two people are more important than a tempest or a coach being overturned. (1942b, 13)

This is, of course, particularly apposite to her own fiction, for whilst Bowen's novels may be considered within their own historical context, their plots are predominantly concerned with the "conflicting desires between two people".

There is a growing body of criticism of Bowen's fiction and much has informed my own reading of her work but, as already mentioned, the study which has had the greatest influence on my book has been Hermione Lee's *Elizabeth Bowen* (originally published in 1981 and revised in 1999). This offers an interpretation of Bowen's work interpolated with biographical information and probably provides the most useful starting point for any study of Bowen. Lee's appreciation of Bowen's fiction is evident from her opening comment: "Elizabeth Bowen is one of the greatest writers of fiction in this language and in this century. She wrote ten novels, at least five of which are masterpieces" (1999, 1). However, Lee is also critical about Bowen's writing, specifically her criticism of her contemporaries, stating that when Bowen wrote about writers she admired (and Lee cites her work on Virginia Woolf in particular) she could be "indulgent and flowery", and, in relation to E. M. Forster, "over-effusive" (ibid, 217).<sup>9</sup> Lee's study is a particularly valuable contribution to Bowen criticism, its biographical details and individual discussions providing both essential background reading and a model for this book. Other studies (particularly those of Bennett and Royle, Lassner, Ellmann and Coates) have all played an important part in my reading of Bowen's fiction.

As Lee notes in her introduction to the second edition of *Elizabeth Bowen*, in the eighteen years between the publication of the first and

second editions, Bowen's fiction began to attract attention from critics in a variety of fields including Anglo-Irish studies and feminist criticism. More recently, there has been a further surge in the critical reception of Bowen's fiction; indeed, an edition of *Modern Fiction Studies* (published in the summer of 2007) focuses entirely on Bowen's fiction. No longer gathering dust on university bookshelves, Bowen's work has begun to attract an increasing amount of critical attention, a revival probably led by Lee's work and one added to by Andrew Bennett and Nicholas Royle's groundbreaking study *Elizabeth Bowen and the Dissolution of the Novel* (1995). Bennett and Royle's premise for their work, according to Ann Wordsworth, is that rather than providing an "old-fashioned [...] single-author study of a "minor" figure whose work is most often read as a charming but dated embodiment of traditional literary and social studies" (1995, viii), they will offer a "process of dissolution, of 'loosening, fading away, breaking up, unsolving' " (ibid) and their work has provided the springboard for later studies.

Maud Ellmann's *Elizabeth Bowen: The Shadow Across the Page* (2003) acknowledges the debt she owes to Bennett and Royle's study; she states that their work is "[t]he most important influence" on her own study (2003, 17). Her book takes their analysis a step further, providing close readings explicitly based on theories of psychoanalysis and deconstruction. Her account is particularly concerned with identity and sexuality and each chapter examines these themes as they function in specific novels and with particular foci.

John Coates' study of the role of society in Bowen's fiction (*Social Discontinuity in the Novels of Elizabeth Bowen: The Conservative Quest*: 1998) considers, amongst other issues, the stability of marriage compared with the disorder that arises when social conventions are rejected, "the dichotomy between stasis and mobility" (1998a, 291) in eight of Bowen's novels,<sup>10</sup> he pays particular attention to the theme of innocence in *To the North* and *A World of Love*. Eschewing "contemporary critical practices" (ibid, 4), Coates's close readings of these two novels highlight specific instances where a discussion of innocence is of importance and his exploration of innocence, morality, sexuality and the corruption of the innocent in these two particular novels is particularly useful. However, his reluctance to engage with "contemporary critical practices" in his account combined with the lack of reference to the novels' historical moments, and the limited scope of his discussion of the theme of innocence, leave many areas unexplored. Despite not doing so himself, he notes that Heather Bryant Jordan's study<sup>11</sup> places "Bowen in a specific cultural and historical context" (ibid, 245); approving this methodology, Coates states



it is probably most useful to place Bowen within the context of her own times, to look at the response her fiction records to the cataclysmic public events about which she knew, the decline of the Anglo-Irish, the First World War, the disintegrations of the 1930s, the return of war in 1939-45 (ibid)

Whilst not consciously following Coates's advice, I have utilised such an approach in order to gain a better understanding of Bowen's responses to the momentous cultural changes in the five decades in which she wrote her novels. Such contextualisation is aided by two book-length biographical studies by Patricia Craig (1986) and Victoria Glendinning (1977); of these, the latter is particularly useful, providing a detailed account of Bowen's life. However, this latter study is strangely reticent about Bowen's sexual relationships with Glendinning's refusal to name Humphrey House as Bowen's first lover being the most striking omission. The diaries of Charles Ritchie offer further biographical information, detailing meetings with and his feelings for Bowen. These are, of course, highly subjective but nevertheless his diaries, which chart his relationship with Bowen from their first meeting in 1941 until her death in 1974, provide a wealth of biographical information about Bowen, recording both her thoughts about every day occurrences to, for example, the pleasure she gained from *Eva Trout, or Changing Scenes* (1983, 85).

Of the articles and book chapters that address the theme of innocence in Bowen's fiction, only those by Frederick Karl, Paul Parish and Robert Coles are specifically relevant to this book. Karl's discussion of innocence in his chapter on Bowen, "The World of Elizabeth Bowen" (1964) provides a useful exploration of the relation between violence and innocence and, as will be seen from this introduction, his reading of Bowen's fiction leads him to suggest that "good" and "evil" are not always represented as binary opposites (1964, 108). Parish's article, "The Loss of Eden: Four Novels of Elizabeth Bowen" (1973), provides another of the few discussions of innocence in Bowen's fiction but only examines four novels, *The Last September*, *The House in Paris*, *The Death of the Heart* and *Eva Trout, or Changing Scenes*. There are some similarities between Parish's article and Harriet Blodgett's overtly Christian interpretation of Bowen's novels which argues that the presence of God is to be found in all Bowen's fiction (*Patterns of Reality: Elizabeth Bowen's Novels*, 1975). Both Parish and Blodgett discuss Bowen's use of the myth of Eden and Parish suggests that Bowen's use unites "the elements of nature, love and idealism" in scenes reminiscent of the Biblical story of the Fall of Man (1973, 86). Coles' study, *Irony in the Mind's Life: Essays on Novels by James Agee, Elizabeth Bowen and George Eliot* (1974), discusses the issue

of Portia's possible innocence in *The Death of the Heart* and he questions whether she should be seen as an innocent victim or as a cruel, revengeful and spiteful figure (1974, 14).

The earliest account of Bowen's fiction of any length is Jocelyn Brooke's monograph *Elizabeth Bowen* (1952), written for the British Council. It is concerned (necessarily, given its date of publication) with Bowen's earlier fiction. Brooke highlights various aspects of Bowen's fiction and comments on her impressionistic technique, comparing her with Virginia Woolf in this respect. Bowen was apparently delighted with Brooke's appraisal of her work: "I was not only impressed; I learnt a lot from it. It gives me at once a base and a point of departure from which to go on" (Bowen, quoted in Glendinning 1977, 196-197). No further studies were published for 23 years until Edwin Kenney produced his monograph *Elizabeth Bowen* (1975) which offers a brief critique of Bowen's novels and short stories. Kenney suggests that all of Bowen's novels deal with the loss of innocence and goes on to explore this loss specifically in his reading of *To the North*, *The House in Paris* and *The Death of the Heart*. His readings focus however on the loss of childhood innocence, and fail to develop the issue of sexuality, or the role of the narrator. Building on Brooke's and Kenney's studies, Allan Austin's *Elizabeth Bowen* (1989) is a general overview of Bowen's novels which notes Bowen's fascination with "the journey of youth to adulthood with all its attendant hazards" (1989, 4). Austin finds Bowen's language

impressionistic. Calculated to reverberate, the prose nicely conveys the ambiguities and imponderables of experience that underscore her vision. In approaching her material as more of an x-ray than a camera, she projects essences. (Ibid, 10)

Phyllis Lassner's two major studies of Bowen's fiction, *Elizabeth Bowen* (1990) and *Elizabeth Bowen: A Study of the Shorter Fiction* (1991) provide a feminist reading of Bowen's work. The earlier study concentrates on six of her novels<sup>12</sup> and begins with a brief biography which highlights the losses that Bowen suffered, experiences that later contributed to events within her novels. The later study, as its title suggests, is concerned with Bowen's short stories, and discusses various issues such as loss, sexuality and the comedy of manners. This account also includes extracts from Bowen's own prefaces to her volumes of short stories and reviews and provides an overview of earlier critical studies of Bowen's work. The most comprehensive study of Bowen's short stories, this provides a wealth of information about this form of Bowen's fiction.

In *How Will the Heart Endure: Elizabeth Bowen and the Landscape of War* (1992) Heather Bryant Jordan discusses how war influenced Bowen's writing and contends that Bowen used fiction as a device to disassociate herself from the horrors of war but, at the same time, always sought to provide links between her writing and the external world. A different approach is offered by Renée Hoogland's *Elizabeth Bowen: A Reputation in Writing* (1994) where a lesbian/feminist reading of Bowen's fiction is adopted, providing both biographical information and a detailed close reading of Bowen's novels. These three studies, (Lassner, Hoogland and Jordan) all provide useful explorations of the gender issues which need to be considered in any discussion of Bowen's work and they invite a feminist approach both to her fiction and to her position as a woman writer during the first half of the twentieth century.

Neil Corcoran's *Elizabeth Bowen: The Enforced Return* (2004), although not focussing specifically on the representation of innocence in Bowen's fiction, provides an illuminating study of her fiction. He notes that "Bowen is a writer deeply impressed by the ambitions of High Modernism, even if, until the final two novels, she never entirely loses touch with classic realism" (2004, 4): Bowen is discussed increasingly in relation to the Modernist movement—and "Intermodernism"—and the narrative strategies discussed in this book would appear to support such a reading. Stating that his book is organised around three specific themes, "Ireland, childhood and war" (2004, 11), Corcoran has also been influenced by Bennett and Royle's work: he refers to the "dissolution" of the plot of *The Last September*, and to their work on *The House in Paris*, amongst other novels (ibid, 87). Corcoran's book provides a thematic discussion of Bowen's fiction, tracing similarities and differences through, for example, *The Last September* to *A World of Love* in a continuing discussion of Anglo-Irish history before he turns his attention to the treatment of childhood in Bowen's fiction in the second part of his book. This section discusses *The House in Paris*, *The Death of the Heart* and *Eva Trout, or Changing Scenes* as Corcoran interrogates the themes of childhood, identity and sexuality. The last part of his book discusses the theme of war in relation to *The Heat of the Day* and Bowen's wartime short stories, *The Demon Lover* and *Other Stories*.

The field of Bowen studies has been greatly enhanced by Eibhear Walshe's edited collection of essays in *Elizabeth Bowen* (2009) and Allan Hepburn's three publications: *The Bazaar and Other Stories* (2008), a collection of previously uncollected short stories; *People, Places, Things* (2008), essays which range from her thoughts about teenagers to the proceedings of the 1946 Paris Peace Conference; and *Listening In* (2010)

in which Hepburn draws together some of Bowen's broadcasts, speeches and interviews. In the introductions to these collections, Hepburn provides a new reading of Bowen, one which highlights her own views about the process of writing and of collecting impressions of the world around her.

As will be seen from this review of the pertinent secondary material, while there is a growing body of criticism of Bowen's fiction, and although much ground has been covered, there remain gaps in these critical discussions. Drawing on the range of existing criticism, I hope that I have built on the work of critics such as Lee, Bennett and Royle, Lassner, Christensen, Ellmann and Corcoran and offer a different approach to Bowen's fiction, one which is concerned with her continued preoccupation with the nature and meaning of innocence and which foregrounds the psychological conflicts experienced by her protagonists. This book focuses specifically on the notion of innocence throughout Bowen's novels, examining the subject not only across the range of her work, but also in relation to her unfolding narrative structures through the application of narratological theory, and especially the process by which the readers learn what happens in parallel to, yet very differently from, the characters within her fiction.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Eric Partridge notes that the definition of this word is "harmful" (1966, 442); its antonym, "innocence" should therefore be defined as "not causing harm".

<sup>2</sup> Second edition (2000).

<sup>3</sup> My transcriptions of relevant unpublished material and an extract from her unpublished manuscript *Anna* can be found in the appendix.

<sup>4</sup> A prime example can be found in *A World of Love* where "mush for the chickens, if nothing else, was never not in the course of cooking" (*A World of Love*, 21)

<sup>5</sup> See chapters three, four and five specifically.

<sup>6</sup> Cave prefers to use this term as if it were English, unitalicised and without the accent over the second "o".

<sup>7</sup> Quoted in Cave (1998, 184).

<sup>8</sup> See, for example, Cave's discussion of Henry James's *The Ambassadors* (1998, 428/463).

<sup>9</sup> This comment relates, of course, to Bowen's critical essays and introductions, rather than her fiction.

<sup>10</sup> Coates does not include *The Hotel* nor *Eva Trout, or Changing Scenes* in his discussion, although he does include the latter in his conclusion where he considers some recent critical approaches to Bowen's fiction.

<sup>11</sup> Discussed below.

<sup>12</sup> Whilst Lassner's study concentrates on *The Last September*, *Friends and Relations*, *To the North*, *The House in Paris*, *The Death of the Heart* and *The Heat*

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*of the Day*, some mention is also made of Bowen's four other novels (*The Hotel*, *The Little Girls*, *A World of Love* and *Eva Trout, or Changing Scenes*).

## CHAPTER ONE

### INNOCENCE AND VIOLENCE: *THE LAST SEPTEMBER*

Bowen states in *The Death of the Heart* (1938) that “[i]n love, the sweetness and violence [the innocent] have to offer involves a thousand betrayals for the less innocent” (*DH*, 106). In Bowen’s fictional world violence and chaos often occur as a result of the actions of the innocent and the use of these themes is not to be found solely in *The Last September*. With its violent backdrop however, the novel provides a useful starting point in any discussion about the use of violence in Bowen’s fiction; it is a novel which sets the innocence of the main protagonist, Lois Farquar and, arguably, the possible innocence of the Anglo-Irish, within the context of the actual political violence which raged in Ireland during September 1920.

Of course, *The Last September* was not Bowen’s first novel. Having published two volumes of short stories, *Encounters* (1923) and *Ann Lee’s and Other Stories* (1926), respectively, Bowen published her first novel, *The Hotel*,<sup>1</sup> in 1927. Whilst arguably derivative of E. M. Forster’s two novels *A Room with a View* (1908) and *Where Angels Fear to Tread* (1905), nevertheless *The Hotel* introduces one of Bowen’s main themes, that of a young, innocent protagonist attempting to cross the divide between adolescence and adulthood. The novel is set in the insular world of a hotel on the Riviera, a novel in which the “outer world is barely recognized” (Atkins 1977, 59), and it tells the story of Sydney Warren as she meets the Reverend James Milton. Sydney is staying in the hotel as a guest of her cousin, Tessa, and her family firmly holds the belief that spending the winter on the Riviera will be of huge benefit to Sydney:

It had appeared an inspired solution of the Sydney problem. The girl passed too many of these examinations, was on the verge of a breakdown and railed so bitterly at the prospect of a year’s forced idleness that the breakdown seemed nearer than ever. Now an ideal winter had offered itself: sunshine, a pleasant social round. Sydney could be out of doors all