

**BRUISED BOYS AND “FALLEN” WOMEN:  
THE NEED FOR RESCUE IN SHORT STORIES BY ELIZABETH BOWEN**

*by Jeanette Shumaker*

John Halperin writes of the Anglo-Irish novelist Elizabeth Bowen that “Like James, she often took as her subject something only half glimpsed or understood, and thus suggestive” (45). Along similar lines, Richard Tillinghast states that “Not uncommonly in Bowen’s work, something that is never mentioned—or that is alluded to ten pages later—may be the most important thing that is going on” (27). In short stories such as “The Return” (1923), “Summer Night” (1941), and “Ivy Gripped the Steps” (1945), Bowen shows characters under the influence of illusions of which they are only partially aware. “The Return” and “Summer Night” concern adulteresses who cherish the illusion that romance will rescue them from banality. “Ivy Gripped the Steps” deals with a child’s similar belief, but also depicts the lasting damage that childhood disillusionment causes. Many critics see Bowen’s novels “as psychological studies that universalize the terror of modern alienation” (Lassner 3). Such alienation may stem from peer pressure, from unmet emotional needs, from fixations upon figures from the past, and especially from disappointed romantic illusions; alienation remains as relevant a theme as it was during Bowen’s lifetime. Whereas Bowen’s reputation as a novelist is secure, few critics have analyzed her short fiction (Lassner xi).

“The Return” features an affluent former adulteress who loses her illusions about love. Childless and in her early forties, Mrs. Tottenham receives a letter from the lover who had dominated her twenties, when she had recently married a philanderer. In those early years Mrs. Tottenham had delighted in her ability to eclipse other women in the eyes of attractive men like her former lover. Having left his wife and brought his children with him, her lover from long ago now hopes to rekindle his affair with Mrs. Tottenham. The story is narrated by Mrs. Tottenham’s disapproving, unmarried servant, Lydia Broadbent. Mrs. Tottenham’s long frustration with her marriage helps to account for her habitual irascibility with servants like Lydia, and also for Mrs. Tottenham’s interest in entertaining guests who might distract her. Although the couple’s sordid past is common knowledge, they are now regarded as generous, respectable hosts. Mr. Tottenham’s young nephew and heir follows his guardians’ example, living as dissolutely as they once did.

Mrs. Tottenham confides her worries about her lover’s return to Lydia: “I’ve got so ugly! . . . . It’s been so real to me, I couldn’t bear to lose him . . . . How can I have the heart to care when I couldn’t keep him caring?” (34). Mrs. Tottenham realizes that her only value to her lover was as a pleasing sight. Aging has therefore made her worthless. In her classic work about women in films, Laura Mulvey describes the power of the male gaze to define women; Mrs. Tottenham once gazed at herself with a masculine, evaluative eye, but now

realizes that she was mistaken. She finally sees that love should not depend upon looks.

Mrs. Tottenham's realization that she has lived on memories of a lover who never really cared for her causes her to burn his photograph. The photograph had let her play the game of gazing at her phantom lover while she imagined that he returned her approving look. Without his photograph, Mrs. Tottenham will no longer be able to fantasize about her lover rescuing her from her unhappy marriage.

Her new awareness of her illusions about her lover leads to a painful realization about the hollowness of her marriage. She tells Lydia that "My husband's been a bad man, too, but here we are, smirking and grinning at each other, just to keep hold of something we neither of us want" (34). Mrs. Tottenham is left with neither adultery nor marriage to hold onto, and with a sense of her beauty's decline. She has not built loyalty in a man who would cherish her for her personality, regardless of her looks; even her husband mocks her about the loss of her loveliness. Believing in the power of her beauty, Mrs. Tottenham neglected to make herself into a loving and lovable human being.

Mrs. Tottenham's burning of her lover's photograph earns her the narrator's respect at the story's end, if not Lydia's: "For all her frizzled hair and jingling ornaments and smudgy tentative cosmetics she was suddenly elemental and heroic . . . . The place was vibrant with the humanity of Mrs. Tottenham. It was as though a child had been born in the house" (34). The child is Mrs. Tottenham's integrity, which she had aborted seventeen years ago when her lover left. Instead of the Celtic goddess Medb's transformation from old hag into young beauty, Mrs. Tottenham experiences the opposite, with a similar holy effect. Rather than lauding youth and beauty, Bowen lauds the wisdom of middle age. "The Return" comes to mean not the return of her lover, but of Mrs. Tottenham's dignity.

In reaction to Mrs. Tottenham's misery, Lydia has her own galling epiphany: "She felt suddenly hard and priggish and immature" (34). That hardness keeps Lydia from feeling more than dismay at Mrs. Tottenham's grief. Bowen allows the "fallen" woman to become more praiseworthy than the respectable servant. Lydia lacks sympathy with the scandalous Mrs. Tottenham. Not only that, but Lydia also lacks tenderness for herself. Lydia views herself as split into two women—the obsequious paid companion and the idealist who feels contempt for the insincerity of the servile self. Yet Lydia's idealist side feels only fear of Mrs. Tottenham even though her mistress finally deserves respect. Like Mrs. Tottenham, then, Lydia has been living a lie, pretending to believe in "fine big truths" that she withdraws from when tested (32). Lydia becomes painfully aware of her own conventionality and narrowness.

Since the story ends with Mrs. Tottenham and Lydia facing their illusions about themselves, the reader gets not so much a sense of the two women's sterility as of their potential for growth. Mrs. Tottenham squarely faces her mistake of seeking a powerful lover to save her. Bowen argues that even uneducated women like Mrs. Tottenham can learn to avoid wasting their lives through indulging in fantasies of a romantic rescuer. Mrs. Tottenham's epiphany goes against the shallow lessons of her upbringing, for her mother had put her energies into enhancing her daughter's looks to prepare her for the marriage market. "The Return" is one of many of Bowen's stories and novels such as *The Death of the Heart* (1936) that criticize what Ann Owens Weekes calls "the culture and education that prepares them [young girls] only for love" (*Unveiling* 47). Whereas most of Bowen's treatments of this theme portray innocent, sensitive girls, "The Return" dramatizes what

happens to such a girl after a mercenary marriage leaves her unfulfilled.

Like Mrs. Tottenham, Emma, the adulteress in Bowen's "Summer Night," feels disappointed in love. Emma's punishment for adultery is to have her illusions about passion shattered. For Emma finds out that she is "being settled down to as calmly as he [her lover] might have settled down to a meal" (328). Carol Gilligan's notion that most women develop themselves through relationships suggests why Emma looks for meaning in her affair. She is married to a man who is too ill—mentally—to fully respond emotionally or sexually. Like Emma Bovary, her namesake, Bowen's twentieth-century Irish adulteress seeks a fairytale fulfillment through romance that neither her war-traumatized husband nor her experienced lover can provide ("Summer Night" 330). Emma may be seen as fitting the "Cinderella Complex" described by Colette Dowling in that Emma wants a powerful lover to save her from the despair and ennui of her marriage to a war-shattered major. Although she discovers that her lover can't or won't rescue her, she takes no steps to save herself.<sup>1</sup>

Emma's long drive to her lover Robinson's house is described in terms of her car's freedom, which stands for the driver's: without a family to carry, the car can move much faster, as "emptiness seemed to levitate it" (297); similarly, Emma's mood rises while she speeds along. Di, Emma's daughter, notes that her mother, unlike their Aunt Fran, "likes things to happen" (316). Emma is not willing to merely imitate the Madonna by nurturing her children and her emotionally damaged husband. She also wants to live for herself.

Emma's other daughter, Vivie, echoes her mother's desire for freedom when she uses colored chalk to tattoo her body with snakes. Dressed only in chalk tattoos like a Celt from eons past, Vivie bounces on her absent mother's bed until her elderly great-aunt Fran wraps her in a comforter: "only the prisoner's dark eyes, so like her mother's, were left free to move wildly" (320). The Major's Aunt Fran then abases herself for Vivie's sins, as well as for Emma's, her own, and those of humanity in general. Meanwhile, Vivie's mother, similarly constrained by shame over her lawless behavior, "sat crouching in her crouching car" in front of her lover's house, until his friends, Queenie and Justin, leave (326).

As Aunt Fran had disapproved of Vivie's nakedness, so Aunt Fran was shocked that Emma left their house without wearing stockings. Emma's bare legs, like Vivie's naked, decorated body, stand for a desire to be free of the shame over the female body that keeps women like Aunt Fran kneeling in constant humiliation. Marina Warner describes the primary effect of the Madonna myth on women such as Aunt Fran: "By setting up an impossible ideal the cult of the Virgin does drive the adherent into a position of acknowledged and hopeless yearning and inferiority" (337). Guilt-ridden Irish Catholicism, represented by Aunt Fran, contrasts with the joyous primitivism of the Celts; Celtic culture abounded with colorfully decorated bodies like Vivie's and powerful, promiscuous goddesses whom Emma unsuccessfully emulates. Emma is unsuccessful in part because she is contaminated by Aunt Fran's Christian ideology of feminine self-denial. Emma's urge to forget herself ties in with her desire for a potent being to whom to dedicate herself—a desire Aunt Fran tries to fulfill through prayer, and Emma, through adultery.

Emma regrets that her selfish tendencies make her seem "not good" to her children, who were raised on Aunt Fran's notions about ideally selfless women (330). Emma laments her children's disapproval of her, telling Robinson that it is one reason for their affair. It is ironic that the children's rejection of Emma makes her into the rebel that they dimly sense she may be. In her children's disapproval of Emma are the seeds of rejection of the "other"

woman that Julia Kristeva argues means rejection of the mother. For if the daughter sees herself as uniquely important like the Virgin, her mother must fall short; the cycle of female rivalry begins. The daughter who prohibits her mother's *jouissance*, is, to Kristeva, a modern Electra standing up for the father's restrictions upon the mother ("About Chinese Women"). Emma not only violates her husband's authority, but also her daughters', who are his allies. Like Kristeva, Luce Irigaray longs to overcome daughters' typical denial of their mothers' right to *jouissance*: "We must give her [the mother] the right to pleasure, to *jouissance*, to passion, restore her to speech, and sometimes, to cries and anger" ("Bodily Encounter" 43). Emma is searching for all of these, against her daughters', husband's, and Aunt Fran's wishes. Unfortunately, Kristeva's *jouissance* of the lover eludes the too demanding Emma, as the *jouissance* of the mystic eludes the too needy Aunt Fran.

As Aunt Fran rejects Emma as immoral—"other"—Emma rejects Aunt Fran as too old, as "other" in a different sense. Believing that her need to escape Aunt Fran is another reason for her affair, Emma feels frustrated with the conventionality that the elderly woman tries to teach Emma's daughters in her effort to overcome their likeness to their rebellious mother. Emma utilizes Kristeva's superior woman myth against Aunt Fran just as the old lady uses it to turn Emma's daughters against their mother by appealing to their self-righteous vanity.

The Major's preoccupation with the war seems the primary reason for Emma's affair, although Emma pretends that other reasons are more important. In this way Emma denies the extreme painfulness of her husband's distance from her. According to Carol Gilligan, separation from loved ones is women's biggest fear. The Major long ago separated from Emma emotionally. But because the Major suffers from war-induced trauma and not a willed absence from intimacy, Emma cannot blame him for his distance. Leaving the Major would seem cruel given his circumstances and the ages of the children, yet Emma's emotional and sexual needs are not being met. Emma faces the kind of moral dilemma that Gilligan describes: Emma could give up her needs like Aunt Fran does in traditional feminine fashion, but instead Emma tries to balance her own needs with those of her family. Gilligan writes that when interdependence rather than dependence becomes the goal "the notion of care expands from the paralyzing injunction not to hurt others to an injunction to act responsively toward self and others and thus to sustain connection" (149). Such balancing of needs necessitates the contextual thinking that Gilligan says women tend to use, rather than judging by absolutes. Adultery, which is immoral when considered as an absolute, is less so when looked at as the alternative to a marital breakup in Emma's situation.

Contextual thinking leads Emma to her liaison, then to a realization that adultery is not the answer to her problems, for illicit passion is not love. Yet having gone so far with her liaison, Emma persists; that persistence creates her brief, strange martyrdom to her impossible desires. Emma is thus not as free from the compulsion towards feminine sacrifice as she might wish. Bowen suggests that rebels like Emma can easily make the mistake of copying what they are rejecting—in this case, the self-denial embodied by Aunt Fran.

Emma is paralyzed by her realization that her lover will not rescue her. Justin is also paralyzed by a similar disappointment in Robinson, but for different reasons. Like Joyce's Stephen Dedalus, Justin regards his too-restricted lifestyle as part of a general cultural paralysis. Paralysis makes the reader think of the Major, Emma's husband, who is nearly

immobilized due to the pain of his memories. Justin tells Robinson that hopefully the war will awaken their culture into “a new form of thinking and feeling” (307). But the Major awakened from battle terror into paralysis. And the war awakened Emma into a questionable new feeling, an adulterous passion for Robinson that ultimately paralyzes her as well. Aunt Fran, too, may be seen as paralyzed—by self-loathing caused by her religion’s view of women as lowly. The story provides glimpses of diverse forms of cultural paralysis that afflict adults during a single Irish summer night. Bowen implies that Justin’s view of his culture as paralyzed is correct, but that the paralysis will not be cured by the war, as Justin hopes. As Phyllis Lassner observes, the story “personifies a world that is as ambivalent about trusting order as it is about seeking change” (102); from such ambivalence, cultural paralysis grows.

Justin, resembling Emma, yearns for more than a monkish life. Similar to Emma and Aunt Fran, Justin restlessly seeks an ideal passionate attachment that would give meaning to his life by making him forget himself. Whereas Aunt Fran turns to God, Justin and Emma turn to Robinson as their love object. Like Emma, Justin is attracted by Robinson’s open-mindedness and ease, though ultimately disappointed by his imperviousness. For unlike Justin and Emma, Robinson is no seeker. Justin writes to Robinson of his rendezvous with Emma that “Tomorrow . . . you will feel fine, but you will not know any more about love” (333). Perhaps Robinson already knows too much about passion; Emma suspects that as a practiced seducer, he can no longer truly feel. That makes Robinson yet another example of emotional paralysis. The story leaves it open as to whether Aunt Fran will be able to get more satisfaction from an absent God than Emma can from a spiritually absent lover and Justin can from a shallow friend.

Oddly, it is the sexually naive Queenie, Justin’s deaf sister, who knows more about love than Robinson, Emma, Aunt Fran, and Justin do. She has made “the nothing or everything” of her one date as a young girl into “an everything” (335); that date continues to be the source of her romantic fantasies as a middle-aged woman. By contrast, Emma betrays her husband even though she suspects that adultery will not satisfy her yearnings for intimacy and passion. Emma is making the supposed “everything” of marital fidelity into the “nothing” of empty adultery. Only Queenie is able to preserve her romantic dreams through fantasizing about Emma’s lover, Robinson. That may be because Queenie doesn’t expect that her fantasies will ever come true.

Queenie’s querulous brother Justin notes that Queenie’s deafness insulates her in her own “solitary and almost fairylike world” (303). Queenie does not want to be rescued from that world, whereas Emma’s need for a savior destroys her romantic illusions. The irony is that Queenie is much happier than Emma, even though she lacks Emma’s experiences of marriage, motherhood, and adultery. Unlike Aunt Fran, Queenie is not the traditional, bitter “old maid.” Queenie is described as “almost without an ‘I,’” with a self-forgetfulness that is not the self-abnegation of Aunt Fran, but rather, freedom from egotism (334). The story ends with Queenie’s innocent fantasies of love; this is the only possible happy ending for the story given the personalities of the other adult characters. Perhaps it is Queenie’s passionate nature that gives the story its intensity.<sup>2</sup> “Contemplative, wishless” Queenie escapes the stereotypical doom of women who either emulate the Virgin, like Aunt Fran, or rebel against her, like Emma (334). But the irony is that Queenie gains her freedom through a kind of arrested development caused by her deafness. Queenie’s deafness is both

a disability and an advantage, since it narrows her life choices but emancipates her mind. Deafness keeps Queenie immune from being socialized into the demand for a rescuer that pressures Emma, the energetic mother, and her tired helper, the old aunt, just as it does Justin, the lonely scholar. Bowen suggests that the paths of adultery, piety, and study may likewise lead to disappointment, if taking them stems from wishing for a savior. Although Emma's epiphany about the meaninglessness of adultery should keep her from making the same mistake again, Emma's need for a savior may next lead her to guiltily abase herself before God, cultivating a new romantic illusion in the style of Aunt Fran.

Bowen wrote the more optimistic story about the lessons of adultery, "The Return," earlier in her life. "Summer Night" suggests that one's need for rescue can motivate not only illicit passion, but religious fervor: Emma and Aunt Fran are two sides of the same coin. Nonetheless, in both "The Return" and "Summer Night" the heroines learn that their affairs stemmed from marital problems that they might have at least partially resolved had they not expected their lovers to rescue them. As an upper-class Protestant concentrating upon affluent Catholics and Protestants, Bowen does not depict the severe social pressure on "fallen" women that Irish Catholic writers such as Edna O'Brien and Mary Lavin do in stories about working-class women such as "A Scandalous Woman" and "Sarah."

On the surface, "Summer Night" criticizes constricting Irish mores like Aunt Fran's, and dramatizes the damaging effects of war on men like the Major. Paralysis is the story's overarching theme. However, looking at the story through the lens of feminist thought, we see that Bowen highlights a particular cause of paralysis—the need for a rescuer to whom women can entrust their passion, be it sexual or religious. Bowen earlier handled that theme less complexly through focusing exclusively on adultery in "The Return." Both stories portray disappointed female passion and broken romantic illusions with exemplary candor. They also fit what Thomas Dukes says of Bowen's novels: "Bowen creates marriages that gloss over nothing" (12). The marriages in "The Return" and "Summer Night" are damaged by the romantic illusions that each wife holds, as well as by inadequate husbands.

Not only women are subject to unrealistic dreams of a romantic savior who will rescue them from their unsatisfactory circumstances. Whereas Justin, the bitterly disappointed romantic, is a minor character in "Summer Night," Bowen focuses upon a boy's dreams of rescue in "Ivy Gripp'd the Steps." The story depicts the growth of that dreaming boy into an isolated man who is obsessed with a widow who died during his childhood. Widowed Mrs. Nicholson's friendship with the young Gavin is dramatized through the memories of the adult Gavin. He visits her deserted house during WWII, nearly thirty years after her death in 1912. Gavin's memories of glamorous Lilian Nicholson are poignantly described in what Angus Wilson calls Bowen's "finest story" (10). From the age of eight, Gavin Doddington is sent to visit Mrs. Nicholson, his mother's school friend, so that the sea air can benefit his fragile health. Wealthy Mrs. Nicholson exposes the boy to luxury for the first time. However, Gavin is troubled by Mrs. Nicholson's passionate flirtation with a married admiral. Mrs. Nicholson dies of an illness when Gavin is ten, taking her place "among the stigmata of his extreme youth" (688).

Through hindsight that grants knowledge of the widow's early death, the reader sees that Mrs. Nicholson's "preoccupation" with the married Admiral Concannon wasted the few years that she had left. As Thomas Dukes states of the heroines of Bowen's novels, "women are less victims of circumstances than of their own needs and desires" (22); this is

true of Mrs. Nicholson. Rather gratuitously, the Admiral advises Mrs. Nicholson to be “happy” in their friendship when he contends that adultery is a vile enterprise that he would never undertake (707). Apparently, Mrs. Nicholson had fantasized that the Admiral’s sickly wife might die, leaving him free to remarry. Ironically, the hardy Mrs. Nicholson is the one who dies, with her hopes of being rescued from widowhood destroyed.

As Mrs. Nicholson squanders her passion on an impossible, forbidden love, so does Gavin. With the adult Gavin visualizing Mrs. Nicholson during his own early middle age, the reader falls under the illusion of regarding them as contemporaries. Gavin might have courted the widow if fate had matched their generations. Instead, little Gavin resents the tall Admiral, whose age is appropriate but marital status is not—the reverse of Gavin’s own predicament. “Ivy” portrays Gavin’s courtly love for the indifferent Mrs. Nicholson as a destructive passion. The courtly love movement began through worship of the Virgin during the Middle Ages, according to Marina Warner and Julia Kristeva, who have written separate, influential works on Madonna myth.<sup>3</sup> For Gavin, Mrs. Nicholson is as distant and perfect as the Madonna herself. Lilian’s beautiful clothes, leisurely days, and richly cushioned rooms create a glamorous image that contrasts with that of Gavin’s threadbare, hard-working parents and chilly, ill-furnished house. Of course, Lilian and all she represents transfix the boy, making him realize the squalor of his own life. Visits to her rescue him from that squalor; he longs never to return home. Like a pilgrim, he goes to Lilian to escape the mundane by worshipping the grace and loveliness conjured by her name.

Unfortunately, the longterm effect of Gavin’s obsession with Mrs. Nicholson is to cripple his emotional development; courtly love poisons him metaphorically while it literally kills the widow. Mrs. Nicholson and the Admiral portray a kind of courtly love in retaining the honor of chaste lovers of old; but the story asks, for what purpose? Rather unwillingly, Mrs. Nicholson keeps herself unstained like Rapunzel in a tower until the widow becomes a dead relic. Gavin worships her from an even greater distance than that existing between her and the Admiral, and continues his worship long after both Lilian and the Admiral have died. His living death complements the actual death of the other two.

Bowen’s flashback technique highlights Mrs. Nicholson’s lifelong effect on Gavin; for though few of the people in Lilian’s neighborhood in 1940 have heard of the elegant widow, Gavin continues to be taken with his memory of her. A girl whom Gavin meets at the story’s end guesses that emotional damage has been done to Gavin, seeing him as “a whole stopped mechanism for feeling” (711). Of course, the girl does not know that the cause of Gavin’s paralysis is his absorption with the woman who had regarded him as a substitute for a pet dog. Overhearing Mrs. Nicholson say that she saw him so had broken the boy’s heart; the adult Gavin’s heart remains torn.

As an adult, Gavin pursues many brief affairs instead of anything substantial, much as Mrs. Nicholson did when flirting with the Admiral. The girl at the story’s end recognizes something “wolfish” in Gavin’s face, but notes that “preyers are preyed upon” (711). This suggests another parallel between Gavin and Mrs. Nicholson. Mrs. Nicholson’s exploitative attitude towards young persons like Gavin is amplified by Gavin the adult, who, at the story’s end, regards the girl “with calculation” (711). Gavin wishes to pick up the girl to use her for his entertainment; he is sexually exploitative of women today because he was “preyed upon” emotionally by one long ago.<sup>4</sup>

The flashback technique serves an additional function of juxtaposing the two painful

World War periods with the tranquil pre-war era. Before World War I, Gavin spent idyllic weeks with Mrs. Nicholson in prosperous Seastone. However, the Admiral marred their days with his dour predictions of impending war. The widow angrily denied the possibility of war, partly out of loyalty to Germany, where she and Gavin's mother attended finishing school. Neither did Mrs. Nicholson know that she would die before WWI, nor that WWII would come after it—two tragic disputes with her beloved Germany. Dying in 1912, Mrs. Nicholson becomes, through Bowen's flashback technique, an emblem of a lost world that believed in civility between people and nations. Nevertheless, in Mrs. Nicholson's case, civility was a veneer over selfishness; perhaps that could be so for her class in general, whose economic interests both wars defended at the cost of innumerable lives.<sup>5</sup> The Admiral becomes the emblem of pre-war values too, specifically of the renunciation of improper desires. Yet he, like Mrs. Nicholson, is not as admirable as he first appears. He leads Mrs. Nicholson on for many months before dismissing her when she confesses her feelings for him. What has changed between the Admiral's prime and Gavin's is that postures of nobility are no longer required. Consequently, Gavin boldly follows the girl at the end of the story.

The "ivy" of the title suggests the abandonment of past customs by Gavin's generation, along with England's economic decline under war expenses that has turned Seastone from a well-kept resort town into a seedy army billet. Heather Bryant Jordan believes that the ivy stands for the strangling effect of the two wars upon Seastone, and perhaps upon Britain as a whole (146). The profusion of the ivy also suggests Gavin's overgrown obsession with the past—his dwelling upon the hurt inflicted upon him by Mrs. Nicholson at the cost of his present life. He projects his sense of being smothered by his memories of Mrs. Nicholson into a belief that her house is being strangled by ivy.

Gavin regards the widow's house with a skepticism that resembles Bowen's attitude towards the English, according to the contemporary Irish novelist, William Trevor: "She came to know England well, but always wrote about the English from an angle which suggests a stranger on the edge of a circle of friends" (171). Like Gavin, Bowen observes changing English society from an outsider's critical perspective. Bowen's disillusionment with and alienation from English culture stems from her Anglo-Irish identity. However, Gary Davenport observes that "To the casual reader, one of the least conspicuous things about the late Elizabeth Bowen is her Irish nationality" (27).<sup>6</sup> Not surprisingly then, "Summer Night" is the only story of the three treated here that focuses upon Irish characters and society.

Despite the attention placed upon Bowen's English traits, critics have discussed the influence of Bowen's Irish background upon all of her novels and stories, even those not set in Ireland. For example, Howard Moss sees the adults exploitation of children in such stories as "Ivy" as mirroring the colonial relationship between the English and the Irish (128). In addition, even when Bowen's stories are set in England, they reflect the complexity of perception that Anglo-Irishness encourages. As Richard Tillinghast explains, "How complicated questions of identity were for the Anglo-Irish, who thought of themselves as Irish, while to their tenants they were 'the English'" (27). Bowen's questioning of English values is characteristically Irish, but she depicts such values with authenticity because she lived in England among the English. The converse is true when she depicts Irish values with some skepticism along with deep knowledge. In other words, Bowen writes from both the insider's and the outsider's positions when she portrays England and Ireland.

From the point of view of theorists such as Emily Hicks and Gloria Anzaldúa, Bowen could be considered a border writer because of her dual identity—both Irish and English. Hicks says that border writing is characterized by “the ability to see not just from one side of a border, but from the other side as well” (xxiii). Bowen’s double perspective allows her to illuminate characters’ disillusionment when seeking an impossible rescue from a rapidly changing society that alienates them.

Although Anzaldúa specifically analyzes the Chicana who is caught between Anglo, Mexican, and Native American traditions, Bowen can be seen to be in a comparable, if less vexed and impoverished, position. Bowen’s double perspective resembles that of the “mestiza” described by Anzaldúa: “Straddling . . . cultures and their value systems, la mestiza undergoes a struggle of flesh, a struggle of borders, an inner war . . . cultural collision” (78). Such a cultural collision reflects “a larger creative process: cultural shifts” (74) that engender “mental and emotional states of perplexity. The mestiza’s dual or multiple personality is plagued by psychic restlessness” (78). Like Bowen, her protagonists suffer “psychic restlessness” that stems from the “cultural shifts” produced by capitalistic industrialism plus two world wars, and, in “Summer Night,” by the collision between Irish Catholic puritanism, Celtic primitivism, and English decadence.

When the mestiza comes to terms with her restlessness, she can achieve “a more whole perspective, one that includes rather than excludes” (Anzaldúa 79). Mrs. Tottenham and Queenie achieve that wholeness of viewpoint to a certain extent, though Gavin and Emma do not. Bowen’s stories tend to end on a defeated note of pain rather than on one of triumphant psychological integration. Bowen’s pessimism resembles that of other modern Irish fiction writers such as Joyce, Sean and Julia O’Faolain, Jennifer Johnston, William Trevor, Brian Moore, Bernard Mac Laverty, and Mary Lavin.

The pessimism of modern Irish stories is consistent with the views of Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guaitari, who consider Irish literature to be one of the “minor” literatures created by colonized peoples. Deleuze and Guaitari write that “A minor literature doesn’t come from a minor language; it is rather that which a minority constructs within a major language” (16). Bowen does not exhibit the overt political agenda that some writers of minor literature do, but she does often write from the disillusioned, alienated perspective about England as a “major” colonial nation that characterizes the author of minor literature.

As well as Bowen’s Anglo-Irishness, another source for her understanding of disillusionment and consequent alienation is her traumatic childhood. Mary Jarrett writes that “Elizabeth Bowen suffered feelings of dislocation and betrayal as a child from the lies told to her about her father’s mental breakdown and her mother’s cancer” (71). Tragedies were compounded by lies that adults chose to tell the young Bowen. Ghosts haunt Gavin as symbols of the childhood betrayals he cannot forget. His disillusionment occurred while he was a child, too young to cope with it; it has left him stunted as an adult. Bowen shows that painful epiphanies can dignify middle-aged women like Mrs. Tottenham, but they can overwhelm children like Gavin who are not yet ready to face the truth.<sup>7</sup>

Bowen chronicled the psychological issues of her war-torn era, according to Heather Bryant Jordan. Angus Wilson calls Bowen one of the two writers who best dramatized London during the blitz of World War II (7). Bowen’s stories of disillusionment and alienation transcend the individual’s experience to portray the conflicts of her time—not only of a shaken England, but of a changing Ireland and a divided Europe that continue to

struggle with alienation and the tyranny of illusions.

## NOTES

1. Mary Jarrett notes that forms of imprisonment are Bowen's central concern (73). For example, Emma is imprisoned by her husband's tragic situation, but also by her high expectations of what illicit romance should mean.
2. According to Heather Bryant Jordan, "Summer Night's" intensity about sexuality and emotion recalls fiction by D.H. Lawrence (144).
3. Both Julia Kristeva's "Stabat Mater" and Marina Warner's *Alone of All Her Sex* examine the myth of the Virgin Mary from a feminist perspective, meditating upon its significance during different historical periods, including the Middle Ages.
4. A.C. Partridge wrote that "In her use of the short story, Elizabeth Bowen indicates most economically how Edwardian wealth could strangle human values" (180). That is what happens to Gavin under the influence of Mrs. Nicholson's calculating charms.
5. Phyllis Lassner observes that "this story is ringed by two world wars, but the characters' dispossession and losses place them in a wider historical process" (91). She sees Mrs. Nicholson's society "as a metaphor for Anglo-Ireland, not just English gentility" (92). Lassner's interpretation of "Ivy" is in keeping with her view of Bowen's short fiction as centrally concerned with the conflicts between her own Irish and English heritages.
6. Gearoid Cronin reports that Bowen has been "identified with the almost constitutionally English tradition of the comedy of manners and social satire" (144). "The Return," "Summer Night," and "Ivy" do contain a few satirical elements but are too dark to be called comedies of manners. Swift, the great satirist, was Anglo-Irish like Bowen, and like her, has been accused of misanthropy.
7. The sources for Bowen's depiction of disillusionment and alienation include modernism, psychology, and impressionism. As has been noted by many critics, Bowen's dense, elliptical style recalls that of Henry James. Lassner, for example, contends that Bowen's ambiguous language and her view that the short story should be suggestive and impressionistic come from James (119). See John Bayley's study of the interconnections between writers of the short story such as Bowen, Joyce, James, Kipling, and Hardy. Her occasional use of the stream of consciousness technique has roots in modern psychology and echoes Joyce, Lawrence, and especially Virginia Woolf. Her impressionistic style not only comes from literary influences, but that of painting

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