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The Haunted House in Paris:

How Elizabeth Bowen's Use of Gothic Elements Ultimately Elevates Her Novel, *The House in Paris*

Elizabeth Bowen's use of gothic elements in her modernist novel, *The House in Paris*, allows her novel to feel surprisingly intimate as she ventures beyond superficial dark and eerie aesthetics and instead uses these gothic elements as tools to create a personal connection. In other words, by analyzing how and why Bowen uses gothic elements, we are able to uncover how she crafts such an intimate and personal narrative. There are three main elements that this essay will focus on. The first being the child's perspective. The "haunted house" setting allows the reader to truly see the world through the eyes of a child. The second being that the gothic elements also give the characters greater depth as the tropes they are assigned to generate another layer to be analyzed. And finally, the idea of houses, homes, and the personal belongings that reside within those walls all carry a sense of longing and haunting that further adds an undercurrent of nostalgia and, ultimately, melancholy. From a modernist perspective, it would be all too easy to dismiss the gothic elements of *The House in Paris* as mere aesthetics. However, by using gothic elements, Bowen is being all the more so modern. It is her self-awareness, knowledge of the past, and practical implication of these elements that allow her to not only craft this carefully weaved story, but also distinguishes herself as a writer.

### Part 1: Children's Perspective

The first effective use of the gothic elements in Bowen's *The House in Paris* is the reimagining of the world through the child's perspective. By experiencing a pseudo-supernatural haunted house, the reader is able to fully see the world through a child's eye.

“Turning warningly at the foot of the steep stairs Miss Fisher put a finger to her lips, to remind Henrietta someone was ill somewhere. So up they crept like thieves. You saw no windows; the hall and stairs were undraughty, lit by electric light. The inside of this house – with its shallow door-panels, lozenge door-knobs, polished brass ball on the end of the banisters, stuffy red matt paper with stripes so artfully shadowed as to appear bars – was more than simply novel to Henrietta, it was antagonistic, as though it had been invented to put her out. She felt the house was acting, nothing seemed to be natural; objects did not wait to be seen but came crowding in on her, each with what amounted to its aggressive cry. Bumped all over the senses by these impressions, Henrietta thought: If this is being abroad . . .” (Bowen. *The House in Paris*. 11)

There is a sense of fear and anxiety, but also wonder that is elevated to hypersensitive levels.

When the reader reads the passages from the children's perspective, they themselves should feel once again the innocence of a child. To experience the time spent in the Fisher house through the eyes of Henrietta and Leopold allows the reader to believe in magic once more. Even if the setting is gothic, fantasy and magic is still magic. The world comes crashing down when we step out of the child's perspective, regain the adult vision, and see that it is not a wicked witch antagonizing us but those we know. Bowen's prose takes the reader back to a time when the unknown, the inexplicable, and all adult related matters could be explained with the supernatural rather than reality; a time in which it is much easier to believe in a mad witch than a borderline sociopathic socialite, such as Mme Fisher. The blending of the gothic with themes of childhood innocence comes across naturally as Bowen channels a sense of nostalgia that is inherently tied to childhood. And this nostalgia ultimately leads to melancholy. That is to say, to feel like a child again creates a sense of melancholic nostalgia.

These sorrowful undertones tie together with the rest of the novel's melancholic nature and, furthermore, they relate to Bowen's own sentiments towards childhood. In her essay titled, "The Cult of Nostalgia," Bowen's states this about childhood. "...that time of any life seems to have been both simple and dramatic; and also this was a time of fresh, sharp and pure sensation" (98). Thinking on the idea of childhood being both "simple and dramatic," as well as it being a "time of fresh and pure sensation," we have already seen one moment when this manifests in Henrietta as the house seems to come alive for her. However, it is especially true if we contrast with the adults of the story and how they no longer experience Madame Fisher's house in Paris as an enchanted place. During the time Karen Michalis spent at the Fisher house as an eighteen-year-old young woman, she is not haunted nor enchanted by anything that seems mystical but rather, the inverse. Karen is drawn to the real-world things that one tends to be interested in when reaching an older age. Her attraction to Max is the proof that shows Mme Fisher's house is not a place of mysticism for her or adults. In this house, Karen essentially transitions into adulthood. As Timothy Dow Adams explains, "For Karen's inner timing is off: her traditional life has stunted her development and the inborn vulgarity, nurtured by the evil of Madame Fisher's house..." (51). For Karen, it is a very real evil, not fantasy. Karen is at the age when she no longer is interested in dolls, dress-ups, and other playthings. She no longer believes in fairy tales, fantasies, or ghost stories. Instead, she is interested in matters of an adult. Studying, soirées, and relationships. And so, contrasting Karen's late teen/young adult experience with that of the children, it is evident to see how these two differ. For one is filled with childlike wonder, dread, and heightened emotions. The other is characterized by less fantastical feelings, more mature emotions, and the experience of adulthood beginning to bloom. This contrast allows us to appreciate why the gothic elements are so important in defining the perspective of the children.

For it allows the reader to feel small once more and be afraid of all the wrong things. What is frightening is the torn wallpapers and shadowed hallways and what one is oblivious to is all the secrets kept by the adults.

## Part II: The Character's and Their Tropes

The second concept of the gothic elements from Elizabeth Bowen's *The House in Paris* is how these elements give greater depth to the characters. Beneath a layer of superficiality lies a fully-fledged person and yet it is that layer, that gothic trope, that also colors in said person. It melds with their personality and gives greater depth. What Bowen does is she sets up these stereotypes, these tropes, these archetypes and then she plays with them or breaks them entirely. What is left is a more nuanced, realistic character in an equally nuanced and realistic world. With this she separates herself from being a sort of neo-gothic writer but a genuine modern writer as she is not taking the assigned tropes seriously but rather using them as a means to her style and narrative. The gothic tropes help uniform her world as a somber, grey, passionless world wherein the present is in the aftermath of something terrible. Almost acting like a scholar, Bowen reaches into the past and it is through a self-aware knowledge of past gothic writing that Bowen creates these tropes and applies them to the modern era.

Beginning with the more obvious example, Madame Fisher: the madwoman in the upper level of the house. In other words, the madwoman in the attic. She is also a sort of witch type of character. Madame Fisher is terrifying, frightening, manipulative, chilling, and she holds some kind of power. All things the mad woman / witch should be. Bowen is right to assign her this trope. Mme Fisher is described to be as much: "Henrietta felt that pillow was all eyes. Mme Fisher's unmoved regard was a battery: with an unconscious quiver Henrietta drew in her chin. If

she was really dying her head would be flat, she thought. She felt every hair she had, and every freckle, every red bone button down her stomach stand out with frightening meaning..."

(Bowen. *The House in Paris*. 39). It is briefly worth mentioning how this also relates to the earlier section of the essay, the child's perspective, it allows Henrietta to see a creature-type monster in Mme Fisher rather than the reality of her being a vile, abusive person. The cleverness and gracefulness of Bowen's writing is that life could be easier if we could simply believe a madwoman / witch were causing trouble amongst us. But there is not. Real-life is far more complicated and nuanced. The reality is that terrifying, frightening, manipulative, chilling, individuals who hold some kind of power do exist, except they are human just like the rest of us, they are people we know and may be close to.

Naomi Fisher is assigned the trope of a sort of shade / familiar / ghostly figure in the shadows who serves a master. She is timid, submissive, somewhat omnipresent yet also caring though emotionally tormented. "He broke Naomi's heart.' She [Mme Fisher] mentioned this impatiently, as though it had been some annoying domestic mishap. Henrietta, glancing across the bed, saw Miss Fisher's eyelids glued down with pain. Then, with the air of having known all along this would come, the helpless daughter rolled up her knitting quickly, as though to terminate something, perhaps the pretence of safety, jabbing her needles through it with violent calm" (Bowen. *The House in Paris*. 45-46). The portrait of a hollowed, shadow-like servant helps the reader empathize with her. Again, it would be easy to compartmentalize and ignore this sad ghoulish being if she were just a supernatural spirit yet because she is a true, flesh and blood, emotionally abused, broken-hearted woman, then we feel her great pain almost twice over. By setting Naomi as a hollow, ghost-like servant trope and then bringing the reader away from the genuine gothic and into the modern era, it ultimately creates an understanding of the character

with minimal efforts. Setting these tropes allows Bowen to effectively get the reader to feel Naomi's sadness by doing half the work, because we know what to already expect from such a trope. It is also worth mentioning once again the child's perspective. Towards the beginning of the novel Naomi is almost a guardian of the home. The children are unnerved around her presence at first. "'Hush!' exclaimed Henrietta, sitting back suddenly. 'Somebody's coming. Miss Fisher's coming downstairs.'" (Bowen. *The House in Paris*. 25) Yet by the end she is the closest thing either child has to a mother figure throughout the story. It is most noticeably seen in the peculiar scene where she says goodbye to the children alongside Ray. "Instead of shaking hands or bending down to kiss him, she put out her right hand gently to touch his face... She looked into his eyes that were still to see so much, and at his lips, consideringly and gently, as though she could be no enemy of anything they could say. Leopold's upturned face remained during these moments thoughtless and pure..." (Bowen. *The House in Paris*. 259-260) At this moment, they are almost a picture-perfect family. And here, Bowen also shows the reader most plainly how she breaks beyond trope writing. Naomi herself is shown as much more than a weak and hollowed half-living person, she shows the tenderness of a mother-figure.

Hopefully by now the idea of "trope-building" and "trope-breaking" is more evident, yet there are still other characters worth examining. Such as Karen Michalis who haunts both the present-day and past narratives of *The House in Paris*. Karen's presence is obvious to any reader, despite never appearing except for in the past, Karen is the centerpiece of the narrative. When we look at her through a gothic perspective, her trope is that of a ghost. Bowen seems to acknowledge as much as Max clearly states to Karen, "You still exist in that house – haunt it, if you prefer..." (Bowen. *The House in Paris*. 116). She lingers in the thoughts of others, her memory haunts the Fisher house in Paris, and she remains an elusive desire to her son. "Yes, his

mother refused to come; she would not lend herself to him. He had cast her, but she refused her part. She was not, then, the creature of thought... So she lived outside himself; she was alive truly..." (Bowen. *The House in Paris*. 216).

The characters of Henrietta and Leopold also play their roles in this sort of gothic pantheon. For Henrietta and Leopold together are children without parents, they are the unwatched and unwanted orphaned children. They are two kids who come from different families and countries and worlds entirely and yet both are displaced. Both children have at least one parent who is dead. Both are young children who must be uprooted and moved around without a permanent sense of home (an idea elaborated on later).

Individually, Henrietta has her own trope. As referred to by R. B. Kershner Jr., Henrietta is Karen's double. In his analysis, he states, "Only when her young double, Henrietta, escapes from Mme. Fisher's house is Karen finally freed" (421).

Leopold himself also has a role to play. It could be argued that, because of his present and future, he is the most important character in the story. Despite the novel beginning with Henrietta and despite most of the novel revolving around Karen, it is Leopold who is the focus of the present and it is Leopold whose lineage is mostly discussed. Who he is and the truth of his nature is kept secret from him. In this way, Leopold is almost like a prophesized hero or an abandoned child who lives with a relative / boarding school. In being so, he partially breaks away from gothic tropes into something a bit more mythical. His "uniqueness" is most evident when comparing the scene of Henrietta's visit with Mme Fisher with Leopold's visit with Mme Fisher. Henrietta's scene is far shorter, less intimate, and far less dramatic. Leopold's scene with Mme Fisher ends with him delivering this dramatic internal monologue, "At Spezia when I am angry I go full of smoke inside, but when you make me angry I see everything... Nothing makes

me belong to them. Open your eyes again; make me see what I saw. You said I was not the young man with the sword, but –” (Bowen. *The House in Paris*. 234). Of course, in the end, Leopold is just a boy. We see how starved he is for maternal affection as he cherishes Henrietta’s English Newspaper just because it is English, like his mother. “The Strand Magazine had looked a gold mine to Leopold... he lay over the magazine on one elbow, turning over the pages with quick brown hands as though he had England here” (Bowen. *The House in Paris*. 28).

Both the characters of Max and Ray are also worth briefly discussing as Max and Ray fit into two very different tropes. Max being the impassioned lover who takes his own life in a fit of passion, almost like someone out of a Brontë novel. His suicide provides a sense of gravitas. As Neil Corcoran states, “*The House in Paris* is a novel full of blood, imagined as much as real” (39).

As for Ray, R. B. Kershner, Jr. insightfully explains, “If there is a hint of melodrama in Karen's affair with Max, there is a suggestion of the deus ex machina resolution in Forrestier's Gordian solution to the immense emotional knot, but there is also a psychological and thematic symmetry to it... Forrestier's commonsensical solution - the boy should be with his mother, regardless - resolves the novel's tension between the romantic, mythic past which entraps the characters in a painful stasis and the pragmatic present which offers the hope of renewal” (414). Ray plays the role of a noble hero. Of course, this nobility is not indestructible. He who has “an incalculably romantic mind” and attempts to do the right thing is still a very flawed person who is also the same to lose his temper (Bowen. *The House in Paris*. 225). We see the cracks in the armor when he loses his temper and we read his internal thoughts. “The devil you did. You will notice, we talk where I can talk. You will not quote Mme Fisher, you will not kick me in taxis, you will not shout in houses where they are ill. You will wear a civilian cap, not snub little girls



and not get under my feet. There will be many things that you will not like. There are many things that I do not like about you” (Bowen. *The House in Paris*. 268). Yet there is valor to his character not because he is perfect but because he is flawed and still attempts to do the right thing. And here Bowen is once more playing and expanding upon tropes and motifs. It is also worth mentioning that Ray, like Leopold, does not perfectly fit into the gothic motifs as seemingly as the other characters may. This is not without purpose as it distinguishes these characters. Just as Henrietta escapes Karen’s shadow, so does Leopold. As Leopold escapes Mme Fisher’s house with his (potential) stepfather, he embraces a life away from the passion-torn world marked by the past. Leopold himself is still of a turbulent nature and yet with proper guidance he may signify a new breed of being, someone impassioned yet stable. As discussed, Ray himself also seems to represent someone who is both romantic and practical. John Coates offers an interpretation of enlightenment of the novel’s ending. “Ray stands with Leopold on the "commanding, heroic height" above Paris... Leopold asks a question that resonates with all those traditions of reason, lucidity, and enlightenment that Mme. Fisher and *the house in Paris* had deformed: ‘Is it illuminated?’ The city is crowned with lights (28). And so, Bowen shifts away from the volatile passion of the gothic novel and towards something more reasonable in the enlightened modern era.

## Part III: The House and Luggage

The final effect of Bowen's use of Gothic elements in *The House in Paris* can be seen in the use of the house itself. It may seem easy to dismiss the haunted house trope as something silly but when we question the nature of the haunted house then we understand Bowen's interest in it. If we stop thinking about all things supernatural and focus on what it means to haunt someplace in the paranormal-less, real world, then we can think of memories preserving, a sort of melancholy fixed upon a place, a sense of somberness, or some kind of energy that lingers and weighs down upon a place. This is what Bowen uses her haunted house archetype for in *The House in Paris*. Mme Fisher's house holds the memories of her soirées, Naomi's servitude, Karen's girlhood, and of Max's affairs and ultimate suicide. Perhaps it can be said that Bowen's final trope is that she borrows and bends the iconic haunted house itself. And like the other tropes, once we look beyond the supernatural, we are left with a battered and broken home that carries real memories that have not just impacted but shaped the lives of everyone in the narrative. A real-world sadness lingers over the very breathable air. For it is not spirits or magic that cause the haunting but real-life regret and sorrow. Actions that cannot be undone and those same actions that damn all those at the center of the narrative. A regret that happens in an instant and forever changes many lives.

Bowen herself has a sentimentality for homes, spaces, and objects that hold precious memories. In her essay, "Notes on Writing a Novel," she speaks on the nature of plot and states, "It is luggage left in the hall between two journeys, as opposed to the perpetual furniture of rooms. It is destined to be elsewhere. It cannot move till its destination is known. Plot is the knowing of destination" (1). While her thoughts on plot are worthy of discussion, what this argument is more concerned with is the metaphor itself. The "luggage left in the hall between

two journeys, as opposed to the perpetual furniture of rooms.” There is a quiet sadness to this image as we are left to imagine for ourselves the unstable, impermanent, volatile nature of being uprooted, displaced, and moved around. As Emily Ridge explains, “The house that pervades Bowen’s work is most often a house left behind” (110). In her autobiographical writings, Bowen herself acknowledges her dear use of houses, “Am I not manifestly a writer for whom places loom large?... Since I started writing, I have been welding together an inner landscape, assembled anything but at random” (Bowen. *Pictures and Conversations*. 34-36). Bowen’s emotional attachment to homes and the objects placed in them are evident. It is all too easy to dwell on the scene of Uncle Bill watering the garden as Aunt Violet plays the piano, maintaining a daily rhythm, despite knowing that Aunt Violet will eventually succumb to her illness (Bowen. *The House in Pairs*. 80-81). As John Coates once again explains, “The passage suggests the fragility of human achievement in beauty, art, civilization, in the maintenance of homes or of the bonds of love. Death is juxtaposed with Schubert [the musical composer], and pain is implicit in the act of maintenance, perhaps of life itself. Weeding a lawn is painful for the weeds” (20).

For Bowen, the matter of the home is a sensitive subject. It is heart-breaking for her to think of being uprooted and be made to leave. It is a painful sting that reaches to the core, strikes at nostalgia, and upsets the inner child. And it reinvigorates those pure, raw, and sensitive emotions of a child discussed earlier. And yet it does make her all the more so a modernist writer. She is constantly moving, constantly mobile, never fixed. The volatile era of the 20<sup>th</sup> century seeps its way into Bowen’s writing as the dream of a traditional, fixed home is an unobtainable one. As Emily Ridge once again elegantly explains, “...change of scenery, upon movement, in other words, and we would do well to imagine the individual in Bowen’s vision to be looking out of a train or car window as opposed to a house” (113).

## Part IV: Modernity &amp; Conclusion

It is because Bowen uses gothic elements in a self-aware manner and as a means to her message rather than being genuine in a neo-gothic setting that she is indeed engaging in modernist writing. In other words, she understands how to use gothic elements without letting it consume her novel. These gothic elements emphasize the innocent child's perspective. She is not unlike Woolf who gives importance to the sentimental childhood feelings in *To the Lighthouse*. The gothic elements of the story give a more in-depth understanding of the characters. Not unlike Katherine Mansfield, whose modernist short story "The Little Governess" plays with the trope of the Little Red Riding Hood and The Big, Bad Wolf. The same way that Mansfield tells us that it is not the wolf in the woods that we must watch out for but the wolf who appears to be a kindly old man. Bowen engages in the same concept that Mansfield does. In both Bowen's story and Mansfield's story we are reminded that we are not reading a gothic story nor even a grim fairy-tale, we are reading a modern story. Finally, the gothic elements allow Bowen to lament on the heavy-hearted idea of haunting a place, particularly a home - and perhaps also the idea of a lack of a stable home. It is not unlike Jean Rhys whose novel *Good Morning, Midnight* sees the main character, Sasha, almost haunting the streets of Paris with no true sense of time, place, or belonging. Here, we see both writers sharing a sense of not belonging, a feeling of instability, and ultimately, displacement. In the end, Bowen as a modernist writer is writing what she knows, the gothic, the romantic child, and the feeling of sincere longing / regret. She ties it all together to create her modernist story. Though it wavers around the gothic, Bowen cements her text as modernist by both impassioned sentiments and learned knowledge.

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