

Twentieth-Century
Literary Criticism

TCLC

148

Volume 148

Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism

**Criticism of the
Works of Novelists, Poets, Playwrights,
Short Story Writers, and Other Creative Writers
Who Lived between 1900 and 1999,
from the First Published Critical
Appraisals to Current Evaluations**

Linda Pavlovski
Project Editor



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Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism, Vol. 148

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Preface

Since its inception more than fifteen years ago, *Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism (TCLC)* has been purchased and used by nearly 10,000 school, public, and college or university libraries. *TCLC* has covered more than 500 authors, representing 58 nationalities and over 25,000 titles. No other reference source has surveyed the critical response to twentieth-century authors and literature as thoroughly as *TCLC*. In the words of one reviewer, “there is nothing comparable available.” *TCLC* “is a gold mine of information—dates, pseudonyms, biographical information, and criticism from books and periodicals—which many librarians would have difficulty assembling on their own.”

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TCLC is designed to serve as an introduction to authors who died between 1900 and 1999 and to the most significant interpretations of these author’s works. Volumes published from 1978 through 1999 included authors who died between 1900 and 1960. The great poets, novelists, short story writers, playwrights, and philosophers of the period are frequently studied in high school and college literature courses. In organizing and reprinting the vast amount of critical material written on these authors, *TCLC* helps students develop valuable insight into literary history, promotes a better understanding of the texts, and sparks ideas for papers and assignments. Each entry in *TCLC* presents a comprehensive survey on an author’s career or an individual work of literature and provides the user with a multiplicity of interpretations and assessments. Such variety allows students to pursue their own interests; furthermore, it fosters an awareness that literature is dynamic and responsive to many different opinions.

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- A **Portrait of the Author** is included when available.
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An alphabetical **Title Index** accompanies each volume of *TCLC*. Listings of titles by authors covered in the given volume are followed by the author's name and the corresponding page numbers where the titles are discussed. English translations of foreign titles and variations of titles are cross-referenced to the title under which a work was originally published. Titles of novels, dramas, nonfiction books, and poetry, short story, or essay collections are printed in italics, while individual poems, short stories, and essays are printed in roman type within quotation marks.

In response to numerous suggestions from librarians, Gale also produces a paperbound edition of the *TCLC* cumulative title index. This annual cumulation, which alphabetically lists all titles reviewed in the series, is available to all customers. Additional copies of this index are available upon request. Librarians and patrons will welcome this separate index; it saves shelf space, is easy to use, and is recyclable upon receipt of the next edition.

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Contents

Preface vii

Acknowledgments xi

Literary Criticism Series Advisory Board xiii

Elizabeth Bowen 1899-1973	1
<i>Irish-born English novelist, short story writer, essayist, critic, nonfiction writer, travel essayist, playwright, and memoirist</i>	
Hermann Hesse 1877-1962	137
<i>German-born Swiss novelist, poet, short story writer, editor, and critic Entry is devoted to The Glass Bead Game (1943)</i>	
Jorge Ibar Güengoitia 1928-1983	188
<i>Mexican novelist, essayist, short story writer, critic, and playwright</i>	
Miguel de Unamuno 1864-1936	226
<i>Spanish poet, essayist, novelist, philosopher, playwright, and journalist</i>	

Literary Criticism Series Cumulative Author Index 353

Literary Criticism Series Cumulative Topic Index 451

TCLC Cumulative Nationality Index 463

TCLC-148 Title Index 469

Elizabeth Bowen

1899-1973

Irish-born English novelist, short story writer, essayist, critic, nonfiction writer, travel essayist, playwright, and memoirist.

The following entry provides criticism on Bowen's works from 1979 through 2001. For further information on her life and works, see *CLC*, Volumes 1, 3, 6, 11, 15, 22, and 118.

INTRODUCTION

Bowen was a renowned Anglo-Irish novelist and short story writer whose prolific writing career encompassed more than fifty years. Her later novels articulated the precarious position of the individual in the modern, postwar world and anticipated postmodernism in their use of new, experimental literary forms.

BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

An only child, Elizabeth Dorothea Cole Bowen was born in Dublin, Ireland, on June 7, 1899, to Florence Colley and Henry Cole Bowen, both of Anglo-Irish descent. Her father was an attorney in Dublin where the family lived in the winter, but they spent every summer at Bowen's Court, the family home in County Cork. The house itself was built in 1775, although the 800-acre estate had been granted to the Bowen family in 1653. In 1906, Bowen's father was hospitalized with nervous depression, a condition that apparently ran throughout the family, and Bowen and her mother went to stay with relatives in England. Missing both her father and her home in Ireland, Bowen developed a stammer that she never outgrew. Although her father's health improved and the family was reunited in Ireland in the summer of 1912, her mother's death soon afterwards proved another devastating blow to the young girl's precarious sense of stability. Her aunts assumed responsibility for her care and she was sent to live with her mother's unmarried sister in Hertfordshire where she attended day school. Two years later, she was enrolled in Downe House, a boarding school in Kent, where she remained for the next three years, splitting her school vacations between her maternal relatives in England and her father's home in Ireland. During her time in school, Bowen remained relatively isolated from the events of the outside world—the beginning of World



War I and the Easter Rising of 1916. However, when she left school in 1917, she volunteered as a nurse in a Dublin hospital where she cared for shell-shocked soldiers. Bowen traveled extensively after the war, briefly studied art at the London County Council School of Art, and then turned to journalism as a possible career, discovering her talent for fiction-writing along the way. Her brief engagement to a British army officer during this time was undone by the disapproval of her maternal aunts.

In 1923 Bowen published her first book of short stories, the favorably-received *Encounters*, and that same year she married Alan Cameron, an Oxford graduate and former soldier who held a minor government post in Kingsthorpe, Northampton, where the young couple took up residence. Two years later, Cameron accepted a position in Oxford where Bowen soon became a part of the local intellectual community; there she made the acquaintance of Rose Macaulay who provided her with invaluable introductions to important people in the pub-

lishing business. Between 1926 and 1929, Bowen published her first two novels and two additional short story collections. In 1930, when Bowen's father died, she inherited the family estate in Ireland; she and her husband began spending holidays there, although they still lived in England. She continued writing and publishing, and by 1935 she had produced a total of five novels and four collections of stories. Meanwhile, she was expanding her circle of literary friends and acquaintances and soon counted Virginia Woolf among her close associates. When Cameron took a position with the BBC, the couple moved to London and Bowen began writing literary reviews for the *Tatler*. She produced several more novels, among them the highly acclaimed *The Death of the Heart* (1938) and *The Heat of the Day* (1949). When Cameron's health began to fail, the couple moved to Bowen's Court, where he died in 1952. She resided there alone for the next several years and finally decided to sell the family estate in 1959. She returned briefly to Old Headington in Oxford and then moved to Kent, where she and her mother had lived for a time during her childhood. Meanwhile, she continued to write and to travel extensively, visiting America—where she lectured and served as writer-in-residence at various universities—every year from 1950 until her own declining health prevented her from traveling. Bowen produced her last novel in 1969 and died on February 22, 1973, of lung cancer.

MAJOR WORKS

Bowen's first two volumes of short stories, *Encounters* and *Ann Lee's and Other Stories* (1926), along with her first two novels, *The Hotel* (1927) and *The Last September* (1929) all deal with innocent young women who gain experience and self-awareness over the course of the narrative. *The Last September* is set on a large estate in Ireland and features a central character who very much resembles Bowen herself, although the author denied that the novel was autobiographical even as she acknowledged that the setting was inspired by Bowen's Court. Succeeding novels and stories did not measure up to the success of *The Last September* until the publication of what is often considered her masterpiece, *The Death of the Heart* in 1938. The story of a young girl sent to live with her half-brother and his wife after her parents die, *The Death of the Heart* features events viewed through multiple perspectives and dialogue that not only signal communication or lack thereof, but also provide for character and plot exposition as well.

In the following decade, Bowen abandoned the novel form and published, in addition to two new short story collections, stage and radio plays, and two volumes of memoirs: *Bowen's Court* (1942), a history of the family

estate in County Cork, and *Seven Winters* (1942), the story of her early life at Bowen's Court. Her most popular short story, the frequently anthologized "The Demon Lover" was written in the early 1940s and published in the collection *The Demon Lover and Other Stories* (1945).

World War II figured prominently in Bowen's fiction both during the war and afterwards, most notably in her 1949 novel, *The Heat of the Day*, a story of intrigue, espionage, and blackmail in which historical events co-exist with the standard elements of a love story against the backdrop of London during the blitz. In 1955 Bowen published *A World of Love*, the story of several women involved in one way or another with the same man, an Irishman who joins the British army and dies in France. His memory continues to exert a powerful influence over the lives of the women long after his death. *The Little Girls* (1964) also features women who share a common bond, in this case, their friendship as schoolgirls. Reuniting fifty years later, the women dig up a small chest containing various personal objects that they buried as children, an activity that forces them to confront the events of their individual and collective pasts. Bowen's final novel, *Eva Trout* (1968) is her most experimental in both form and content. The title character is a young heiress who is more devoted to her lavish home than her young adopted son, a deaf mute. She sends the boy to France to be educated by a specialist and the boy returns just as Eva is about to marry a childhood friend. The boy shoots his mother, either deliberately or accidentally, and Eva is killed instantly. The exact nature of the novel's conclusion continues to be debated by critics who find the work puzzling.

CRITICAL RECEPTION

Bowen's reputation during her lifetime was solid; by 1935, her books were being widely and favorably reviewed, and her work was compared to the writings of Virginia Woolf, E. M. Forster, and Henry James. But in the years since her death Bowen's place in the twentieth-century literary canon has been less secure, particularly with regard to her later novels. Most critics consider *The Death of the Heart* her best work, and dismiss her post-war writing as the product of a writer in decline. More recently, however, Bowen's work has been re-evaluated by postmodernists and feminist scholars who view her last four novels with new appreciation.

Of her final four novels, *The Heat of the Day* was most favorably received by critics. Set in London during the years 1942-44, the novel treats World War II as "a mirrored replay of the war being fought within man, of the nothingness within himself against his own humanness," according to Barbara Brothers, who suggests that

during this period Bowen was concerned with the same issues that occupied Yeats and Eliot after World War I. Hermione Lee believes that the central concerns in Bowen's late writing appeared in her earlier work, but after the war, her narratives dealt "more than ever with the failure of feeling and certainty in modern civilization, and with the need for consolatory retreats into memory and fantasy." For Lee, Bowen's last three novels in particular are about "displacement, alienation, and the search for consolation," often found by revisiting the past. John Coates, though, in his analysis of *A World of Love*, refutes the notion that the attempt to recover the past amounts to mere nostalgia on the personal level. According to Coates, the novel is "concerned through a self-conscious and at times ironic reworking of myth, to examine some of the most significant 'public' themes of the twentieth century." Allan E. Austin, however, feels that *A World of Love*, while interesting on a variety of levels, "is an experiment that was not successful and is, consequently, one of Bowen's least satisfactory books."

Anne M. Wyatt-Brown has studied *The Little Girls* and *Eva Trout*, both categorized as upper-class comedies of manners, a genre denounced by most modern critics. However, she believes the two works are noteworthy because they "move the novel in the direction of post-modern experimentation." For Wyatt-Brown, the uncertainty running through these novels, denigrated by many critics, should be recognized as a sign of Bowen's courage in risking her substantial literary reputation by abandoning the formula that had made her famous and experimenting with new literary possibilities instead. John Coates, like Wyatt-Brown, takes on earlier scholars who consider *Eva Trout* a failure, Bowen's "botched and belated attempt to remake herself in changing times." Coates sides with more recent feminist critics who believe Bowen's last novel represents "a radical criticism of gender stereotypes." Austin considers Bowen's late work to be "in many ways her most interesting; for it shows the author working with a new sense of adventure." While the last four novels may not "quite match the perfection of *The Death of the Heart*, they reflect the touch of a poised and knowing craftsman."

PRINCIPAL WORKS

Encounters: Stories (short stories) 1923
Ann Lee's and Other Stories (short stories) 1926
The Hotel (novel) 1927
Joining Charles and Other Stories (short stories) 1929
The Last September (novel) 1929
Friends and Relations: A Novel (novel) 1931
To the North (novel) 1932

The Cat Jumps and Other Stories (short stories) 1934
The House in Paris (novel) 1935
The Death of the Heart (novel) 1938
Look at All Those Roses: Short Stories (short stories) 1941
Bowen's Court (memoir) 1942
English Novelists (criticism) 1942
Seven Winters (memoir) 1942
The Demon Lover and Other Stories (short stories) 1945
Anthony Trollope: A New Judgement (criticism) 1946
Selected Stories (short stories) 1946
Why Do I Write? An Exchange of Views between Elizabeth Bowen, Graham Greene, and V. S. Pritchett (nonfiction) 1948
The Heat of the Day (novel) 1949
Collected Impressions (essays) 1950
The Shelbourne: A Centre in Dublin Life for More than a Century (autobiographical essay) 1951
A World of Love (novel) 1955
Stories by Elizabeth Bowen (short stories) 1959
A Time in Rome (travel essay) 1960
Afterthought: Pieces about Writing (essays) 1962
The Little Girls (novel) 1964
A Day in the Dark and Other Stories (short stories) 1965
Eva Trout; or, Changing Scenes (novel) 1968
Nativity Play (play) 1974
Pictures and Conversations (essays and unfinished novel) 1975
Elizabeth Bowen's Irish Stories (short stories) 1978
The Collected Stories of Elizabeth Bowen (short stories) 1981
The Mulberry Tree: Writings of Elizabeth Bowen (essays) 1986

CRITICISM

Barbara Brothers (essay date spring 1979)

SOURCE: Brothers, Barbara. "Pattern and Void: Bowen's Irish Landscapes and *The Heat of the Day*." *Mosaic* 12, no. 3 (spring 1979): 129-38.

[In the following essay, Brothers explores Bowen's use of Irish settings in her post World War II writing, particularly her autobiographical work and the 1949 novel *The Heat of the Day*.]

The Last September was the only one of Elizabeth Bowen's works, fiction or non-fiction, written prior to World War II that extensively drew on or reflected the life Bowen had known in Ireland.¹ The preface in which she relates the importance of that life to her as a person

and as a writer, however, was not written until 1952. Why is it then that after World War II Bowen felt the need to make explicit her claims to that life, claims that are reiterated in her autobiographical reminiscences—*Bowen's Court* (1942), *Seven Winters* (1942), *The Shelbourne* (1951), and *Afterthought* (1962)? *The Heat of the Day*, her first post-war novel, is significantly not only a picture of life in England during the war but a novel divided in its setting between England and Ireland. As reflected in both autobiographical statements and in fictive constructions, it was Bowen's experience of the Second World War that led to her questioning of what was lacking in the culture and life of those persons who were both its victims and its perpetrators. Bowen now struggled with the questions that Yeats and T. S. Eliot had struggled with earlier: how in an age without belief or tradition can the individual live with purpose? how can the individual be kept from a solipsistic working of his selfish will upon the rest of mankind? where is to be found a standard for value judgment other than the pure numbers of the mob? since man's reason does not curb his cruelties, how foster his sympathetic identification with his fellow man?

The similarity in the landscapes which Bowen makes explicit in her autobiographical writings seems to have suggested the importance of the life she had known and loved as a child. The landscape which Bowen emphasizes for that heredity—the ruins surrounding the homes of the Anglo-Irish ascendancy—prefigures the landscape of Bowen's environment, the crumbling world of Europe after two world wars. Thus she began her self-conscious immersion in that world through extensive reading in Ireland's histories and imaginative writings. As if aware of the tenuousness of her claims to that world (Bowen lived in Ireland only as a sojourner after the age of eight), she carefully supports them: she repeatedly cites Proust on the importance and vividness of early memories in determining the art and life of the individual.² Such extensive explorations and explicit apologies can be understood only if that life has assumed the larger significance of a symbolic value, and we can understand that symbolic value only by examining the context of the Irish landscape which Bowen saw as making her experience of import for her contemporaries.

For Bowen Ireland is not a place to escape to, to "ignore life and death" as William Heath suggests,³ but a place in which those realities are embodied in the landscape. It is a landscape whose "inherent emptiness"⁴ forced those who built there to recognize that they were creating a "pattern" (*BC* [*Bowen's Court*], p. 21) upon the "anonymous countryside":

The land around Bowen's Court, even under its windows, has an unhumanized air the house does nothing to change. Here are, even, no natural features, view or

valley, to which the house may be felt to relate itself. . . . Like Flaubert's ideal book about nothing it sustains itself on itself by the inner force of style.

The central significance of the Anglo-Irish Ascendancy's way of life for her was its self-consciousness and discipline, which limited the freedom of the individual and gave him a "sense of community"⁵ in the face of the void. It rooted him in an order outside himself but of himself as well. The isolated life that the demesne dwellers lived encouraged the virtues of hardiness, independence and courage. In this essay, written for Sean O'Faolain's *The Bell* in 1942, she metaphorically likened the existences of the inhabitants of the big houses—servants and family—to that of people on a "ship out at sea." While T. S. Eliot's experience of the wasteland led him to the established church to find a timeless order in which man could identify with his fellows through a God which transcended them all, Bowen's experience of it led her to the Anglo-Irish tradition of a circumscribed family life within the history of which a social order was preserved that transcended the individual's experience of time. Through man's commitment to his participation in that order, he became free to love and be. That order was identified by her in terms of its physical expression, the way the houses and the city of Dublin defined their spaces. A home for Bowen, however, was not just the physical expression of a tradition; it was the dwelling place of the tradition's active essence. The relationship between architecture and landscape and the human spirit was integral to Bowen. Only through man's experience of place could he become a part of the transcendent reality it embodied.

In the first chapter of *Bowen's Court*, Bowen recreates in detail the landscape upon which the house and its life were erected. "This is a country for wet weather: the steady sough of rain in demesne trees induces by day a timeless and rather soothing melancholy, by night an obliterating, exhaustive sleep" (p. 19). The wet weather along with the "alteration of sun and damp" quickly produces a "weathered bloom" upon the interiors and exteriors of the homes. As the weather challenges the illusion of the permanency of man's artifacts, the "dips and creases" (p. 5), the "high hedges, sunk rivers," and the "sheltering trees" (p. 4) make his existence seem only illusory.

It is not only the natural landscapes but also the ruins, reminders of his "error or failure" (p. 17), that make man feel how extrinsic his existence is. Ireland, for Bowen, is

a country of ruins. Lordly or humble, military or domestic, standing up with furious gauntness, like Kilcolman, or shelving weakly into the soil, ruins feature the landscape . . . and make a ghostly extra quarter to towns. They give clearings in woods, reaches of mountain or sudden turns of a road a meaning and preinhab-

ited air. Ivy grapples them; trees grow inside their doors; enduring ruins, where they emerge from ivy, are the limestone whitegrey and look like rocks. . . . Some ruins show gashes of violence, others simply the dull slant of decline.

(p. 15)

Bowen reminds us that not

all these ruins are ruins of wars: where there has not been violence there has been abandonment. Mansions, town houses, farmhouses, cottages have often been left to die—and very few people know the story of the bitter necessity. That air of waste and nonchalance about Irish ruins is an irritant to the present-day English mind.

(p. 16)

Thus Bowen calls attention to the Irish landscape's dramatization of the forces in life which challenge the permanence of man's constructions and notes the English lack of comprehension that man may be limited in his ability to erect physical edifices to withstand the onslaught of time.

Within this macrocosm of desolation and mutability, the Anglo-Irish created their island-worlds of conscious living.

Each member of each of these isolated households is bound up not only in the sensation and business of living but in the exact sensation of living *here*. The upkeep of the place takes its tax not only of physical energy but of psychic energies people hardly know that they give. Each of these houses, with its intense, centripetal life, is isolated by something very much more lasting than the physical fact of space: the isolation is innate; it is an affair of origin.

(pp. 19, 20)

Here "the present seems to be there forever," and the past "pervasively felt." And thus it is for Bowen that character "is printed on every hour, as on the houses and demesne features themselves." In the Irish big-house tradition, encapsulating an interaction of character and place, man's spirit finds a focus and commitment to a numinous reality. That reality and the awareness of his minuteness and fragility in the large world of time and space pattern his relationships with others.

While in Bowen's Court, Bowen reconstructs the life of her ancestors as it shapes and is shaped by their country home in County Cork, in her autobiographical essays in *Seven Winters* and *Afterthought*, it is the city of Dublin whose scenes her memory retraces, revealing their imaginative imprint. Bowen was born in Dublin and lived there from late October to spring each year until her father's illness forced the departure of her and her mother for England. "I never looked up Sackville Street without pleasure, for I was told it was the widest street

in the world. Just as Phoenix Park, grey-green distance beyond the Zoo, was the largest park in the world."⁶ For Bowen, South Dublin, like the country big houses, boldly and broadly defined its spaces.

Her family life, like the city into which it merged, was spacious and ordered with daily walks to Upper Baginbun Street to buy small treasures in shops "where white cotton coats were worn . . . chalky clean, and sweet dry sawdust covered victuallers' floors . . . kind smiles came over the high counters . . . and almost everyone knew . . . [her] name" (p. 22). Or on other occasions there were walks to the Royal Dublin Society's empty grandstands to view from the top tiers an imagined performance of the August horse show, for which the family never returned to Dublin. Like the brass name plates viewed on the walks to Merrion Square, all "here stood for stability" (p. 34). The family worshipped at St. Stephen's Church in an "august and rational" (p. 48) service dominated by the "organ's controlled swell." The dancing lessons, visits to her mother's family at Mount Temple, the family friends from Trinity College, the Bar, and the Church of Ireland, the independence and quiet temperament of her parents—all enclosed her in an existence that reflected her father's "philosophic feeling for observance and form" (p. 49).

The mysterious, the threatening, existed only in the periphery, like the Dublin slums and Catholic religion about which she said she had an "almost sexual shyness" (p. 50). "In fact," she records, "the climactic moodiness of South Dublin (a bold Italianate town-plan in tricky Celtic light) must have existed only in my eye" (p. 34). The reader recalls her recording a few pages earlier that a piece of grit was blown into her eye on a walk with her governess; those feelings of "a malign temper at work" (p. 32), of a "definite threat," might be dismissed now but were to be felt later in her personal life as well as in the social life she shared with her contemporaries. As a child, the pattern of her life, as directly perceived, was the well-ordered, structured one of her family, but like the landscape surrounding the big houses, the landscape of Dublin just beyond her purview, which fleetingly touched her senses, reflected the forces of unreason, instability and neglect.

The Shelbourne Hotel, as she recreates its history in a book written in 1951, becomes another center of "style and well-conductedness" within a country known for its "distress, miscarried projects, enervated dreams and romantic gloom." For Bowen, "both its character and its place in the human pattern are important": "It stands for grandeur—which, in Ireland, we have not yet become ashamed to like. It stands for a certain social idea of life." Bowen explicitly connects the historical landscape of the Shelbourne during the Easter Uprising with that of post WWI Europe:

At that time, 1916, be it recalled, battles were associated with battlefields, not yet cities. To that extent, in