

# Memory and the House in the Fiction of Elizabeth Bowen

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## Bowen's Fictional Houses

[T]he whole, places more often than faces have sparked off stories. To be honest, the scenes have been with me before the characters—it could have seemed to me, even, once or twice, as though the former had summoned the latter up.<sup>1</sup>

Elizabeth Bowen described herself as a “writer involved closely with place and time; for her these are more than elements, they are actors.”<sup>2</sup> Most of Bowen’s stories are set in one house, and these houses are some of the main actors in her work. Bowen gave human characteristics and important meanings to houses and rooms in a house. Varieties of houses appear in her stories: a Big House, a castle, an empty neglected house during wartime, an ordinary family house, and even a room in an apartment.

Perhaps having moved around so much during her adolescent years and having become the inheritor and owner of a Big House, Bowen’s Court, in the latter part of her life shaped Bowen’s sensitivities to the importance of the place one lives in, and the strong influence it has over the residents. Taking this perspective, I want to explore the theme of “houses” in Bowen’s work. As indicated by Gaston Bachelard in his *The Poetics of Space*, “it [is] reasonable to say we ‘read a house’ or ‘read a room,’ since both room and house are psychological diagrams that guide writers and poets in their analysis of intimacy.”<sup>3</sup> Upon close examination, various themes of intimacy stand out in Bowen’s work; the relationship between the past of the characters and their houses seems to come up again and again. Bowen stated that:

The dead do not need to visit Bowen’s Court rooms—as I said, we had no ghosts in that house—because they already permeated them. Their extinct senses were present in lights and forms. The land outside Bowen’s Court windows left prints on my ancestors’ eyes that looked out: perhaps their eyes left, also, prints on the scene? If so, those prints were part of the scene to me.<sup>4</sup>

For Bowen, her own past and her ancestors are reflected in historical great houses like Bowen’s Court. The past of finished lives permeates the air of rooms, furniture, and the whole of the house. In other words, a house comes to symbolize the past of the people living there. It is, however, noted by Bowen that the past in one house cannot be one definite thing. Bowen stated in *The Mulberry Tree*:

The past is veiled from us by illusion—our own illusion. It is that we seek. It is not the past but the idea of the past which draws us.<sup>5</sup>

Bowen also valued “the idea of the past” of characters in her stories. But the past can mean different things to different people. Regarding imagination, memory of the past and illusion, Bachelard stated that:

Memory and imagination remain associated, each one working for their mutual deepening. In the order of values, they both constitute a community of memory and image.<sup>6</sup>

According to Bachelard, people make “their own idea of the past” mixing their own imagination with memory in a house. Houses in Bowen’s stories could have various forms and images depending on the viewer’s idea of the past in the house. Houses themselves have different meanings and shapes for different people. Bowen indicates that a house provides a space for the fusion of past and one’s imagination:

the house shelters the day-dreaming, the house protects the dreamer . . . the house is one of the greatest powers of integration for the thoughts, memories, and dreams of mankind.<sup>7</sup>

Bowen thus created houses in her stories that have various implications. A house in her stories is not a mere building, but it has deeper connotations that influence the whole story. This essay will explore how the deeper implication of houses relates with the psychology of her characters and the theme of the whole story.

Bowen is not alone in her focus on houses: there are many modern writers who have written about houses in their fiction. Evelyn Waugh (1903–1966), for example, wrote about great English country houses in *Brideshead Revisited* (1945) and *A Handful of Dust* (1934). Bowen said about *Brideshead Revisited* that it was “superbly and triumphantly romantic with that sort of shimmer of the past (or rather, the shimmer one’s own feeling can cast on the past) over it all.”<sup>8</sup> Waugh himself said:

My theme is memory, that winged host that soared about me one gray morning of war-time. These memories, which are my life—for we possess nothing certainly except the past—were always with me.<sup>9</sup>

Houses in Waugh’s fictions are never separated from the characters’ memory and their idea of the past. Their “shimmer” of the past is cast on the memory of the houses and the whole stories.

But as we see from Bowen’s work, houses are not simply repositories of memory. People live there under various circumstances. Indeed, living in a house requires one to be realistic and practical. At the same time people cannot help but dream and have their own imaginations and

fantasies. Thus, houses are also places for the residents' illusion and realities to come together. In one of Bowen's stories, "The Demon Lover", she focuses on the role of fantasy played in a house during wartime. Bowen wrote in her Preface to the volume which contains the story:

It is a fact that in Britain, and especially in London, in wartime many people had strange deep intense dreams. . . . Dreams by night, and fantasies—these oftenchildishly innocent—with which formerly matter-of-fact people consoled themselves by day were compensations.<sup>10</sup>

Bowen set many stories during this period in bombed houses or small flats in London. These houses are not "home" for people, but merely shelters from external dangers. Homeless people have to make their own fantasy in ruined houses, keeping their own identity. Their houses are only safety zones where people can create and maintain their identity.

In Bowen's works, then, houses play crucial roles as mirrors of oneself; the individual's thoughts, past, memories, imagination, reality and dreams are all reflected in the description of the house. A house integrates the wholeness of us: the identities of the residents are deeply connected to houses where people find physical, spiritual and social significance.

Bearing in mind the complexity of houses as places of memory, of daily life, of shelter and of a combination of all these factors, I want to look especially at the house in "Ivy Grippped the Steps." This paper attempts to understand the concept of Bowen's fictional houses that reflect her own idea or images of her house and her memories of her own life through examination of a house.

### **The House in "Ivy Grippped the Steps"<sup>11</sup>**

This story's first scene is like a picture titled, "Ivy Grippped the Steps." The vision first focuses on the ivy that "grippped and sucked" the steps of a house. The vision of the ivy is strangely described like something "brutal" which is feeding on something inside the house. Bowen created the vivid image of ivy gripping the house, and readers see the house that had been Mrs. Nicholson's, whose fate is in some way "gothic." This short story, although Hermione Lee stated that it is long and structurally complex enough to merit the title of *nouvelle*,<sup>12</sup> was in *The Demon Lover* (1945), and we can trace its gothic aspect to the grotesque ivy, the neglected house, and the tragic lives and deaths in the story.

Bowen is a writer who is always conscious of the perspective of the scene she describes. She creates a perspective, then quickly shifts the focus to another plane.

Jocelyn Brooke wrote:

Miss Bowen is tending more and more to see things on a number of planes simultaneously, so that one is sometimes reminded of those modern pictures in which several aspects of the same object are presented in different perspectives on a single canvas.<sup>13</sup>

Bowen's technique is, in this respect, often very close to that of modernist artists like Braque and Picasso.

The first scene in this story is, however, like a picture that is seen from one viewpoint. And the gothic image of a house whose steps are gripped by ivy in the first scene has deep implications influencing the whole story. We come to know about the house, which had been Mrs. Nicholson's, and had a sense of detachment and reserve, "something quite of its own." We learn that "the house was a paradox: having been closed and sealed up with extreme care, it had been abandoned in a manner no less extreme." The house with this mysterious paradoxical atmosphere is gripped by ivy, which signifies "fidelity, regret or the tomb-defying tenaciousness of memory." Bachelard says:

A house constitutes a body of images that give mankind proofs or illusions of stability. We are constantly re-imagining its reality: to distinguish all these images would be to describe the soul of the house; it would mean developing a veritable psychology of the house.<sup>14</sup>

The house with the ivy in the first scene connotes various images that connect the central theme in this story. I shall explore these connotations in the image in order to read the "psychology of the house."

The focus of vision in the narrative moves from the house to a middle-aged man, Gavin Doddington. In the later parts of the story, this house is seen in various ways in relation to his experience in it and consciousness of it. He has come back after a thirty-year interval to Southstone, which had once been a pretty seaside town, and has now been taken over by the army. Though he felt his journey to Southstone to be a "pilgrimage," he has "stalked" and "confronted" the house. We feel that Gavin feared and hated the house. However, paradoxically, "he could pursue with his finger, though not see, the pattern that, with other details of the house, outside and in, had long ago been branded into his memory"(IG 688).

We realize that Gavin feels afraid of seeing the house, because the house was branded on Gavin's memory, and has never been separated from him. The image of the house gripped by ivy is the main symbol in this story, and this image leads us to make an analogy with Gavin Doddington himself, the central character, who lives on his childhood memory of that house. He is like ivy clinging to the house. Ivy is parasitic on the house as Gavin is a parasite on his past. We know, then, that Gavin's memory and the house are inseparable.

This story explains how this could have happened by moving back to Gavin's childhood, thirty-years before. Gavin, at the age of eight, was brought to stay at the house of his mother's friend, Mrs. Nicholson at Southstone, in 1910. Her husband had died, and their one child had also died at birth. At the time Gavin met her, she was having an affair with Admiral Concannon, who had a dying wife. Mrs. Nicholson herself died in 1912. Her life, it seems, is always surrounded by death.

We see their first meeting from Gavin's viewpoint. In a "blazing June," Gavin is waiting for Mrs. Nicholson in the sea-blue drawing-room of the house marvelling at "the variety of the bric-a-brac crowding brackets and tables and the manyness of the cut-crystal vases, and the

earliness of purple and white sweet pea.” Mrs. Nicholson appeared in a dress “accentuated by the taut belt with coral-inlaid clasp: from that small start the skirts flowed down to dissipate and spread where they touched the floor”(IG 690). All the interior of the room, Mrs. Nicholson’s beautiful dress, and her attitude towards Gavin, makes an image that casts a spell on Gavin. He is seeing a world that is totally different from his home as a member of the impoverished gentry in the Midlands. Bowen uses here a technique in which many scattered fragments become a whole, creating deeper symbolic connotations. Gavin’s memories of his childhood are reflected in the blazing weather at the seaside, the prosperous atmosphere of Southstone, the luxurious interior of the house, and the beauty of Mrs. Nicholson. All these things together should provide the best memory of his childhood.

Gavin has fantasized about Mrs. Nicholson, her house and Southstone. He used to go for walks under a cliff near the sea, and always stared up the heights, because “from right down here, . . . its illusion, its magical artificiality, was to be savoured as from nowhere else”(IG 694). The vision he saw one day was of Mrs. Nicholson’s gaze from above him, on the cliff. However she did not see him, and “despair, the idea that his doom must be never, never to reach her, not only now but ever, gripped [Gavin]”(IG 694). This is a key scene, because his despair is prophetic. His despair grips him forever, as the ivy will come to grip the house in the future.

The best part of Gavin’s memory is, however, struck in his childhood. Southstone was a heaven on earth for him. However the crack in his dream began silently. Gavin’s next arrival at Southstone is in early January, when “a gale tore the slate,” and he heard “roaring thumps from the beach.” The wind suggests a change in Gavin’s memory. The cracking of his heaven begins with Admiral’s Concannon’s party. The Concannons give a party to celebrate Mrs. Concannon’s recovery. Mrs. Nicholson consciously selects “scarlet carnations” for the party in spite of the fact that Mrs. Concannon wanted “white chrysanthemums.” Moreover, she brings eight-year-old Gavin to the party, which is a quite extraordinary and impolite thing to do. “To a suggestion so completely outrageous, who was to think of any reply? It was a *coup*..”

The party scene in The Admiral’s house is important.

Their sapphire darkness, with that of the sapphire pendant she was wearing, was struck into by the Concannons’ electric light. The round fitment on pulleys, with a red silk frill, had been so adjusted above the dinner table as to cast down a vivid circle, in which the guests sat. . . . The centerpiece was a silver or plated pheasant, around whose base the carnations—slightly but strikingly “off” the red of the shade, but pre-eminently flattering in their contrast to Mrs. Nicholson’s orchid glaze gown—were bunched in four silver cornets. (IG 700)

We realize that Mrs. Nicholson has consciously selected the scarlet carnations on the table to bring out the colour of her dress and make Mrs. Concannon look much worse. The party had been balanced like a house of cards built, it remained as precarious. “Now the structure trembled, down to its base, from one contemptuous flip at its top story—Mrs. Nicholson’s caprice of bringing a little boy” (IG 700). She has broken the atmosphere of the Concannons’ party like flipping “a house of cards,” and she has used Gavin as her weapon in the party. Mrs.

Nicholson has to pay the reckoning. The house, then, has gathered new meanings of tragedy and conflict through the lives lived in it.

From this important dinner scene the story jumps to Gavin's last visit to Mrs. Nicholson. One year after the party, he visits her. "The September was an extension of summer." It is the last September of Southstone in Gavin's memory. Mrs. Nicholson is now ill, and we know that two years later she is to die. She pays the price for her sins. There is a metaphoric scene representing Mrs. Nicholson's situation.

Mrs. Nicholson's house cast its shadow across the avenue on to the houses opposite, which should otherwise have received the descending sun. In revenge, they cast shadow back through her bow window. (IG 704)

Mrs. Nicholson's house is in some sense the alter ego of Mrs. Nicholson herself. The houses standing opposite revenge themselves on her house that has a "detached" atmosphere and is somewhat different from other houses.

In the drawing room of Mrs. Nicholson's house, Gavin overhears her speaking cruelly about himself and the way that he has been used. She says "he is my little dog" in her conversation with the Admiral. The scene is tragic, but in some sense like a theatrical comedy. Both the cruel words and a burst of applause from the theater at the back of the house are heard by Gavin. This is the worst, unforgettable moment in Gavin's memory—a traumatic experience. He has experienced his first deep love for a woman, and at the same time he has felt deceived and hurt by her. But he does not visit the house again for thirty years. The house has come to represent Mrs. Nicholson and his memory of her in Gavin's mind. The house thus contains the best and the worst of his childhood.

One aspect of the house is contained within the past experiences of Gavin's childhood: We return at the end of the story to Southstone with Gavin, in the present. He sees the complete change in Southstone in the thirty years. There are uncountable new graves in thirty years that remind Gavin that Mrs. Nicholson might be lying beside her husband. The path and steps up the cliff have been destroyed. The flower shop, where Mrs. Nicholson bought the scarlet carnations, has received a direct hit from a bomb: the entire corner has gone. The two wars have changed Gavin's fantasy world, Southstone, utterly. In his mind, his dream about Mrs. Nicholson was already broken by her words thirty years ago. He has known in his head that the beauty of Mrs. Nicholson and Southstone was only an illusion, and that there were cruel realities and truths in the world of adults. However on his return to Southstone after a thirty years' interval, he has to see the truths replayed in an actual sense. His illusion about Southstone is broken, but Southstone itself has been destroyed by the war. Gavin has to realize these hard facts in wartime, and to see the gap between illusion and reality.

Gavin also visits the house of Admiral Concannon, who died in World War I.

Nobody now but Gavin recognized its identity or its importance. Here had dwelled, and here continued to dwell, the genius of the Southstone that now was. Twice over had there been realized the Admiral's alternative to love. (IG 710)

The Admiral's alternative to failed love is war. There have been two wars in thirty years, World Wars I and II. There has also been another war in this story, the love war. Mrs. Nicholson, Admiral Concannon and Mrs. Concannon have had a war of passions, using Gavin as their weapon. They have all died in the thirty years, and only Gavin has survived. However something inside him is also dead.

Readers are then suddenly confronted with an objective description of Gavin. The perspective of the main part in this story has been from Gavin's viewpoint, so readers have been seeing a view mediated by Gavin. However in this final scene, the perspective suddenly shifts from Gavin's to that of a girl in the Admiral's house. The readers have to face Gavin differently as a tragic and sinister man.

She had seen the face of somebody dead who was still there—'old' because of the presence, under an icy screen, of a whole stopped mechanism for feeling. Those features had been framed, long ago, for hope. The dints above the nostrils, the lines extending the eyes, the lips' grimacing grip on the cigarette—all complicated the picture of someone wolfish. A prayer. (IG 711)

Gavin's dream about Mrs. Nicholson and Southstone is a romantic fantasy. The story might be Gavin's "selective and subjective" memory. It might be his idea of the past. However we realize that the objective truth about Gavin, the truth we see from the girl's point of view, is that he is a man whose "mechanism for feeling" has died. We thus see his story from a different perspective, and the objective truth is the sterility and isolation of a lonely, damaged middle-aged man.

Gavin can thus only live in his memory of the house—his past. He is one of the living dead, like the house that nobody lives in now, but which is still standing. The past has preyed on Gavin's feelings, his ability to live in the present, while ivy is feeding on something inside the house. The house in this story is the victim of the grotesque ivy that grips it and symbolizes death. At the same time the house is the symbol of the central character's past, which also preys on him.

Mrs. Nicholson hurt Gavin and destroyed his emotional life in some way, but Gavin can only live on his memories of her. She has destroyed him, but at the same time only she made him feel alive and made him feel strong passions. We can see that the house itself is the alter ego of Gavin and of Mrs. Nicholson, and the house also might symbolize Gavin's idea of his past with Mrs. Nicholson. The image of the house in its glorious past that we have seen was veiled by Gavin's selective and subjective memory and imagination. But his fantasy and idealization of Mrs. Nicholson were betrayed by her words "Gavin is my little dog." His past is veiled from him by his betrayed heart, his deep despair that he could never reach Mrs. Nicholson.

Mrs. Nicholson's empty house gripped by ivy might be taken as the symbol of Gavin's idea of the past gripped by despair. His imagination and his dreams were severely hurt by the traumatic experience in his childhood. His imagination and dreams are, however, significantly contained in, and represented by, a house. The house might be Gavin's own illusion of his past

that never lets him go. Bachelard says:

Sometimes the house grows and spreads so that, in order to live in it, greater elasticity of daydreaming, a daydreaming that is less clearly outlined, are needed.<sup>15</sup>

The image of Mrs. Nicholson's house, which has various ambivalent faces, seems to "grow and spread" to readers. Bowen created a house with its various implications that was especially branded into the memory of childhood. While Bowen kept in her mind the image of Bowen's Court all her life in a positive way, Gavin has kept in his mind his image of Mrs. Nicholson's house in a negative way, because the obsession has destroyed his emotional life.

A house usually survives for a long time unless it is destroyed, and it can contain various ideas, illusions, memories and the feelings of people contained by it, like ghosts, as long as it stands. The house in this story has various faces and even ambivalent meanings for those who have known it.

### Conclusion

I have tried in this article to explore the image of the house in the fiction of Elizabeth Bowen. Though I have discussed the house in childhood in "Ivy Gripp'd the Steps," we can see other versions of the Big House in her novel *The Last September*, and ruined houses and a flat in London in the blitz, in her ghost short stories. Every house in the fiction of Elizabeth Bowen has various connotations that influence the whole atmosphere of the stories. The Big House in *The Last September* symbolizes the dignity and fear of Anglo-Irish families. The ruined houses in the ghost stories play the role of Gothic settings and reflect the tensions of people in wartime. The memory of the house in Gavin's mind in "Ivy Gripp'd the Steps" makes a prey of his emotional life. Elizabeth Bowen created various images and different implications in her fiction by using these metaphors of houses. However we see one common quality in three types of houses in the fiction of Elizabeth Bowen. That is that these houses always relate to the memory of the past of the characters. They reflect the Anglo-Irish historical past and memory, the strange memory of the Demon Lover, or the traumatic memory of childhood. They are all "subjective and selective" different memories in houses that draw characters. Bowen was always fascinated with ideas about involuntary recall, *déjà vu*, and the overlap between imagination and memory. She talks in her novel *Eva Trout* about, "Imagining oneself to be remembering."<sup>16</sup> Houses in the fiction of Elizabeth Bowen are the palaces of memories that never go away. If a house is demolished, the image of the house does not die in the memory of a person who lives or loves it. Bowen wrote in *Bowen's Court*:

Loss has not been entire. When I think of Bowen's Court, there it is. And when others who knew it think of it, there it is, also.<sup>17</sup>

Houses in the fiction of Elizabeth Bowen thus symbolize memory, or in other words, the idea of the past. Houses, which can reflect various kinds of the idea of the past, are like mirrors

that have “not one reflection but an almost infinite number.”<sup>18</sup> Virginia Woolf, who wrote that “Life is not a series of gig lamps symmetrically arranged; life is a luminous halo, a semi-transparent envelope surrounding us from the beginning of consciousness to the end,”<sup>19</sup> thought that modern fiction should explore the uncountable images in “a luminous halo” freely. Henry James (1843–1916), writing of his *House of Fiction*, says:

The house of fiction has in short not one window, but a million—a number of possible windows not to be reckoned, rather; every one of which has been pierced, or is still pierce-able, in its vast front by the need of the individual will.<sup>20</sup>

Henry James described the infinite possibilities of imaginative fiction, using the metaphor of the house. Similarly we can say that houses in the fiction of Elizabeth Bowen have “a million—a number of possible windows.” The image can be identified with Bowen’s *Court* that “seems to be riddled with light”<sup>21</sup> from a number of windows.

Bowen, who admired Henry James and Virginia Woolf, created houses in her fiction like a “semi-transparent envelope” with a number of possible ways of seeing them. The perspectives, the ways of seeing are the idea of the past in Bowen’s writings.

The past—private just as much as historic—seemed to me, therefore, to matter more than ever: it acquired meaning; it lost false mystery.<sup>22</sup>

Elizabeth Bowen, who respected a sensitivity to the past, thus created a number of possible images of houses which evoke various memories and the pasts. “Ivy Grippled the Steps,” as we have seen, contains a multi-layered representation of memory and a house.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Bowen, Elizabeth. *Seven Winters and Afterthoughts*, New York: Alfred. A. Knopf, 1962, 179.

<sup>2</sup> *Seven Winters*, 199.

<sup>3</sup> Bachelard, Gaston. *The Poetics of Space*, Boston: Beach Press, 1994, 38.

<sup>4</sup> Bowen, Elizabeth. *Bowen’s Court*, New York: Knopf, 1942, 21–22.

<sup>5</sup> Bowen, Elizabeth. *The Mulberry Tree*, London: Virago Press, 1986.

<sup>6</sup> Bachelard, 5.

<sup>7</sup> Bachelard, 6.

<sup>8</sup> Lee, Hermione. *Bowen: An Estimation*, London: Barnes and Noble Books, 1981, 168.

<sup>9</sup> Waugh, Evelyn. *Brideshead Revisited*, Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1945, 225.

<sup>10</sup> Bowen, Elizabeth. *Collected Impressions*, London: Longmans, 1950, 49.

<sup>11</sup> In this chapter, I will refer to this story as IG.

<sup>12</sup> Lee, 130.

<sup>13</sup> Brooke, Jocelyn. *Elizabeth Bowen*, London: Longmans, 1952, 19.

<sup>14</sup> Bachelard, 17.

<sup>15</sup> Bachelard, 51.

<sup>16</sup> Bowen, Elizabeth. *Eva Trout*, London: Cape, 1969, 216.

<sup>17</sup> Bowen's Court, 459.

<sup>18</sup> Woolf, Virginia. "The Mark on the Wall," in *The Second Penguin Book of English Short Stories*, London: Penguin Books, 1972, 145.

<sup>19</sup> Woolf, Virginia. "Modern Fiction", London: Penguin Books, 1993, 9.

<sup>20</sup> James, Henry. "Preface" to *The Portrait of a Lady*, New York: The Library of America, 1984, 1075.

<sup>21</sup> *Bowen's Court*, 21-22.

<sup>22</sup> *Bowen's Court*, 454.