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English 330

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Driven to the Hinterland: Mirror Images and the Uncanny Double in Elizabeth Bowen's "The Demon Lover"

Elizabeth Bowen's "The Demon Lover" (1941) has traditionally been studied as a product of its historic moment. Although it is necessary to consider Kathleen Drover's 'demon lover' from the context of the psychologically crushing realities of war, this research essay shall establish Bowen's ubiquitous, elusive 'demon' as the uncanny doppelganger of the repressed Kathleen Drover. Certainly both interpretations of "The Demon Lover" carry considerable merit that can be evidenced from the text; Bowen's narrative power lies in her refusal "to be contained within a single [or even a double] frame of reference" (Ellman 145). This essay shall first briefly examine the ways "The Demon Lover" has traditionally been subject to interpretation; based upon textual evidence and academic scholarship; it shall then submit that the interpretation of the doppelganger and the uncanny be considered as an equally valid analysis of a tale in which reality "is always under negotiation" (Hopkins 125).

Prior to the advent of New Criticism, "The Demon Lover" has traditionally been subject to two interpretations. The most simplistic interpretation – while still creating a most enjoyable reading experience – suggests that Kathleen Drover is spirited away by the malevolent specter

of her deceased fiancé. This theory is excellently elucidated upon by Rachel Mayrer, who suggests that the short story “ends with the dead soldier’s spirit returning to violently claim Kathleen because she could not successfully and reverently remember him” (n. pag).

A second approach to ‘The Demon Lover’ holds significant academic merit: Robert Calder suggests that ‘The Demon Lover’ *also* holds the potentiality for allegory; Kathleen Drover becomes representative of weary, aging England (95); the malevolent face of the Demon is that of “war itself” (97). Phyllis Lassner concurs with Calder’s assessment when she suggests that the return of the Demon is a “metaphor for the world wars that are certain only in their havoc but whose losses can never be fully tabulated and whose causes can never be entirely explained or understood. Because the First World War was left unresolved, its casualties untold and its beginnings confused, it becomes a terrifying ghost in this Second World War story” (66). Mayrer suggests “because Kathleen did not mourn and could not remember her dead fiancé well enough even after the letter sought to invoke memory, memory [of war] and the dead soldier could not be expunged (n. pag). Thus, “The Demon Lover” becomes a tale of warning of the dire consequences that arise when reverence and memory are removed from personal and collective consciousness.

Bowen’s mastery of language and her deft treatment of the short story suggests that multiple interpretations of “The Demon Lover” may exist simultaneously. This essay suggests that space must be negotiated for a third interpretation of Bowen’s work; “The Demon Lover” must be considered as a tale of repression and psychosis; it is the traumatizing milieu of Total War which brings about Kathleen Drover’s experience with her doppelganger and subsequent break from reality. “The Demon Lover” is permeated with “dislocation, aberration, destruction”

(Mitchell 46). Indeed, the setting of war-torn London is simultaneously enigmatic and pivotal to the reader's understanding of this "dislocation." Deborah Parsons submits that the landscape of urban London becomes "a female dominated space" (24); she further posits that it becomes "a site of dislocation and displacement, inhabited by wanderers, people who have lost both homes and identities in the disruption of war" (24).

The theater of the urban, Total War "hinterland" (Bowen 147) proves to be the catalyst for Kathleen's "conflict between performativity and the Other" (Sanches 3). Her neighbourhood "once familiar" (Bowen 143) reacts with a "damaged stare" (146) as she exits the house. As Thompson states, "[Kathleen's] orderly pre-war existence – so wonderfully grounded by 'voices, habits, and steps' – has been turned upside down" (7). Indeed, the "steamy, showery day" (Bowen 143) with its glittering trees and pavement, "unfamiliar" (143) streets and "unoccupied" (146) neighborhood takes on a dream-like quality in which the barriers of physical and psychological space become blurred and subverted. Parsons further comments that "as buildings and traditional beliefs crumbled, the ideal of stability was shown to be erroneous, and confidence in personal identity and the social conventions that supported it was lost" (26).

Kathleen's relationship to her cultural milieu and her home itself becomes instrumental in understanding her troubled inner landscape. The abandoned house becomes deeply tied to Kathleen's sense of identity and to her stifling role as middle-class wife and mother (Hopkins 119). The "warped" front door, rush of "dead air" which meets her upon entry, ominous "cracks in the structure", "claw marks" from the piano and "bruise in the wallpaper" where the door handle "had always hit the wall" (Bowen 143) become "symbolic of some deeper malaise" at

work in Kathleen's stifling home life and troubled inner life (Thompson 4). Chris Fraustino concurs that the menacing eccentricities of the house become indicative of a "deep and lingering dissatisfaction with [Kathleen's] marriage" (485).

Certainly the "controlled" and "calm" (Bowen 144) Mrs. Drover initially presents as a paragon of "utter dependability" and "family life" (146). She is a persona "overwhelmed by psychological fragmentation" (Skarda and Jaffe, xx). This fragmentation can certainly be evidenced by a close reading of the text; she is "controlled" and "calm" and does not remove her hat or gloves in spite of the humid August weather and solitary setting (Bowen 144). The arrival of the letter creates "tenseness" (144); the prim Mrs. Drover feels "intruded upon" (144), "annoyed" (143) and is "stopped dead" (143) by the arrival of the letter. She struggles with regulating emotional responses: strong emotion is described as "this crisis" (145); her response to such emotion is to "rally herself" (145) and to fight emotional incidents by being "decisive" and "bold" (146). Thompson posits that Drover is thus "tormented by her inner contradictions" (5). "Buried by years of conventional marriage" (Calder 91), Mrs. Drover settles for a placated existence that nineteen-year-old, sensuous, "free to run" Kathleen did not expect (Bowen 145). The narrator notes that Mrs. Drover and her husband "settled down in this quiet, arboreal part of Kensington: in this house the years piled up, her children were born and they all lived till they were driven out by the bombs of the next war" (145). Her movements are "circumscribed" (145); she experiences a "complete dislocation from everything" (145); the text suggests an experience of postpartum depression – "a quite serious illness" - following the birth of her third child (144).

Kathleen's letter is a fascinating object unto itself as it proves to be the catalyst by which her "deeply traumatized psyche" (Thompson 6) begins to rapidly unravel. Certainly it is not coincidental that the letter is signed with the initial "K", opening up the potential that the initial may, in fact, stand for "Kathleen." The letter contains "no stamp" (Bowen 144); it is free of dust and recently placed; it causes Kathleen to feel "intruded upon" and "anxious" at "someone contemptuous of her ways" (144). It is upon the reading of this letter that Kathleen becomes awash with memory, and her emotional response begins to take over. "Her lips, beneath the remains of her lipstick" begin "to go white" with emotion (144). Kathleen looks "over her shoulder at" the love letter that has been suggestively placed on the "stripped" bed (144); the rain - like a baptism or a sea-change - begins to come "crashing down" (144) upon London in a ubiquitous, sensuous, ominous way reminiscent of the snow in James Joyce's "The Dead".

It is immediately upon finishing the letter, in the suggestive setting of her lonely room, that Kathleen comes face to face with the unhappy realities of the lackadaisical, stifling life she has constructed. Wiping the dirty mirror clear, Kathleen is able to "urgently and stealthily" (Bowen 144) examine herself for who she is:

She was confronted by a woman of forty-four, with eyes starting out under a hat-brim that had been rather carelessly pulled down. She had not put on any more powder since she left the shop where she ate her solitary tea. The pearls her husband had given her on their marriage hung loose round her now rather thinner throat, slipping in the V of the pink wool jumper her sister knitted last autumn as

they sat round the fire.¹ Mrs. Drover's most normal expression was one of controlled worry, but of assent (144).

"The Demon Lover" can indeed be interpreted as a doppelganger tale. Bowen encroaches upon a transgressive literary space by offering a "rare female rendering" of a male-dominated genre (Thompson 1). Millicent Bell aptly describes the doppelganger as the "rival reality of the un-lived life" (27). Upon inspection in the grime-coated mirror, Kathleen is "confronted by" her own image and turns "from her own face as precipitately as she had gone to meet it" (144). Thus Kathleen confronts "not a traditional doppelganger, the ghostly figure of what she might have been, but rather, gazing back from the smudged looking glass she beholds... the unflattering likeness of the dowdy, middle-aged society matron she thought she would never become... Dismayed, her vanity cut to the quick, she turns away in disgust and horror" (Thompson 3). This analysis synthesizes nicely with Zuzanna Sanches' claim:

The Real merges with the Imaginary and what lurks at Kathleen from the past is the life she never had and which she exchanged for a respectable family life – a life that does not stand the test of the wartime desiccation of reality. The mirror reflection she also does not recognize as hers and from which she 'turns away precipitately' gives Kathleen a glimpse of the Other (3).

It is immediately upon this glimpse of the Other, with Kathleen disgusted by the "change[s] in her own face" like Dorian Gray or the Queen in *Snow White*, that Kathleen yields to "the complete suspension of her existence" (Bowen 144). A rush of warm air "from the

¹ The pink sweater may symbolize the red of passion combined with the white of marital propriety. Kathleen's inability to pacify her internal duality may be manifest in the sweater.

basement” strikes “her face”, and Kathleen realizes it “was possible that she was not alone” (146).² The moment becomes a “conjuring of an uninhibited persona whom [Kathleen] wishes she could have inhabited, could have fleshed out and enjoyed: that headstrong nineteen-year-old girl who reveled in youthful sensuality” (Thompson 7). In line with the ‘return of the repressed’ Kathleen Drover is forced to confront “old desires, old hopes” (Maitland xv) which have lain dormant for much of her life. It is this awakening from dormancy which creates the “anguish of the disordered mind” (Skarda and Jaffe Note 330) and the confrontation with Kathleen’s sensuous, carefree “rival reality” (Bell 27) of what might have been.

Kathleen exits her home – and her old life as she knows it – to the taxi “waiting for her” (Bowen 147). It is here that Kathleen has an encounter with the uncanny in a way which is strikingly similar to the incident with the mirror. With only a glass panel separating “the driver’s head from her own” (147), Kathleen comes face-to-face with a rare and maddening vision of who she might have been. The text reads: “Through the aperture driver and passenger, not six inches between them, remained *for an eternity eye to eye*. Mrs. Drover’s mouth hung open for some seconds before she could issue her first scream” (Bowen 147, emphasis mine).

Commenting upon this moment, Sanches claims that “Mrs. Drover – in fact now the ‘driver’ or the subject of her private discourse – is faced with her demonic (here different from the public discourse) nature, which at first she does not recognize as hers” (2). “At war within herself in the midst of war” (Thompson 7), the “hallucinatory flashbacks of her past” create a “kaleidoscopic vision of the present” (Sanches 4). In a maddening, screaming frenzy, Kathleen

² This is the second of multiple references to Kathleen’s face. This emphasis – combined with her inability to recollect the fiancée’s face, serves to suggest that this is a tale about Kathleen’s own reflected repression.

“drives” herself into the psychological and physical “hinterland” (Bowen 147) of wartime urban London.

Bowen’s “The Demon Lover” is fluidly written in a way that resists a static interpretation. Since its advent, “The Demon Lover” has inspired varying explanations regarding what exactly drives Kathleen Drover into the abyss of physical and psychological space. Although the Demon can stand as a witness to the experience of Total War, the text also strongly suggests that the stifled, troubled Drover, with her internal duality and “confused inner life” (Miller 81) experiences a literal return of the repressed as she is twice confronted face-to-face – and subsequently spirited away – by her doppelgänger. Anna Teekell submits that “the rending of the curtain in Bowen’s wartime writing collapses difference – and also her characters’ inner and outer worlds, their safe and unsafe spaces – into something else, something blitz-rive: a no-lace” (78). Indeed, Kathleen Drover’s inner and outer worlds, her safe and unsafe spaces are collapsed as she twice encounters “a face [she does] not expect” (Bowen 147): the face of her own stifled and repressed desire.

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