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"A Face You Do Not Expect": The Female Other in Elizabeth Bowen's "The Demon Lover"

Terry W. Thompson

- 1 Designed to "traffic concurrently in apparitions and pathology" (Leithauser 13) while at the same time illuminating "the troubled and divided soul of man" (Herdman 161), *doppelgänger* stories have intrigued readers for millennia. From Jacob's nightlong wrestling match with his never-identified opponent to Christ's struggle in the wilderness with his "get thee behind me" opposite, accounts of ominous double-goers—shadowy, ill-defined reflections—are found in nearly all cultures, all religions, and they have proven among the most popular and durable of short story themes. But these life changing yin-and-yang encounters—be they fleeting or prolonged, violent or passive—have almost always been the domain of soul-searching male protagonists who have reached some point of crisis in their lives. From Poe's "William Wilson" to James's "The Jolly Corner," from Conrad's "The Secret Sharer" to Maupassant's "The Horla," this enduring motif abounds with tormented males who—because of "past promises, past attachments, past regrets" (Cox and Gilbert ix)—seek to confront their veiled and diaphanous "others": those vague manifestations of what they might have become had they but chosen different paths or answered alternate callings. In short, these binary men—frequently middle-aged and unhappy with their meager list of accomplishments—are haunted by the specter of what Millicent Bell calls "the rival reality of the unlived life" (27). Once they achieve confrontation with their shadows, however, these rueful protagonists often discover that such an intimate reckoning can sometimes result in unintended consequences—madness, bifurcation, and self-destruction among them. Authored by a woman who has been praised as "after James Joyce and D. H. Lawrence [...] the most distinguished British writer of short stories in our time" (Bloom 1), there is one widely anthologized ghost story which offers, when read non-traditionally, an elegant, understated, and rare female rendering of this male-dominated genre.

- 2 First published in 1941 in *The Listener*, "The Demon Lover" is by far Elizabeth Bowen's most famous tale—supernatural or otherwise. Infused with a sense of "dislocation, aberration, destruction" (Mitchell 46) while teeming with "shadowy presences" (Ellman 162), this brooding narrative is set in London in the opening months of the Second World War. German bombing raids have devastated whole sections of the capital, and most of the inhabitants, especially the city's social elites, have abandoned their grand homes and evacuated to the countryside. During a lull in the Luftwaffe attacks, Bowen's middle-aged protagonist, Mrs. Kathleen Drover—upper-class wife, dutiful mother, paragon of her community—undertakes a solitary journey back into a shattered city of "unfamiliar" streets, "broken chimneys and parapets," (Bowen 661), and "unoccupied houses" to run sundry errands (666). At the end of her long day, exhausted from the stress and the summer heat, she lingers at a small café spared by "the damage of war" (666) to enjoy a soothing cup of tea and a light meal. After this refreshment, as "ink-dark" clouds begin to gather overhead and the ionic smell of an approaching rainstorm permeates the "steamy" August air, Kathleen decides to stop by her "boarded up" estate "to look for several things she wanted to take away" with her to the countryside (661).
- 3 Once this conservative and "prosaic woman" (Bowen 661), as the narrator describes her, enters her former home—a grand structure that is "vitally important" to her sense of self (Hopkins 119)—she engages in an episode of long, deep, silent reverie. Amid the rosy hues of day's end, Kathleen wanders slowly and pensively through the deserted house where she has spent so much of her adult life. She absorbs "its reassuring power" (Bowen 664) and inhales its memory-laden air while contemplating all the visual *aide memoires* of her comfortable years there before the chaos and dislocation of the Second World War. She takes great delight, for example, "in the traces of her long former habit of life—the yellow smoke-stain up the white marble mantelpiece, the ring left by a vase on the top of the escritoire [her favorite piece of furniture]; the bruise in the wallpaper where, on the door being thrown open widely, the china handle always hit the wall" (661).
- 4 While lost in memories of better times—of hearth and husband, of children, friends, neighbors—she comes across something unexpected and jarringly out of place. It is "a letter addressed to her" resting atop the dust layer on the hall table (Bowen 662). Since all of the family's mail has been rerouted to the countryside by an efficient wartime postal service, there is no reason for an envelope—addressed to anyone—to be inside her sealed estate. Furthermore, she declares, letters that are "dropped in at doors of deserted houses do not fly or walk to tables in halls. They do not sit on the dust of empty tables with the air of certainty that they will be found" (664). Adding to the sense of unease, she does not recognize the bold masculine cursive. Feeling a sudden "tenseness" and somehow "intruded upon" by this mystery, an increasingly "annoyed" Kathleen carries the envelope upstairs "to what had been her bedroom" where there is more natural light (662). (The electricity has been disconnected, the downstairs windows boarded.) She then proceeds to open the strange epistle. As she reads the unfamiliar handwriting, a summer storm breaks overhead—foreshadowing the psychological tempest that is about to come—and torrents of rain begin to pummel the roof above her:

Dear Kathleen: You will not have forgotten that today is our anniversary, and the day we said. The years have gone by at once slowly and fast. In view of the fact that nothing has changed, I shall rely upon you to keep your promise. I was sorry to see

you leave London, but was satisfied that you would be back in time. You may expect me, therefore, at the hour arranged. Until then. (Bowen 662)

- 5 The cryptic correspondence is signed at the bottom with just the large initial "K." Because there is no return address, no postmark, and "no stamp" (Bowen 662), the letter had to be deposited on the hall table by some person or persons who managed to gain entrance to her locked estate. And seeing as there is no dust on the envelope, obviously the letter was recently placed. Perplexed and now growing "anxious" at "someone contemptuous of her ways" (662), she wonders briefly what such an enigmatic communiqué could possibly signify. Perhaps the letter was delivered to the wrong house, and she has simply been confused with some other woman named Kathleen. Given the tumult of war and the increasing anonymity of London's bomb-cratered streets, such errors of identity and address are certainly possible. But then suddenly, "buried by years of conventional marriage" (Calder 91), a long-repressed memory rises from the nadir of her consciousness. This remembrance affects the prim, middle-aged socialite so powerfully, so deeply, that "her lips, beneath the remains of her lipstick," begin "to go white" with emotion (Bowen 662). Trembling and suddenly overcome by what this brief message has stirred inside of her, she drops the letter onto the naked mattress of her old bed and walks unsteadily over to her vanity mirror—gone dusty and unused since she evacuated to the countryside with husband and children. After rubbing clear a face-sized portion of the looking glass, Kathleen stares "urgently and stealthily" into the mirror, and what she sees there takes her breath away: "She was confronted by a woman of forty-four, with eyes starting out under a hat-brim that had been rather carelessly pulled down. She had not put on any more powder since she left the shop where she ate her solitary tea" (662).
- 6 In those tales which proffer ominous and shadowy other selves as adversaries, looking glasses—be they clean or dirty, whole or fractured—often appear as important symbolic elements, such as in Edgar Allan Poe's "William Wilson" or Robert Louis Stevenson's "Markheim" as well as Algernon Blackwood's superb "The Listener." The same holds true in Bowen's atmospheric account of a secretly troubled upper-class wife and mother who sees something frightening in the mirror and then wishes she had not. For in that tired, old-before-her-years reflection, "this rueful woman," as Douglass A. Hughes describes her (411), beholds not a traditional *doppelgänger*, the ghostly figure of what she might have been, but rather, gazing back from the smudged looking glass she beholds—and is rudely "confronted by"—the unflattering likeness of the dowdy, middle-aged society matron she thought she would never become: "The pearls her husband had given her on their marriage hung loose round her now rather thinner throat, slipping in the V of the pink wool jumper her sister knitted last autumn as they sat round the fire" (Bowen 662). According to Patricia L. Skarda and Nora Crow Jaffe in their book *The Evil Image*, a protagonist's blurry double-goer, whether real or imaginary, flesh or vapor, provides "the human mirror [that] reveals all" once he—or in this case *she*—is encountered by the central character (Note 330). So in this reflected image—rendered dim and ghostly by the dust, grime, and failing light—Kathleen sees the very picture of stolid, aging, wool-clad domesticity. And like the fairytale queen whose honest mirror offended her pride, the awful truth stuns this middle-aged wife and mother, rocks her back on her aristocratic heels. Dismayed, her vanity cut to the quick, she turns away in disgust and horror "from her own face as precipitately as she had gone to meet it" (Bowen 663).

- 7 Analogous to Elizabeth Bowen's many other "strange and somewhat eldritch protagonists," Mrs. Kathleen Drover is tormented by inner contradictions; she seems almost to "come in and out of focus" as the tale progresses, like some figure carved "in a bas relief" (Osborn 191). Always "elegant and civilized" (Wilson 8), she carries herself like a proper lady at all times. (Even though it is August, she never removes her hat or gloves during the story.) In sum, Kathleen is the reserved embodiment of the elite social caste to which she belongs. She is aloof, "controlled" (Bowen 662), and "calm" (663). But once alone in "the desuetude of her former bedroom [inside] her married London home" (664) — prompted by her dowdy reflection in the mirror, the warm temperature, the pounding rain, and a twenty-five-year-old memory — Kathleen's conservative comportment begins to melt away. She cannot stop "looking over her shoulder at" the mesmeric love letter resting so suggestively, almost invitingly, on "the stripped bed" where she had let it fall from her tremulous fingers (663). Stung by her careworn reflection in the vanity glass, dismayed by "the change[s] in her own face," in a sudden rush of emotion amid "the dusk and the dust" (662), she transforms for an "intense moment" (663) into the svelte, smooth-cheeked, thrill-seeking girl she was when, at age nineteen, she had fallen desperately in love with "K," a tall soldier from the First World War who had swept her off her feet, had dominated and aroused her. But their passionate love affair—disapproved of by her patrician family—was tragically short-lived. For within weeks of being shipped to the western front in late summer of 1916, "her fiancé was reported missing, presumed killed"—much to the relief of Kathleen's relatives (664).
- 8 After this devastating news, she suffered "a complete dislocation from everything" and everyone (Bowen 662). Her betrothed's actual fate was never learned, no body recovered for Christian burial; and for more than a dozen years, Kathleen had no romantic life at all until, "at age thirty-two" (664), she was relieved at last to be courted by one William Drover, a wealthy, dependable, if unexciting suitor. And so she married this most excellent provider, "and the two of them settled down in this quiet, arboreal part of Kensington: in this house the years piled up, her children were born and they all lived till they were driven out by the bombs of the next war"; and yet still, her very comfortable life "as Mrs. Drover [was] circumscribed" (664)—achingly safe, mundane, earnest, far different from the exhilaration of her forbidden love affair with the dashing and dangerously virile soldier, a charismatic rake who both excited and "intimidated" her (663).
- 9 According to Daniel V. Fraustino in his essay "'The Demon Lover': Psychosis or Seduction?" Bowen's most frequently anthologized tale hints at "the repetitious character" (484) of Kathleen's privileged existence, as well as a "deep and lingering dissatisfaction with her marriage" (485), a union born, Fraustino claims, "out of desperation" (484) and not affection. Of telling implication, when Kathleen enters her locked estate at the beginning of the story—even before she finds the mysterious letter—it is the many small blemishes in her former home which first draw her attention. She notes, for example, the ominous "cracks" in the foundation, the "warped" front door, the unpleasant "cold hearth" smell of everything, "the yellow smoke-stain" on the white mantel, the water "ring left by a vase on the top" of her writing desk, the ugly "bruise in the wallpaper" where the door handle "had always hit the wall," as well as the unsightly "claw-marks" in the parquet where her beloved piano—now in storage—had once stood (Bowen 661). At the beginning of the story, all of these seem but the

charming imperfections of a well lived-in house. Later on, however, they become symbolic of some deeper malaise.

- 10 With the sexually suggestive pulsing of the warm rain providing background for her erotic trance, two and a half decades melt away. Kathleen's "romantic imagination" (Mitchell 46), held in check for so long, is at last given free rein. As she leans her head back, closes her eyes, and surrenders, "old desires, old hopes" (Maitland xv) take possession of her senses; and she is once more in the arms of her beguiling soldier, experiencing the illicit thrill of their last rendezvous in the twilight so long ago. Time is suspended as this Second World War bleeds backward into the one before it, and dreamy recollections telescope all those summers in between. "The young girl talking to the soldier in the garden" (Bowen 663) again feels the hard buttons of an army tunic press roughly against her bosom; she hears his whispers, smells his shaving cream and his hair pomade. She yields once more to "the complete suspension of *her* existence" (665) as she is again enthralled by the dominating young man with whom she shared love and a first initial. Then after some minutes, a sudden rush of warm air comes up the staircase "from the basement," strikes "her face" (666), and snaps the forty-four-year-old mother of three back to the present, to the bomb-damaged Kensington estate that has been her safe if dull sanctuary for a dozen years. Fearing that it "was possible that she was not alone" in the house (665)—that some intruder has just forced open a basement window to enter or exit her home—Kathleen quickly gathers up her packages. To "rally herself" (664), she then ties them into the neat bundles of a disciplined wife and mother. She is again "decisive, bold" (665), stubbornly back in control of her emotions. She is no longer "in a mood" (664), as she dismisses it, nor "out of synch with herself" (Jordan 48).
- 11 Eager to escape "this crisis" of strong emotion (Bowen 664) and return to "the ordinary flow of life" (666), once "her normal breathing" has resumed and she is pink-clad modesty itself, Kathleen walks "calmly down" (665) the stairs and out into the wet and the dark to hail a cab to take her to the train station: "This evening, only one taxi—but this, although it presented its blank rump, appeared already to be alertly waiting for her" (666). Feeling both relieved and rescued, this exemplar of "utter dependability" climbs into the back seat of "the taxi, safe" (665); but before she can offer instructions, the driver puts the car into gear and pulls away at speed. An irritated Kathleen bends "forward to scratch at the glass panel" separating "the driver's head from her own" (666). The cabbie brakes to a stop, reaches back, and slides open the partition: "Through the aperture driver and passenger, not six inches between them, remained for an eternity eye to eye. Mrs. Drover's mouth hung open for some seconds before she could issue her first scream" (666). As the taxicab, "accelerating without mercy" (666), speeds off into a blacked-out London, this abducted paragon of "family life" (665) keeps screaming until distance muffles her cries for help. And then Mrs. Kathleen Drover—wife, mother, socialite, fantasist—is seen and heard no more.
- 12 According to Chris Hopkins, reality "is always under negotiation" (125) in Elizabeth Bowen's short stories—especially the supernatural ones. And her well-known Jamesian fondness for a nuanced "multiplicity" of meanings often "leaves the reader with much work to do in the way of understanding the text" (114). As a result, there are three well-established interpretations of what Susan Osborn calls the "queer and indeterminate" (187) ending of "The Demon Lover," a tale that plumbs "personal relationships, incomplete and unsatisfying" (Ross 60).

- 13 The most popular reading, championed by John Coates and many others, is that this unfulfilled socialite wife is without doubt spirited away by the "ghost of the First World War soldier" (309), a devoted fiancé who never forgot his vows of love even after his violent death: "I shall be with you [...] sooner or later You won't forget that. You need do nothing but wait" (Bowen 663). Preferred by most readers, this supernatural interpretation follows a recurring theme found in many classic ghost stories concerned with true love cut short by tragedy. These range from Edith Nesbit's "John Charrington's Wedding" (1891) to Algernon Blackwood's "The Tryst" (1917) to Edith Wharton's "Bewitched" (1925).
- 14 The second most popular interpretation posits that Bowen's signature tale—although somewhat "baffling and salient" throughout (Osborn 187)—is simply a conventional murder mystery without a trace of the supernatural; and hence the plot of this "difficult and delicate" story (Stern xvii) owes more to Agatha Christie than to Amelia Edwards or Charlotte Riddell. Daniel V. Fraustino, for one, argues that the mysterious taxi driver is not the ghost of Kathleen's long lost fiancé at all, but is the flesh-and-blood man himself. A "sadist of the most deranged kind" (486), the charismatic soldier without pedigree did not die for king and country. Instead, he deserted and has spent the last quarter century stalking her. In the closing scene, Kathleen's strange delay "for an eternity" (Bowen 666) before emitting her first scream means simply that it takes her a while—due to the changes the years have made in his once handsome face—to recognize the fiendish countenance glaring back at her through the taxi's partition.
- 15 Because, as Maud Ellman has observed, Elizabeth Bowen's stories "refuse to be contained within a single [or even a double] frame of reference" (145), there is yet another interpretation of "The Demon Lover". In his essay "A More Sinister Troth," Robert Calder champions a third possibility. He maintains that this tale of a middle-aged wife and mother who is spirited away in the night by "something demonic" should be "[l]ooked at as allegory" (95), with Kathleen Drover—isolated, aging, and vulnerable—representing an ally-less Britain in the early days of World War Two. Thus, the appalling visage that glares back at Mrs. Drover through the partition is not that of a ghost or a stalker, but is merely the monstrous "face of war itself" (97). The First World War took Kathleen's true love away from her and so shattered a young girl's dreams of a fairytale future. Now, a Second World War just a generation later has destroyed her neighborhood and driven her out of her home. Everything that made her feel safe, secure, and connected is gone, hence the feral screaming as the tale concludes. According to Calder, war itself is the true demon in Kathleen Drover's life, not some ghastly specter or murderous ex-lover. When read thusly, Bowen's tale soon "becomes explicable" (95).
- 16 The fourth possibility—a *doppelgänger* reading—has never been proffered and is clearly a minority analysis. But it is just as valid as the other three interpretations given the story's legendary ambiguity. Moreover, it is perhaps the most subtle and intriguing reading of this lissome tale of a "sophisticated" wife whose secret "dreams and desires, fears and terrors" prove to be her undoing (Wallace 66). To wit, suffering from what Skarda and Jaffe call "the anguish of the disordered mind" (Note 330), the author of the mysterious letter is none other than Kathleen herself. Disguising her own feminine handwriting while becoming, as the narrator points out, ever "more perplexed than she knew by everything" (Bowen 661), she composed the love letter in some transport

of remembered emotion, initialed it at the bottom, and then left it where what John Herdman calls her "daytime consciousness" (153) would be sure to find it "at the hour arranged" (Bowen 662). Due to her "complex, mixed identities" (Hopkins 116), Kathleen fades in and out of her "complementary personality" (Skarda and Jaffe, Introduction xx). The sudden whirl of hot air from the cellar, the ominous sense that someone else is in the boarded-up estate with her, the mysterious cab driver with a face that horrifies, all of these and more are generated by (or misinterpreted by) her deeply traumatized psyche. Kathleen's "once familiar" (661) and "reassuring" (664) neighborhood has been devastated by German bombs. Her orderly pre-war existence—so wonderfully grounded by "voices, habits, and steps" (664)—has been turned upside down. Adding to all of this strain and dislocation, explains the narrator in a most telling admission, "the birth of the third of her little boys" came with physical and mental complications; these resulted in "a quite serious illness," the "intermittent" (663) aftereffects of which still afflict her in the form of embarrassing facial tics and episodes of clinical depression.

- 17 Longing for passion and escape, for "a certain voluptuousness" to her existence (Radice 115), Mrs. Kathleen Drover—like some priggish male protagonist out of Conrad or James or Blackwood—bifurcates herself because her "conscious and subconscious yearnings are different" (Maitland xiv). As a consequence, because she is at war with herself in the midst of a war, she cannot "achieve balance" (Miller 25) or accommodation in a single psyche, cannot deal with her "constrained emotional life" (Jordan 51). This roiling Jekyll-like conflict is even manifested in her choice of clothing. Red is the traditional color of passion, desire, lasciviousness, lust. White, in contrast, is the stainless hue of innocence, virtue, chastity, devotion. If these two shades are combined, however, the result is pink—the very color which "this rueful woman" (Hughes 411) chooses to wear on her solitary journey back into wartime London. Hence, Kathleen's simple pastel jumper symbolizes outwardly the war of personalities that is tearing her apart inwardly.
- 18 In essence, during "this crisis" of identity (Bowen 664) amid the dust and shadows of her comfortable estate, Kathleen conjures up her own "annexe of the self" (Herdman 42), an uninhibited persona whom she wishes she could have inhabited, could have fleshed out and enjoyed: that headstrong nineteen-year-old girl who reveled in youthful sensuality. But instead of melding her disparate halves into a coherent whole via her inner struggle (like some middle-aged male in a Henry James story), Kathleen, a compass without an arrow, shatters irreparably when she is torn between two opposing selves: the impetuous teenager who loved a charismatic bad boy versus the proper English matron in a pink wool jumper who married for security a man she did not love. And the two jarring catalysts for the "psychological fragmentation" (Skarda and Jaffe, Introduction xx) that overwhelms her in the empty house are the self-written love letter (which ends up on her passionless marriage bed) and the frumpy, intolerable "other" Kathleen who stares back at her from a dusty vanity mirror and informs her that she is no longer the fairest of them all.
- 19 Ever since its publication, there have been differing explanations for who—or what—spirits away Mrs. Kathleen Drover at the end of "The Demon Lover." And now there is another alternative, a *doppelgänger* reading. From the dark abyss that swallows up the unhappy wife and mother, there will be no return, regardless of which side of the looking glass this cloven Alice chooses. Like William Wilson, Dorian Gray, and a host of men before her who grew obsessed with their shadow possibilities, this decorous

woman with a "cool public persona" but a "confused inner life" (Miller 81) is finally undone by the siren call of the passion-filled "rival reality" (Bell 27) that she did not get to enjoy. Just before this "troubled and divided" wife (Herdman 161) exits her empty house and hurries toward her doom, Kathleen offers this chilling observation: "You have no time to run from a face you do not expect" (Bowen 665). When the tale concludes a few lines later, the frightening countenance that glares back at her from the driver's seat and causes her to scream loud and long may not be that of a ghost or a murderer after all. The face, perchance, is her own.

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ABSTRACTS

Depuis sa publication, "The Demon Lover" d'Elizabeth Bowen divise la critique. Pour la plupart des lecteurs, il s'agit d'une histoire de fantômes typiquement anglaise dans laquelle une femme mondaine d'âge moyen est enlevée par le spectre de son premier amour, un beau soldat tué pendant la première guerre mondiale. D'autres préfèrent y voir une simple histoire de meurtre dénuée de tout élément surnaturel. La femme est enlevée par le soldat qui n'est pas mort au combat mais s'est enfui et s'est tenu caché, la suivant et l'épiait pendant plus de vingt ans. L'action étant située à Londres durant le Blitz, d'autres encore considèrent que ce texte est un récit allégorique, la femme symbolisant l'isolement et la vulnérabilité de la Grande-Bretagne à l'aube de la Seconde Guerre mondiale. Il existe toutefois une quatrième interprétation qui mérite réflexion : la possibilité que la disparition de l'héroïne soit l'œuvre non pas d'un fantôme ni d'un meurtrier mais de son propre doppelgänger.

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Terry W. Thompson has published over sixty peer-reviewed articles in such journals as *The CEA Critic*, *Papers on Language and Literature*, *English Language Notes*, and *The South Carolina Review*. He has new articles forthcoming on James's "The Jolly Corner," Wells's "The Country of the Blind," Blackwood's "The Sea Fit," and du Maurier's "The Birds."