The Poetics of House and Home in the Short Stories of Elizabeth Bowen

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This essay offers a comprehensive analysis of the images of house and home in the short fiction of Elizabeth Bowen. First, the essay analyses the construction of these images in terms of style, arguing that Bowen's idiosyncratic combination of a variety of figural tropes and narrative strategies results in a strong but highly ambivalent bond between house and character, whereby houses at once illuminate and efface their inhabitants. Second, while most critics have interpreted Bowen's houses in the context of her Anglo-Irish background as emblems of a lost tradition and identity, this essay argues that Bowen's houses also evoke other contexts, in particular the celebration of the domestic in interwar Britain. Through a detailed reading of several short stories, it shows how Bowen both satirises this idealisation of the home and uncovers its far more awful reality, especially for the 'daughters' and 'ladies' of the house. A final part considers the isolation that marks nearly all of Bowen's houses and opposes it to her characterisation of the ideal house as a place of hospitality and recognition.

Keywords: Elizabeth Bowen, short fiction, domestic ideology, Anglo-Irish fiction, stylistic analysis.

In 'Daffodils', one of Elizabeth Bowen's early stories, the female protagonist walks through the streets on her way home and is said to be 'conscious of the houses, the houses, and the houses' (Bowen 1981, 21). Reading through *The Collected Stories of Elizabeth Bowen* one cannot but be similarly struck by the startling prominence of houses: houses or homes feature in the titles of several stories and are frequently depicted in the opening lines; in several instances they determine the plot of the story and in most of the stories a strong link is established between the house and the characters. This preoccupation with houses is of course not confined to Bowen's short fiction. Houses also figure prominently in such novels as

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1 *The Last September* or *The House in Paris* and Bowen herself has often
2 commented on the importance of place in her fiction in general. 'Am I not
3 manifestly a writer for whom places loom large?' she asked in her
4 abandoned autobiography *Pictures and Conversations* (Bowen 1975, 34)
5 and in her 'Notes on writing a novel', she observed, with a characteristic
6 double negative, 'Nothing can happen nowhere. The locale of the
7 happening always colours the happening, and often, to a degree, shapes
8 it' (Lee 1999b, 39).

9 In the short stories, however, this interest in place becomes an almost
10 obsessive preoccupation with houses. As Phyllis Lassner has put it,
11 'Bowen's houses become her stories' controlling "poetic image" (Lassner
12 1991, 5). What is remarkable about the houses in Bowen's short fiction is
13 not just their prominence and proliferation, but also their immense variety.
14 Bowen's homes range from farmhouses and roadside cottages over
15 suburban villas and town houses to aristocratic manors and big houses.
16 Interestingly, they also appear across the different 'subgenres' that are
17 often discerned in her oeuvre. Houses feature in her ghost stories and war
18 stories as much as in her satirical comedies, childhood stories and Irish
19 stories. Precisely this diversity makes the house such an intriguing image in
20 Bowen's short fiction and one that deserves further consideration. For, in
21 spite of the multiplicity of stories and contexts in which they figure,
22 Bowen's houses have rather uniformly been read as emblems of the past, as
23 embodiments of a tradition and identity from which her characters are
24 irrevocably severed. In this way, Bowen's obsession with houses has
25 primarily been understood in the context of her Anglo-Irish background,
26 with its loss of privilege, power and, indeed, house in twentieth-century
27 Ireland. Without wanting to deny this dimension of Bowen's houses, I
28 would argue that Bowen's houses are more complex and ambivalent
29 images than this standard reading suggests and that they demand to be
30 read in other contexts than just the Anglo-Irish one. In this essay therefore,
31 I propose a more comprehensive investigation of the houses in Bowen's
32 short fiction so as to complicate and complement the dominant reading of
33 this image as a rather nostalgic and conservative ideal. Before turning to
34 this thematic and ideological exploration of the house, however, I will
35 discuss in more detail the stylistic construction of this poetic image and its
36 strong bond with character. In so doing, I hope to shed some light on
37 Bowen's 'notoriously strange prose style' (Osborn 2006, 192). For, as

Susan Osborn and Phyllis Lassner have argued in their recent review essays, while Bowen's writing style has often been called 'peculiar, distinctive, convoluted, conservative, transgressive, disturbing, nostalgic, resistant, obsessive, and otherwise confounding', it has far less often been analysed (Lassner 2010, 670). In the first part of this essay, therefore, I will examine the rhetorical, tropological and narratological strategies underlying the insistent image of the house in Bowen's short stories. This will provide the necessary stepping stone for the subsequent thematic analysis and, I hope, contribute to a further unravelling of the idiosyncrasies of Bowen's style.

I. Metonymy, metaphor and prosopopoeia

It is a staple of realist fiction that houses often reveal certain characteristics of the persons that inhabit them. From the position, height or decoration of the house, skilled readers derive information about the character's social class, occupation and personality. Because houses and their inhabitants are part of the same context, the relation can be characterised as a metonymic one, based on contiguity. As Roman Jakobson has put it, 'Following the path of contiguous relationships, the realist author metonymically digresses from the plot to the atmosphere and from the characters to the setting in space and time' (Jakobson 1987, 111). In Bowen's stories too, descriptions of houses typically function as metonymic expressions of the main characters' status and personality: from the Italian villa with its lush, maze-like garden in the early story 'Requiescat' to the stately portraits and massive furniture that darken Miss Banderry's parlour in Bowen's last published story, 'A Day in the Dark'. In 'The Disinherited', to elaborate on just one story, the different characters are introduced by means of their houses. Mrs Ashworth's 'manor' in the village, 'backed by an ilex and flanked by lines of clipped hollies, had a high, narrow face, with dark inanimate windows, and looked like the frontispiece to a ghost-story. Inside, however, it was kindly, crimson and stuffy' (Bowen 1981, 377). The Harveys' modern house, situated in the new estate on the hill, is a 'freshly built white rough-cast house with a touch of priggishness in its architecture' (p. 377). Its living room, carefully furnished by Marianne Harvey, is described by the narrator as 'artfully pale and bare', with 'steel-framed windows' and 'a cold brick hearth' (p. 378). The room of Prothero – the

criminal with a stolen identity – is ‘bare’ in another way: ‘the furniture showed by candlelight mean outlines on the whitewash. The man had no belongings; the place seemed to be to let’ (p. 391); and in the ‘immense façade’ of the Palladian mansion of the impoverished aristocrat, the ‘pilasters soared out of sight above an unlit fanlight like patterns of black ice’ (p. 385).

Even in metonymic descriptions such as these, however, we can note the use of some metaphorical devices such as symbol and simile. Following David Lodge’s characterisation of literary discourses in *The Modes of Modern Writing*, most of these tropes can still be considered as belonging to a metonymic or realistic style since the metaphors used tend to be ‘subject to the control of context’ (Lodge 1977, 113). Details of the context are elaborated into symbols – or ‘metaphorical metonymies’, as Lodge would call them (p. 100) – and the similes are mostly drawn from the semantic fields associated with the context, as when the narrator notes how the few houses on the Harvey’s new estate ‘stood apart, like Englishmen not yet acquainted’ (Bowen 1981, 376). Through these tropes, however, the houses do acquire a metaphoric meaning, based on correspondence, over and above their metonymic dimension. Thus the modern whiteness of Marianne’s house receives symbolic insistency through repetition and comes to stand for the sterility of her domestic life; the icy coldness that pervades Lord Thingummy’s castle, on the other hand, symbolises the cynicism of the characters that inhabit it. In ‘The Cassowary’, to give one more example, Crecy Lodge is described in minute detail in the opening paragraphs in what seems like a rather superfluous scene setting, until one realises that its features – ‘doubtfully’, darkly’, ‘neglect’, ‘forgotten’, ‘over-large’, with ‘vulgar dignity’ (p. 314) – anticipate those of the two inhabitants: tall, elderly girls who are waiting for a (shared) fiancé who has disappeared in Africa and whose ‘blank look’ (pp. 314, 318) through their glasses mirrors that of the ‘lively shuttered windows’ of the house (p. 314).

In all of the foregoing examples, the description of the houses is given by the omniscient third-person narrator featuring in most of Bowen’s stories. Her resurrection of this fixture of realist fiction clearly marks her out from her modernist predecessors who had worked towards an erasure of the narrator, focusing instead on characters’ subjective consciousness. Bowen’s use of space in these instances can therefore be classified as ‘aperspectival’ (Buchholz & Jahn 2005, 554) since it is the narrator who

describes the houses, interprets them and installs the metonymic and metaphoric links with the characters. Yet in Bowen's fiction this aperspectival evocation of houses is complemented by the modernist, perspectival approach, whereby space is shown from the perspective of a character. The houses and homes evoked in this way in Bowen's fiction, then, express not only their inhabitants' personalities, but also the focaliser's consciousness. Take for instance the opening paragraphs of 'Daffodils', which has Miss Murcheson walk home after school on a nice spring day:

Today the houses seemed taller and farther apart; the street wider and full of a bright, clear light that cast no shadows and was never sunshine. Under archways and between the houses the distances had a curious transparency, as though they had been painted upon glass. Against the luminous and indeterminate sky the Abbey tower rose distinct and delicate. (Bowen 1981, 20)

Clearly, the metaphorical descriptions of the street are infused with Miss Murcheson's feelings and thus become expressive of them. Most of Bowen's characters share Miss Murcheson's sensitivity to their surroundings, in particular to the houses and rooms they inhabit. In this, they remind us of Woolf's 'sensitive people' (Lodge 1977, 180), who transcend the objects around them through expansive flights of consciousness. This perspectival evocation of space is usually considered a hallmark of modernist fiction, since material reality functions as 'a trigger to introspective voyaging and the dilation of subjectivity' (Hunter 2007, 113).

Yet Bowen's perspectival evocations of space depart from this modernist technique in that her focalisers never 'voyage' very far: they stay close to the objects they observe and do not achieve the introspective transcendence or the victory of mind over matter that a modernist writer like Woolf famously demonstrates in 'The Mark on the Wall' (cf. Ellmann 2003, 7).¹ In Bowen's stories, rather, the thoughts and feelings evoked by certain objects are projected back onto those objects and translated as characteristics of material reality itself. The trope that typically accompanies this feedback loop between character and object – or house, in our case – is that of prosopopoeia or personification. To return to the example of 'Daffodils': Miss Murcheson's elated reaction to the air of spring in the streets around her is projected back onto the houses and buildings which are transformed into curiously animate images of freedom and light. After

the delicate transparency of the streets, the house that the protagonist enters appears to her as dark, heavy and cramped. And Miss Murcheson's responses to this change of scene are again translated as properties of the house itself: 'armchairs and cabinets were lurking in the dusk. The square of daylight by the window was blocked by a bamboo table groaning under an array of photographs' (Bowen 1981, 21).

This pattern, established from Bowen's earliest stories onwards, is repeated throughout her short fiction: a certain scene or object elicits a character's emotional response which is then, in a kind of feedback loop, projected back onto the scene and translated into an emotion or characteristic of the scene or object itself. Sometimes, the character's subjective investment in the animation is made evident with words like 'seemed', 'appeared' or 'as if'; at other times these hedges are simply dropped. In 'The Return', Lydia, the paid companion, is upset and displeased by her employers' return home after a six-week holiday and her sense of loss and desolation are rendered as reactions of the house. At first, Lydia's projection of her feelings is made explicit: 'During her six weeks of solitude the house had grown very human to Lydia. She felt now as if it were drawing itself together in a nervous rigor' (Bowen 1981, 28). Later these phrases are dispensed with so that the actions and feelings seem to reside solely with the house: 'the morning-room beckoned her with its association of the last six weeks' or (after the revelatory confession of her mistress) 'The place was vibrant with the humanity of Mrs Tottenham' (p. 34). In 'The Parrot', another story in which a house looms large, Eleanor has to enter the forbidden territory of a neighbouring house to rescue a parrot and again her fears are rendered as characteristics of the house: 'The shadow of the house fell cold on Eleanor', 'The stair carpet crunched under one's feet with a velvety resistiveness; it had, at first contact, a sinister sleekness', or 'the tunnel was narrowing down upon her' (pp. 115, 116).

Although these evocations of space do tell us something about the mindset of the perceiving consciousness, they do not 'dilat[e] subjectivity' in the way of modernist writers such as Woolf or James.² In fact, because of the combination with personification, the effect is rather one of enlarging and illuminating the houses and of dwarfing and obscuring the characters. In other words, while Bowen's houses do allow characters to 'take on a face and a function', as Allan Hepburn has put it (Hepburn

2008a, 7), they also bear out what Paul de Man describes as the danger of personification or prosopopoeia, namely ‘defacement’. ‘By making the death [*sic*] speak’, de Man argues, ‘the symmetrical structure of the trope implies that the living are struck dumb, frozen in their own death’ (de Man 1984, 78). By attributing life to the house, in other words, the characters themselves become ‘lifeless’, divested of the very emotions that motivated the personification in the first place.

With regard to the strong bond between house and character which this stylistic analysis set out to investigate, we can conclude that it is the result of Bowen’s rather idiosyncratic combination of a variety of figural tropes and narrative strategies. Bowen’s omniscient narrators, first of all, install both metaphoric and metonymic relations between house and character by means of symbol, analogy or simile. These narratorial descriptions are added to by the character’s perspectival perception of space, which becomes expressive of the character’s consciousness. Yet in Bowen’s stories these realist and modernist techniques are typically combined with a Gothic fondness for personification shared by narrator and character alike. All of this makes for an unusually strong identification between house and character, whereby character animates house and house illuminates character. However, as I have already suggested, Bowen’s mixture of tropes also makes the bond between house and character a highly ambivalent one. Both the realist and modernist evocations of houses suggest the character’s agency in either constructing or describing domestic space, hence allowing us to read that space as an expression of the character’s personality. Yet, in a kind of domestic fallacy, the recurrent personification of houses and domestic objects in Bowen’s stories transfers that agency from character to house, thus dwarfing, draining and – in de Man’s idiom – ‘defacing’ the characters. As I hope to show in the second part of this paper, this stylistic mixture of agency and passivity, of illumination and effacement, is revisited in the relation between Bowen’s houses and characters on a thematic level as well.

II. Anglo-Irish ‘Big Houses’ and English villas

The thematic interpretation of houses in Bowen’s fiction has often been framed by autobiographical facts: Bowen’s Anglo-Irishness, her displacement as a young child from her ancestral home in county Cork to England,

her divided allegiance to both England and Ireland, and her inheritance and subsequent loss of Bowen's Court. All of this has supported a reading of Bowen's houses in terms of loss and dispossession. Bowen's characters are frequently described as displaced or 'homeless'; her houses as 'places for the dispossessed' (Lee 1999a, 73), offering 'but temporary shelter against psychic homelessness' (Kreilkamp 2009, 15). 'In all of her fiction,' Derek Hand writes similarly, 'characters, for whatever reason are out of place, cut off and cut loose from the safety that a final home might offer' (Hand 2009, 65). While Hermione Lee traces these characters – 'orphans and wards, homeless lovers, disinherited gadabouts' – directly to Bowen's Anglo-Irish background (Lee 1999b, viii), other critics also read them as expressive of the more pervasive modernist experiences of anxiety, loss and alienation (Hand 2005, 143; Kreilkamp 2009, 15). In both these readings, Bowen's houses are interpreted as emblems of the past, 'embodying family and domestic traditions' from which her characters have mostly been separated (Lassner 1991, 5).

Bowen's own elegiac evocations of Bowen's Court underscore this strong bond between house, tradition and identity, as when she describes 'life in the Big House' as:

saturated with character: this is, I suppose the element of its spell. The indefinite ghosts of the past, of the dead who lived here and pursued this same routine of life in these walls add something, a sort of order, a reason for living, to every minute and hour. This is the order, the form of life, the tradition to which big house people still sacrifice so much. (Lee 1999b, 28–29)

That a loss of house consequently equals a loss of 'life' is also strongly expressed in 'The Back Drawing-Room' where the burning of a Big House makes its inhabitants ghost-like, for, as a character puts it, 'how can one feel they're alive? How can they be, any more than plants one's pulled up? They've nothing to grow in, or to hold on to' (Bowen 1981, 210). Several critics have also pointed out that Bowen's preoccupation with home and homelessness was intensified by her war experience: during the actual destruction of a lot of London houses and homes, she turned imaginatively to recreate her childhood home 'as a private sanctuary' (Miller 1999, 138) in the autobiographical works *Bowen's Court* and *Seven Winters* (see also Breen 2009, 110; Lassner 1991, 5). Bowen's war stories themselves, as Deborah Parsons and other critics have pointed out, are 'inhabited by

wanderers, people who have lost both homes and identities in the disruption of war' (Parsons 1997, 24).

Although I do not want to deny this reading of Bowen's houses in terms of a past, order, identity and tradition, I do believe that Bowen's houses evoke other meanings and ideologies as well and that a reading of these houses in contexts other than the Anglo-Irish one may allow us to gain a more comprehensive picture of the poetics of house and home in Bowen's work. Again the autobiographical context might offer a starting point here. After all, Bowen was not just a member of the Anglo-Irish Ascendancy, living in a Big House in Cork. For most of her life she lived in England: first with her English mother, in a succession of villas on the Kent coast, then as the wife of a civil servant in Oxford and London, at the end of her life returning to the town of Hythe in Kent. In *Pictures and Conversations*, in fact, Bowen traces her fictional obsession with houses back to one of her early experiences in England rather than to the influence of Bowen's Court. In a lengthy passage she describes the empty Edwardian villas that she and her mother enjoyed exploring during their walks on the Kent coast:

Any empty premises that we liked the look of we entered, whether at that time requiring or contemplating a change of residence or not [...] I became as adept as a Fagin pupil at sneaking in through some forgotten little back window, then finding a door to unbolt to admit her [Bowen's mother]. [...] Wobbly rustic steps led, often, up to a sagging terrace or down to a dried-out pool. Who *had* been the inhabitants, so mysteriously gone? I cannot wonder villas gained such a hold on me, waiting only a few years more to become the dominants of the stories I started to write. It being necessary there should be people to put in them, I summoned up 'people': men, women, children. Much of my 'creation' of character, has, rather, been evocation, borne out by guesswork. Guesses have hit the mark, by a miracle. (Bowen 1975, 29–30)

It seems, then, that we should not just look to Bowen's Ascendancy life in Ireland, but also to her profoundly middle-class experiences in England for an understanding of her poetics of the house. Interestingly, the English context of the 1920s, when Bowen started writing and published three short story collections, was characterised by a widespread celebration of house and home. As several historians have pointed out, England turned back upon itself after the war, reviving the values of domesticity and tradition. As Alison Light put it, '[T]he 1920's and 30's saw a move away from formerly heroic and officially masculine public rhetorics of national destiny [...] to an Englishness at once less imperial and more

1 inward-looking, more domestic and more private – and, in terms of
2 pre-war standards, more “feminine” (Light 1991, 8). For the British
3 women who had participated so successfully in the war effort, this meant a
4 ‘return to home and duty’, as Beddoe has put it, to the extent that ‘the
5 single most arresting feature of the interwar years was the strength of the
6 notion that women’s place is the home’ (Beddoe 1989, 3).

7 This domestic ideology was supported both by government measures,
8 such as the introduction of the marriage bar in professions or dole office
9 practices that removed women from the workplace, and by the ‘shining
10 ideal of the stay-at-home housewife’ that was celebrated in the many new
11 domestically orientated magazines (Beddoe 1989, 4). Beddoe concludes:

12 In the inter-war years only one desirable image was held up to women by all
13 mainstream media agencies – that of housewife and mother. This single role
14 model was presented to women to follow and all other alternative roles were
15 presented as wholly undesirable. Realising this central fact is the key to
16 understanding every other aspect of women’s lives in the 1920s and 1930s. (p. 8)

17 The ‘Homes Fit for Heroes’ programme also contributed to the rapid
18 expansion of suburban housing estates in the interwar years and, as Lynn
19 Hapgood has argued, the nature of these modern communities was being
20 intensely debated, both in magazines and in the interwar domestic novel
21 (Hapgood 2000, 162–164). In fact, the domestic novel played a crucial role
22 in negotiating this return to the home for its middlebrow readership,
23 carefully navigating the complex issues of class, femininity and modernity
24 it involved.³ While feminist historians such as Gail Braybon and Deirdre
25 Beddoe have been highly critical of the role of women’s magazines in the
26 propagation of the interwar domestic ideology, Judy Giles has more
27 recently argued that the return to the home they advocated was not just a
28 conservative reflex but also involved a modernisation of the home.
29 Through the expansion of the suburbs, the decline of service and the rise of
30 consumerism, women’s magazines and the domestic novel sought to
31 transform the Victorian ‘Lady of the House’ into a ‘professional
32 housewife’, who combined traditional values of care with new efficiency,
33 rationality and, of course, consumerism (Giles 2004, 104–117).

34 Nevertheless, the interwar idealisation of home and housewife did hark
35 back to the Victorian separation between public and private spheres, with
36 the latter defined by John Ruskin as ‘the place of Peace – the shelter not
37

only from all injury, but from all terror, doubt and division. In so far as it is not this, it is not home' (Ruskin 2005, 38). It also anticipated more philosophical explorations of house and home in the 1950s when Martin Heidegger and Gaston Bachelard identified the house as both symbol and source of being and belonging. Given Bowen's own celebration of her ancestral house as a place of tradition, order and identity, one might expect Bowen to underwrite this domestic ideology in her fiction and to depict her houses as places of comfort and shelter, however fragile or temporary. Yet a closer scrutiny of the poetics of house and home in Bowen's short stories does not confirm this hypothesis. Instead of being places of shelter, warmth and comfort most of her houses are haunted or hollow, lonely or oppressive. Instead of providing a sense of belonging and identity – as is suggested in 'The Back Drawing-Room' – Bowen's houses far more often restrict, efface or deny a character's sense of self. Moreover, as I hope to show, it is not just the reality of house and home that proves problematic in Bowen's stories; the very idea of the happy home as a place of security and identity is also satirically undercut in a variety of ways.

III. Questioning domestic ideology

Already in the first story Bowen ever published, 'Breakfast', a domestic ideal is evoked only to be satirically exposed. In this story, the narrator cleverly wrong-foots the reader by describing the breakfast scene in a boarding house as though it were that of an extended family and friends in a large, upper-middle-class household. 'The family' is mentioned twice in the first paragraph, there is an 'Aunt Willoughy' who reminisces about the past and the hostess exclaims proudly that 'There's nothing so homely [...] as a comfortable sit-down family to breakfast' (Bowen 1981, 19). The twist in the story then reveals satirically that this is 'home comforts [...] for which Rossiter paid her twenty-four shillings a week' (p. 19). The 'homely' atmosphere of the gathering turns out to be an artificial and flimsy cover for the 'hostility' between the boarders that lies underneath (p. 20).

In another story of the early 1920s, 'Human Habitation', two students on a walking tour in the English midlands have lost their way and are heartened by 'lights' in the distance: 'There'll be people, you know, and they might let us come by the fire. They'd tell us the way, but I expect they'd ask us to stay for a bit' (Bowen 1981, 151). His companion concurs:

1 'I expect the people are well-to-do, and live there because they like it. It
2 would be rather a jolly place to live', and proceeds to imagine an idyllic
3 house and garden. The narrator comments wryly, 'It was extraordinary
4 how happy they felt as they approached the lights, and how benevolent'
5 (p. 152). The house they imagine and eagerly anticipate is in fact quite
6 similar to both Ruskin's home and Bachelard's oneiric house, including the
7 iconic light in the distance promising warmth and security. 'Through its
8 light alone', Bachelard writes, 'the house becomes human', 'keeps vigil,
9 vigilantly waits', becomes a 'refuge', offering 'protection against the forces
10 that besiege it' (Bachelard 1994, 35, 34, 37). The students also follow both
11 these authors in constructing their ideal house as feminine when they
12 misread the woman's anxious look out of the windows as a sign of
13 welcome: 'Woman, all the women of the world, hailing them home with
14 relief and expectation. Something stirred warmly in both of them; it would
15 be like this to have a wife' (Bowen 1981, 152). The overblown rhetoric of
16 these passages clearly mocks the students' idealising celebrations of a
17 feminine domesticity and the rest of the story further undercuts these
18 images as the woman, her crying baby and an elderly aunt turn out to be
19 waiting anxiously for a husband who has never been late before. The house
20 is thus marked by anxiety and absence rather than the warmth, fullness
21 and safety they anticipated.

22 The opposition between the ideal of house and home as construed by
23 men and its reality as lived by women also recurs in other stories. In
24 'Joining Charles', for instance, Charles is happy to contemplate his
25 childhood home from a safe and superior distance: 'The White House
26 seemed to Charles [...] very proper as an institution; it was equally proper
27 that he should have a contempt for it' (Bowen 1981, 225). In 'The Last
28 Night in the Old Home', to give another example, the son mourns the loss
29 of his childhood house – 'It had always helped him to think of his old
30 home; after a thick night it made him feel good and squashy' (p. 373),
31 while his sister feels 'profound relief', 'its grip relaxed on her spirit'
32 (p. 372). This relief is echoed by Cicely in 'The New House', when she
33 counters her brother's nostalgic references to their 'happy little home' with:
34 'all my life I seem to have been tied up, fastened on to things and people.
35 Why even the way the furniture was arranged at No. 17 held me so I
36 couldn't get away. The way the chairs went in the sitting-room. And
37 mother.' (p. 57).

1 Particularly Bowen's daughters often experience their homes as stifling
2 and oppressive and yearn to break free from the identity they seem to
3 impose. In 'Aunt Tatty', Eleanor struggles with the impossibility of
4 bringing her London lover into her childhood home: 'it seems all wrong
5 here. You see this is my home, Paul, and it's me too' (Bowen 1981, 266).
6 When seated around the fire with 'the women of the family', Paul intones
7 sardonically: 'This is living, O Daughter of the House, this is how time
8 passes, this is how you approach death!' (p. 267). In stories such as 'Mrs
9 Moysey' or 'The Little Girl's Room', moreover, the oppressive, even
10 imprisoning quality of the childhood home is construed as the flipside of
11 the warmth, order and safety it also offers. In the last story, Geraldine is
12 jealously guarded from all corrupting outside influence in her grand-
13 mother's Italianate house, escaping from the suffocating cosiness in
14 imaginary battles she enacts in her room. The closing lines of the story
15 read: 'Security, feeling for her in the dark, closed the last of its tentacles on
16 her limbs, her senses. When the door shut, when they had gone, she sighed
17 acquiescence into her frilly pillow and once more slept in her prison'
18 (p. 434). And also such putative daughters as Eleanor in 'The Parrot' or
19 Lydia in 'The Return' find the cosiness of their homes oppressive.

20 In these stories, the childhood home is realised as the 'stifling
21 dominating matriarchal house', which Phyllis Lassner and Paula Derdiger
22 (2009: 209) have also traced in some of Bowen's novels. In several other
23 stories, to the contrary, it is a patriarchal presence that seems to oppress,
24 blight or haunt the house. We have already seen how the maternal house
25 so idealised by the students in 'Human Habitation' turns out to be haunted
26 by the absence of the man of the family. In a similar way, the cottage by
27 the roadside in 'Look at All Those Roses' which looks so appealing to
28 Lou – 'I wish we lived *there*' (Bowen 1981, 513) – turns out to be blighted
29 by male violence. Although the house appears to be an ideal, all-female
30 domain – inhabited by the tellingly named Mrs Mather, her invalid
31 daughter and a maid – the home is permanently scarred by Mr Mather's
32 destruction of his daughter's health. Hence, while Lou expects the house to
33 be 'homely', 'extinct paper and phantom cretonnes gave it a gutted air'
34 (p. 517). The White House in 'Joining Charles' is at first experienced by
35 Louise, the daughter-in-law, as the 'home' she had never had (p. 224): 'the
36 White House opened its arms to her and she began to be carried away by
37 this fullness, this intimacy and the queer seclusion of family life' (p. 223).

Yet she comes to realise that the house is 'dominated' by her husband, the absent son and brother of the women in the White House: 'The things he said, the things he had made, his imprint, were all over the White House' (p. 225). That this imprint is as destructive as that of Mr Mather is suggested by Polyphemus, the house cat, for whose loss of an eye Charles is to blame. When leaving the house to join her husband in France, Louise leaves Trollope's novel *Framley Parsonage* behind and with it all her illusions about a happy house and home. In these and other stories, in short, Bowen undercuts the familiar construction of the house as 'woman's sphere', instead showing it to be – often negatively – dominated by men.

When we turn from Bowen's daughters to her housewives and mothers, the image of the house becomes an even bleaker one as the sense of oppression or violence, from which the daughters can still try to escape, gives way to a far more pervasive feeling of emptiness, deadness or nothingness. In the story with the ironic title 'Attractive Modern Homes', the main character is shown to be extremely unhappy in her new house, a feeling that she – in a characteristic Bowen move – projects onto the furniture: 'her things appeared uneasy in the new home. The armchairs and settee covered in jazz tapestry, the sideboard with mirror panel, the alabaster light bowls, even the wireless cabinet looked sulky, as though they would rather have stayed in the van' (Bowen 1981, 520). Even though the narrator keeps an ironic distance from her (lower-middle-class) character, Mrs Watson's melancholy ruminations about the new estate are rendered with some sympathy:

This new town they had come to had a mellow, ancient core, but was rapidly spreading and filling up with workers. The Watsons had been edged out to this new estate, the only place where they could find a house. And how *un*-ideal it was. An estate is *not* like a village, it has *no* heart; even the shops are new and still finding their own feet. It has *not* had time to take on the prim geniality of a suburb. The dwellers are pioneers *unennobled* by danger. Everybody feels strange and has *no* time for curiosity. *Nothing* has had time to flower in this new place. (p. 522, my emphasis)

Negatives abound in this passage, as indeed in the whole story, to reveal the emptiness of Mrs Watson's domestic life. In the climactic middle passage of the story, when Mr Watson finds the 'object' figure of his wife lying face down in the wood that is 'too near their door' (pp. 526, 528), the ironic distance of the narrator disappears and in a halting conversation

1 with her husband, Mrs Watson is shown trying to verbalise the source of
 2 her unhappiness. When Mr Watson challenges his wife with 'you've got a
 3 home', she replies bitterly, 'Yes, it's sweet, isn't it. Like you see in
 4 advertisements' (p. 526). In fact, she continues, it's 'awful', 'you can't think
 5 what it's like when you're in it [the house] the whole time'. And when her
 6 husband points out, 'We're the same as we've been always', she replies,
 7 'Yes [...] but it [*sic*] didn't notice before' (p. 527). In short, the move to this
 8 liminal position in a new estate has brought Mrs Watson face to face with
 9 the emptiness or 'nothingness' at the heart of her domestic life. Yet since
 10 this is a story in a comic-satiric mode, the abyss is covered up again at the
 11 end of the story when Mrs Watson meets a friendly neighbour from K
 12 Kot, whose recognition restores her sense of identity again. Still, as the
 13 ironic distance between narrator and character increases again, this 'happy
 14 ending' cannot so easily dispel the very real despair of Mrs Watson's
 15 domestic existence.

16 A similar combination of satire, comedy and horror can be found in
 17 'The Working-Party' which stages the young Mrs Fisk who is for the first
 18 time hosting a working-cum-tea-party for the ladies of her village. While
 19 the narrator clearly mocks Mrs Fisk's domestic aspirations – 'She had
 20 noted the china, the teaspoons, the doylies and saved herself up to outdo
 21 them' (Bowen 1981, 287) – the horror that subsequently strikes when she
 22 encounters a dead man blocking the passage between kitchen and parlour
 23 is again made powerfully real. Although Mrs Fisk is at first determined
 24 that 'Nothing should wreck her' (p. 293, repeated twice), the nothingness
 25 at the heart of her home ultimately does wreck her and she flees from her
 26 house into the equally empty fields around it:

27 The grey-green fields were uncomfortable, the very colour of silence; the sky hung
 28 over the valley, from hill to hill, like a slack white sheet. The river slipped
 29 between reddening willows, sighing and shining. With the dread of her home
 30 behind her she fled up the empty valley [...] Long before he could possibly hear
 31 her she was calling out [...] William! I'm frightened – frightened – I don't dare
 32 stay in the house – all alone with him – all alone – *William!*' (p. 296)

33 Again, the narrator's ironic final comment – 'She had forgotten the
 34 Working Party' – cannot dispel the real feelings of loneliness, emptiness,
 35 nothingness, even deadness which are in this story symbolically attached to
 36 the house, thus again undermining the initially more positive depiction of
 37 Combe Farm as an 'old and solid' house, 'command[ing] the valley' (p. 286).

A more tragic rendering of the nothingness at the heart of the oneiric house or happy home can be found in 'The Dispossessed'. Like Mrs Watson, Marianne Harvey has come to live in a new (though clearly more upper-class) estate, but she is at first 'house-proud' (Bowen 1981, 378) and happy to be 'making a new home' (p. 375). Yet also this modern housewife, who is admired by her husband for her 'serenity, mild good spirits and love of home' (p. 379), becomes aware of the emptiness of this domestic ideal following a confrontation with parodies of home enacted by the impoverished aristocratic Davina and her friends. One of them keeps 'a tea-and-cake parlour called The Cat and Kettle' and mocks the nostalgic ideal home that lures the customers to her place:

But people would eat a boot if it was home made. They like getting caraways into their teeth and spitting out burnt currants; it feels like the old home. I've had customers drive thirty miles to see the dear old black kettle sit on the hob and kid themselves I made the tea out of it. Neurotic, that's what they are. (p. 399)

As Eluned Summers-Bremner has pointed out, Marianne is the 'real casualty' of the story: more than the actually 'homeless' Davina and her friends, she has become the 'dispossessed' of the title, deprived of the ideal of home that she used to live by (Summers-Bremner 2007, 265).

What all of these stories tackle is the belief, central to the domestic ideology of the interwar years, that the modern housewife can find fulfilment and self-expression through her 'home-making' (Humble 2001, 17). As Emily Post famously put it in *The Personality of a House*, your house 'should express your personality, just as every gesture you make – or fail to make – expresses your gay animation or your restraint, your old-fashioned conventions, your perplexing mystery or your emancipated modernism – whichever characteristics are typically yours' (Post 1930, 3). Yet the domestic efforts described in Bowen's stories fail to have the desired results and the characters are instead defeated by a sense of emptiness or nothingness at the heart of the house. In two of her ghost stories, Bowen spells out even more clearly that instead of expressing or gaining an identity through homemaking, women are far more likely to lose any sense of a distinct self. In 'The Shadowy Third', Posy has made great efforts to change and refurbish the house – 'It seems so very much our house [...] we have made it so entirely' – yet her husband continues to

1 be haunted by the – now absent – furniture, clock and draperies that his
2 first, dead wife had put in place (Bowen 1981, 77). And Posy herself is –
3 rightly – afraid of turning into a mirror image of this first wife, for instead
4 of securing her identity through the house, her domestic life threatens to
5 turns her into ‘Anybody’, as the first wife is routinely referred to.

6 In ‘Foothold’, a story that revisits this idea in a more upper-class
7 household, Janet is initially staged as the perfect embodiment of the
8 modern housewife. She is repeatedly praised by Thomas, a friend of the
9 family, for the tasteful way in which she has furnished the house:

10 Thomas [...] looked round the dining-room. Janet did things imaginatively; a
11 subdued, not too buoyant prettiness had been superimposed on last night’s
12 sombre effect; a honey-coloured Italian table-cloth on the mahogany, vase of
13 brown marigolds, breakfast china about the age of the house with a red rim and
14 scattered gold pimpurnels. The firelight pleasantly jiggled, catching the glaze of
15 dishes and coffee-pot, the copper feet of the ‘sluggard’s joy’. The square high
16 room had, like Janet, a certain grace of proportion. (Bowen 1981, 297)

17 Janet’s house seems to express her personality in the exact way Emily Post
18 advocated and Thomas compliments her with, ‘You’ve inhabited [the
19 house] to a degree I wouldn’t have thought possible’ (p. 302). Yet to Janet
20 the house appears more empty every day: ‘I do feel the house has grown
21 since we’ve been in it. The rooms seem to take so much longer to get
22 across’ (p. 299). In spite of her aspirations to make the house into an image
23 of herself, the house in the end destroys Janet, turning her into a duplicate
24 image of its other, ghostly, inhabitant. As Lassner has put it, ‘Women
25 become ghosts as a result of being sacrificed to the life and purpose of a
26 house [...] they lose their individuality and keep duplicating each other’
27 (Lassner 1991, 15; see also Wallace 2004).⁴

28 It will be clear from these examples that Bowen’s depiction of houses in
29 her stories reveals a rather severe criticism of the domestic ideology that
30 dominated Britain in the interwar years. On the one hand, her stories
31 satirically expose idealisations of the home, particularly when coming from
32 male characters; on the other hand, they uncover the often harsh reality of
33 domestic life, primarily for women. Bowen’s daughters typically experience
34 the house as safe but suffocating and restricting, while the enthusiastic
35 attempts at homemaking of her housewives do not deliver the promised
36 self-realisation but only emptiness and despair. In short, while the house
37 does confer a sense of selfhood and identity, as the characters become

1 'Lady of the House' or 'Daughter of the House', for most characters this
 2 identity proves an all too restrictive, suffocating and ultimately empty one.
 3 In most of Bowen's ghost stories, similarly, female characters become
 4 ghosts as a result of their confinement within the house and its domestic
 5 ideology, rather than – as in 'The Back Drawing-Room' – because of the
 6 loss of house and home. In short, if being homeless is not an enviable
 7 condition in Bowen's fiction, being home-bound is clearly not ideal either.

10 *IV. The lonely house: Effacement and recognition*

11 In a recent review essay, Phyllis Lassner has called Bowen a 'trouble-maker',
 12 as her 'cultural and political ambivalence and polysemous writing style' can
 13 be seen to challenge 'traditional, even revisionary, literary and cultural
 14 theories' (Lassner 2010, 670). One aspect of this elusive polysemy has been
 15 traced in this essay, namely Bowen's ambivalent poetics of house and home,
 16 as they are expressed both on a thematic and on a stylistic level. Because of
 17 Bowen's rather unusual combination of different tropes, as we have seen,
 18 her houses seem both to illuminate and efface the characters. This duality is
 19 also borne out by the plots of Bowen's stories, which show characters being
 20 made and unmade by the houses they live in. While these women do derive a
 21 sense of identity from the house and the domestic and marital arrangements
 22 that inspire it, that identity or individuality is at the same time effaced by
 23 their solitary devotion to the house. That the house is the site where
 24 woman's identity is constructed and erased, is in fact recognised by Jeffries,
 25 the most sensitive of the two students in 'Human Habitation'. Having
 26 already qualified his all too rosy picture of the happy home, Jeffries further
 27 strives to understand the position of the woman of the house:

28 One felt that she had built up for herself an intricate and perhaps rather lonely
 29 life, monotone beneath the great shadow of William. Jameson was tapping out
 30 his points with his spoon against his cup and clamouring about cohesion, but he
 31 would be unable to understand the queer unity that had created and destroyed
 32 Annie. (Bowen 1981, 158)

33 House and husband provide women with an identity, a life, but one which
 34 is of necessity lonely, monotonous and ultimately destructive.

35 Lest one should interpret Bowen's critique of the domestic ideology as a
 36 snobbish dismissal of the satisfaction that middle-class housewives could find
 37

in making new homes in suburban estates, I should point out that domestic desolation affects women from different social classes: from the upper class Janet in her Georgian mansion and Marianne in her modernist suburban house to Mrs Frisk in her ancient farm and Annie in her cottage. What all of the houses in Bowen's stories share, moreover, is a sense of isolation. Bowen's houses are typically on their own in the countryside ('Joining Charles', 'The New House', 'The Working Party', 'Her Table Spread', 'Human Habitation' and 'Look at All Those Roses') or in a al place; on the edge of a new estate ('The Dispossessed', 'Attractive Modern Homes', 'The Shadowy Third'); or at the very end of a crumbling terrace ('No. 16', 'In the Square'). In all of these instances, the isolation of the houses symbolises *and* aggravates the loneliness of the characters. Already in 'Daffodils', Bowen suggests that this loneliness is the flipside of the safety the house also offers: '[Miss Murcheson] stood in the doorway, with that square of light and sound behind her, craving the protection and the comfort with which that dark entrance had so often received her. There was a sudden desolation in the emptiness of the house' (Bowen 1981, 22). Far more than being homeless, it seems, many characters in Bowen's fiction are too much bound by house and home, which threatens to cut them off from meaningful interaction with other people. In 'Daffodils', Miss Murcheson tries to counter the isolation of the house by opening the window and inviting three of her pupils, but this does not have the intended effect as they do not understand what she is trying to communicate. In 'Attractive Modern Homes', conversely, Mrs Watson's sense of self is eventually restored by the recognition of a neighbour, rather than the security of house and home. And in 'The Shadowy Third', the death of Martin's first wife is correctly diagnosed as a lack of recognition: 'not to want a person must be a sort, a sort of murder' (p. 82). This necessary interaction with and recognition of other people is often foreclosed by the isolation of the house, which only exacerbates the character's essential aloneness.

In its ideal form, however, Bowen's house does not shut out this interaction but rather incorporates it within itself. An interesting example of such an ideal house is given in 'The Visitor':

Roger had an imaginary house that, when it was quite complete in his mind, he was some day going to live in: in this there were a hundred corridors raying off from a fountain in the centre; at the end of each there was a room looking out into a private garden. The walls of the gardens were so high and smooth that no one could climb over into somebody else's. When they wanted to meet, they

would come and bathe together in this fountain. One of the rooms was for his mother, another for his friend Paul. There were ninety-seven still unappropriated, and now it seemed there would be ninety-eight. (Bowen 1981, 126)

Traces of this ideal house can also be found in Bowen's descriptions of Bowen's Court. Both in *Bowen's Court* and in a 1958 magazine piece of the same title, Bowen emphasises time and again the 'isolation' of the house in 'lonely country', while at the same time stressing the 'social' purposes for which the house was built, 'with hospitality as its inbuilt ideal' (Hepburn 2008b, 140, 149). In a 1940 essay for the Irish magazine *The Bell*, Bowen expresses the hope that this social aspect of the Big House will be able to overcome the barriers that isolate it from Irish reality: 'Symbolically (though also matter-of-factly) the doors of the big houses stand open all day; it is only regretfully that they are barred up at night' (Lee 1999b, 29). And in another wartime magazine piece, 'The Christmas Toast Is Home', Bowen argues against a conception of home as 'a narrow place, from which the family bars out the world's troubles': 'One's home is one's castle – yes. But must this mean a castle defensively guarded, with drawbridge always raised? The castle (however tiny this may be) should show above all a confident graciousness. And the first of the graces is hospitality' (Hepburn 2008b, 130–131). Yet this ideal of an open house which offers shelter without isolating and comfort without loneliness is rarely if ever realised in Bowen's short fiction – as indeed it was not realised in Irish reality, where most Big Houses were burnt, abandoned or destroyed rather than becoming part of the community.

Bowen's ambivalent feelings about Anglo-Irish Big Houses may well be behind the images of house and home that haunt her fiction, but these images are certainly also informed by her recognition of the shortcomings of the domestic ideology that dominated interwar Britain. The influence of these different contexts, experiences and ideologies makes 'house' and 'home' complex and ambivalent poetical emblems in Bowen's short fiction that invariably obstruct any critical attempt at closure. On a stylistic level, we have seen how the house's function as an expressive marker of the central character's personality is undermined by its prosopopoeic agency which works to divest the character of this personality. In thematic terms, similarly, houses and homes seem to promise comfort, identity and protection against the surrounding darkness. Yet these things as easily turn into their opposite: the protection becomes oppressive; the identity restrictive and meaningless;

and the darkness turns out to have always already invaded the very heart of the house. Especially Bowen's women characters, tied as they are to the house by the domestic ideology that governs their lives, experience house and home as inherently oppressive. The sense of self that the house construes for them turns out to be limiting and lonely; and their devotion to house and home renders them ghost-like. This sense of isolation, of being cut off from the world, is perhaps the most salient characteristic of the house for Bowen's female characters.⁵ And if there is an ideal house in her fiction, it is neither Emily Post's 'cultivated' house, nor Ruskin's 'shelter' nor Bachelard's womb-like childhood home, but rather a house that allows rather than excludes community, which embraces rather than shuts out the world.

NOTES

1. I want to emphasise that this comparison between Bowen's use of focalisation and introspection and that of modernist writers such as Woolf and Mansfield should not be construed as evidence of Bowen's after-, anti-, or postmodernist stance. I agree with Phyllis Lassner that the whole heated debate about Bowen's place in literary history is ultimately rather futile and that to read her stories carefully 'is to find Bowen neither aligned with nor in opposition to modernism or postmodernism', but rather committed to 'the anamorphic power of fiction to transform the ordinary into the unfamiliar' (Lassner 2010, 671).
2. This ties in with John Mepham's suggestion that British fiction of the 1930s sees a shift from a modernist concern with 'inner subjectivity' to an interest in 'intersubjectivity', in social interaction and 'what is going on as characters talk' (Mepham 2007, 60).
3. The role of house and home in the domestic novel of the interwar period is discussed at length in Alison Light (1991), Nicola Humble (2001) and Chiara Briganti and Kathy Mezei (2006).
4. Some ghosts in Bowen's fiction are open to a double reading. About *The Last September*, for instance, Derek Hand argues that Lois's sense of 'ghostliness' or unreality anticipates her fate away from Danielstown: 'Lois's leaving is suggestive of her future as dislocated and disembodied: as a homeless ghost doomed to wander rather than be rooted to a single place' (Hand 2009, 72). But the ending could equally be read as signifying Lois's escape from the ghost she was doomed to become in the closed, decaying and preying atmosphere of the Big House, a fate also represented by Valeria Cuffe in the story 'Her Table Spread'.
5. In a 1961 essay for a women's magazine, Bowen commented indirectly on the 'confinement' of women to the domestic sphere when she applauded their recent entrance into the public domain:

Domestic are her ideals: she loves order, light, and the warmth of kindness – the more now that the walls no longer confine her. The home was her sphere, and now the world is her home. Her arrival into the forefront comes late in time; but not, we have reason to hope, too late! (Hepburn 2008b, 379).

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