

WOMEN ENTRAPPED BY THE PAST: THE HOUSE IN PARIS AND A WORLD OF LOVE BY ELIZABETH BOWEN

Olena Lytovka*

Abstract: The uncanny atmosphere in E. Bowen's novels and short stories is often related to the house and felt by its female inhabitants. Lilia in *A World of Love*, Karen in *The House in Paris* and other female characters experience the presence of something disturbing and frightening in the house, perceive the domestic space as strange, sinister and feel entrapped there.

Relying on psychoanalytic literary criticism and G. Bachelard's theory of space, I will argue that the uncanniness of the house originates in the women's traumatic experience of the past. The haunted house appears to be a manifestation of "the crisis of the proper" dissolving the certainty about herself and the world. The house traditionally being associated with woman's domain, symbolically representing the female body become the embodiment of her inner world with its uneasiness, anxieties and fears.

Keywords: The uncanny; domestic space; gendered space; memory.

The uncanny atmosphere in E. Bowen's novels and short stories is often related to the house and felt by its female inhabitants. Lilia in *A World of Love*, Karen in *The House in Paris* and other female characters experience the presence of something disturbing and frightening in the house, perceive the domestic space as strange, sinister and feel entrapped there.

In this paper I would like to look at the uncanniness inherent in the images of the house and to show its relation to the past experience of its female inhabitants, especially the experience related to family and marriage. I am going to focus on Bowen's novel *A World of Love* (1955) and *The House in Paris* (1935).

Without doubt, the house is a focal point in many Bowen's works. According to Malcolm Bradbury, Elizabeth Bowen's fiction is "home-based" (2001, p.145); her novels are "domestic", as R. B. Kershner puts it (1997, p.68). In one of her essays Bowen herself states that home is "the core of the world" (Bowen 2008, p.39). However, instead of standing for a site of comfort, safety and stability, home, in Bowen, appears to be antagonistic to women, it makes them feel threatened and uncertain of who they really are. In search for explanation why domestic space is perceived as uncanny by its female inhabitants, I should start from giving a short overview of woman's role at that period.

The early twentieth century was the time of great changes in the sphere of gender relations. The revolutionary climate that reigned welcomed many new freedoms for women. Their rights and status greatly improved, they were allowed to vote and recognized as equals to men. Women could attend colleges and do the jobs that only men used to do. Their lifestyle changed as well: they began to smoke in public, wear more daring clothes and cut their hair short.

Nevertheless, the women's rights movement affected some women more than others. In spite of many breakthroughs during 1920s-1930s, that lifestyle was enjoyed mostly by young, single women and conditions for married women were nearly as restricting as ever. For all the changes in status, it was still generally accepted that women's place is in the home. It was unusual for married woman to be employed and the majority of married women worked inside their homes as a housewife taking care of their husbands, children and keeping the house.

John R. Gillis calls the period between 1850 and 1950 "the era of mandatory marriage" (p.229). The compulsion to marry was evident in early twentieth century. First of all, the pressure to marry had numerical character: because

of the war there were more single women of marriageable age than men. But that was not the only reason. A married certificate served as a way to increase a woman's social status. Marriage stood for home and home was necessary to social and material well-being. Nevertheless, the ideal of companionship was rarely achieved in married life (Gillis 1985, p.233). Most found their relations with family and friends far more personally satisfying than those with their spouses.

Ina Zweiniger-Bargielowska claims that twentieth century British women embodied Englishness as “domestic and familial life, and the notions of the rooted and stable - belonging, attachment and settlement - that this suggested” (2001, p.303). But what stability and settlement would marriage ensure for women? The role of woman in the family was generally that of dependent wife and mother. Gillis calls it “domesticization of the female” (Gillis 1985, p.245), especially living in the cities. As they did not work they stayed at home “yoked to their families in subordinate roles” (p.245).

In fact, twentieth century women inherited much from the Victorian Age. Thus, the main task of woman was to serve man and family. Woman was the product of the system which oppressed her with home as the centre of “domestic slavery” (Millet 1973, p.131). Being inescapably tied to their

homes by their families and domestic chores women longed for escape from the so called doll's house (Holdsworth 1988). The role of an "item of domestic comfort" (Craig 1986, p.69) was oppressive for women and could cause different sorts of disturbances connected with domestic space.

In her fiction, Bowen depicts female characters in their unconscious attempt to resist domesticisation, and the dark images of the house appear to be the result of their failure. The traumatic losses they go through in their lives come back to them in the form of the uncanny feeling with the house becoming haunted and fear inspiring.

Many scholars including Sigmund Freud, as well as Nicholas Royle, Dylan Trigg, Paulina Palmer, Sara Wasson and others agree that space regarded as uncanny is a result of traumatic experiences of the past which have been repressed but return to invade the present. Cathy Caruth claims that "to be traumatized is precisely to be possessed by an image or event" (1995, pp.4-5). It usually involves time disruption with the past surfacing in the present, especially the past which has not been worked through. Thus, the memory traces are revised and interweave with fresh experiences producing the uncanny effect.

The time in Bowen's novel *The House in Paris* is narrowed to a single day with numerous digressions - recollections, past experiences embedded and reemerging into the pre-

sent. The three sections called The Present, The Past and The Present suggest that the events are not arranged in chronological order. The text is constructed according to the circular narrative structure the novel having begun in the present and coming back to it. The similar circular structure can be observed in Bowen's novel *A World of Love* where the action takes place during a few days in present with recurrent flashbacks to the past.

The relation between the present and the past in the novels correlates with Bergsonian theory of duration where the past, the present and the future interpenetrate resulting in a time-filled moment, a moment of being; it also has much in common with the principle of memory revealed by Victoria Stewart:

conceived not as a movement from the present into the past but as the emergence of the past into the present. [...] this past is more real than 'reality' itself (2006, p.164).

The house becomes the place of intersection of time and space axes, and its inhabitants are caught between past and present, material and immaterial, real and unreal.

In *The House in Paris* there are four houses represented: Madame Fisher's house (rue Sylvestre Bonnard, Paris), the Michaelis' house (Chester Terrace, London), Naomi's dead aunt's house (Twickenham, England) and Karen's dying

aunt's house Mount Iris (Rushbrook, Ireland). In *A World of Love* there are two houses depicted: Antonia's mansion Montefort and Lady Latterly's castle, which are both located in Ireland. It can't help being noticed that most of the houses are owned by women. But, remarkably, they do not have power over their own space, it is rather the space that rules and dictates its will.

The domestic space of the two novels is presented as alien and frightening, and the house is distinguished by its unfriendliness and antagonism. It is uncannily inanimate and alive at the same time. The houses and objects appear to be like monstrous creatures that devour those who come in. In Bowen, the house is often compared to a well, an underground, a grave, a web, an island, a labyrinth, a prison, in a word, to different kinds of a trap:

Untrodden rocky canyons or virgin forests cannot be more entrapping than the inside of a house, which shows you what life is (Bowen 1987, p.77).

The house in Paris is like a monster with a spine which traps those who come in ("sending the vibrations up the spine of the house", "the door shut behind them with a triumphant click", "the bar-like stripes of the paper" (Bowen 1987, pp. 65, 38, 57)). The house seems small and narrow outside, like a doll's house:

The inside of this house - [...] with 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 (p.24).

And even if the house is “asleep”, its eyes are still open watching you and radiating a troubling strangeness.

In *A World of Love* we can see a picture of the Irish Big House in decline: having “an air of having gone down”, “impoverished”, with trees felled and façade carrying “a ghost of style” (Bowen 1993, p.9). The old mansion looks deserted, so that people are surprised finding it is actually inhabited by the Danby family.

But there is something more about the house than just being old and going down, there is something about its atmosphere: “the air around them felt [...] overintensified, strange” (p.18). Lilia dislikes the house, finds it terrible, dreadful; as for Antonia, “something monstrous seemed to her to be under her own roof” (p.18). Lilia has a neurosis about anyone standing outside the door, she has had this sense since she came to live there, she feels “besieged, under observation or in some way even under threat” (p.52). In

spite of the house's name implying protection and stability, it tends to unsettle the notion of stability itself, to settle the sense of insecurity within the four walls of the house.

What produces this uncanny effect? In the novel *A World of Love* Bowen puts the question as follows: "Was it the place itself, her mistrust of Ireland or the uncanny attentiveness of the country which kept her [Lilia's] nerves ever upon the stretch?" (p.53). Comparing *A World of Love* to *The House in Paris* it is evident that it is not the matter of Ireland, nor of the location in the countryside. In *The House in Paris* the action takes place mostly in the cities of France and England but the same atmosphere of uncanniness can be observed in the houses. Is it the house then? Not a particular house, not just Montefort, not the house in Paris rue Sylvestre Bonnard. It is about the Bowen's concept of the house or home space disrupted by the recurrence from the past of their female inhabitants.

According to Freud (1920), the house symbolically represents the female genital or the female body in general. Freud interprets the fears connected with the house as the transformation of unsatisfied libido. In addition to that, Trigg claims that our orientation and experience of place are fundamentally affective. The totality of experience of place begins and ends with the body (2012, p.10). Trigg understands the uncanny as a felt experience that disturbs the body.

However, Gaston Bachelard's concept of the house appears to be more suitable in the interpretation of these two novels. Bachelard regards the house as the representation of both body and soul (*italics mine* - O.L.). He claims that the house stands for inner, intimate world of a person (Bachelard 1994). The mental image of the house repeats or echoes the inside world of the subject and the image of the house is the imprint of his or her mental state. Thus, if the uncanny is localized within the domestic we should be looking for its decipherment in individual experience of women who inhabit them, especially in their past.

The houses are haunted and the women who own or inhabit them are possessed by the images of their past. Karen abandoned her illegitimate son after her lover had killed himself. Now whatever she does in her life the idea of her son being in the world does not let her move on with her life. Lilia's lover died too, he was killed in the war. But in addition to the grief of the loss, since their farewell at the station she has lived with the vague knowledge or strong suspicion of his cheating on her. Even after many years the women remain in the power of their memories. They are haunted because of "the past not being yet over" (Bowen 1987, p.50) or because of the "not-to-be-settled old scores" (Bowen 1993, p.35).

The house appears to be a place of transit, an outgoing point from where the “leaps” in time and space are made, a heterotopian portal into what was supposed to be long dead but is not. Michel Foucault’s concept of heterotopia embraces places which are something like counter-sites, “a sort of simultaneously mythic and real contestation of the space in which we live” (Foucault 1967). The house in Bowen is a house turned upside down, an antihome, an embodiment of homeliness uprooted - it is not the place of the living but of the dead.

Most of the houses depicted in the novels belong to women who are dying or who are dead. The house in Paris is owned by Mme Fisher who is dying. Irish Aunt Violet is dying, too. After Naomi’s aunt’s death the Twickenham house is offered for sale - at the moment it’s nobody’s house, foreign space, transient, in-between owners, empty: “the aunt’s house was hollow, completely dead” with “bare drawing-room” (Bowen 1987, p.104), it was an “empty house”, dusty, with unmown lawn (p.115). It is “a place that’s hardly a place at all” because the house belongs to somebody dead (p.111).

In *A World of Love*, there are also many allusions to death: the darkness, silence and emptiness which reign throughout the house contribute to the aura of a tomb;

stillness, trance and stupor envelopes the inhabitants; the heat leading to fast decay, the flies, the sight of sleeping Antonia which reminds of a dead body - her immobility, “un-fresh surrounding air”, “her face sealed by the resolution never” (Bowen 1993, p.11); the muslin dress belonging to somebody dead that was hanging at the window at night looking like a body of a hanged person. But the element which most explicitly hints at death is the presence of Guy felt by Lilia:

Obstinate rememberers of the dead seem to queer themselves or show some sign of a malady; in part they come to share the dead’s isolation, which it is not in their power to break down (p.44).

The haunting is even more persistent, claims Palmer, when the family secret is known to most or all family members and yet they do not talk about it, treat it as unspeakable: “The trauma resides as much in secrecy as in the event itself, the burden of not telling creates a network of wounds that exceed the event itself” (Palmer 2012, p.118). The house due to its enclosed structure and the power structure of a (hetero-)patriarchal family promotes violence (p.110).

The secret of Leopold’s birth, Guy’s unfaithfulness haunt the domestic space of the house and deepen the trauma of its inhabitants. The secrets raise the spectre of taboo and transgression with their consequences for identity.

The revival of the past in *A World of Love* to much extent owes to the discovery of Guy's love letters thus unburying the family history of the unconsummated loves and unfulfilled expectations and producing the uncanny effect. In this case, as Trigg (2012) puts it, to "see" would mean to unconsciously remember. To cross the borderline entering a house you have been to before is more than to transgress a spatial border but it is to enter a different time scale. It means to combine the traces of familiarity with the presence of unfamiliarity. Things that make up a given place lose their status as objects in the world and become an extension of the formal structure of personal identity (Trigg 2012).

In *The House in Paris* the numb cry of the furniture which "knows" or "remembers", "objects that cannot protest but seem likely to suffer" (Bowen 1987, p.88) evoke Proust's category of felt time: the past which is hidden in material objects, or rather in the sensation this material object gives. Marcel Proust initiated a new form of temporality which presupposes memory's dependence on the senses. Like in Proust, in Bowen, time is psychic time, what is important is the coherence between time and space and the strategy of "delving deep down into ourselves, in regaining the time of our inner lives" (Kristeva 1993, p.6). The letters from the

Monterfort attic, the objects from the house in Paris and other houses are called upon to remind the women of the unresolved past which has to be fully known and assimilated.

The women, in Bowen, are trying to reconcile the present and the past reconsidering the choices made or rather imposed. Undoubtedly, one of the most important events of their lives was marriage. Karen as well as Lilia inhabited the world where “a woman’s real life only began with marriage, girlhood amount[ed] to no more than a privileged looking on” (Bowen 1987, p.69) and young girls had to learn to see love socially. The intimacy and affection that is so central to the ideology of the domestic sphere is displaced by a social contract.

After several unsuccessful attempts to get a job and earn her living Lilia was married off to Fred. Weak, dull-witted and subordinate - that is how her family see her. After Guy’s, her fiancé’s, death she could only have a home on marrying a man she hardly knew. She was merely a complement to the house which she has disliked since that time. Similarly, Naomi Fisher could only become engaged after she inherited the house of her dead aunt.

On the other hand, Karen felt herself imprisoned in the harmony of her parents’ home, the everydayness, evenness and “unconscious sereneness behind their living” (p.70).

She was uncertain about her marriage which would make her life settled, static and she was reluctant to find herself in the routine life like her brother after his marriage: “This was the world she sometimes wished to escape from but, through her marriage, meant to inhabit still” (p.71). She could not stand the calmness and passivity of her home and she wanted desperately to throw it off by breaking the engagement so promising with the respected man of her class and diving into a secret love affair with French-English-Jew Max. However, her unconscious attempt to escape was not a success, and with Max’s death and their child abandoned Karen becomes haunted by the past and seems to be forever the hostage of her memory.

According to Anna Whitehead, the traces of unresolved past events, or the ghosts of those who died too suddenly to be properly mourned, “possess those who are seeking to get on with the task of living” (2004, p.6). The death of Max and Guy constituting the traumatic experience of a loss for the women keeps them in the state of time and space ambiguity and result in disorienting uncertainty about the self. Moreover, the marriages that followed cemented their role of domestic women, subordinate wives entrapped in their “doll’s houses”.

In one of her essays, Bowen claims that the sense of space is emotional and “there is a close relation between the emotional effect of the atmosphere and the crisis of the character” (Bowen 1962, p.139). Summing it up, the haunted house appears to be a manifestation of “the crisis of the proper”, to use Royle’s term (2003, p.1), dissolving the certainty about the self and the world. Karen, Lilia and other women are, as Freud puts it, “suffering from reminiscences” (1997, p.88). Their symptoms are residues of particular traumatic experiences. Not only do they remember these experiences, but they still cling to them emotionally. Wishing to suppress the emotions they remain with a permanent burden upon their life which manifests itself as the feeling of the uncanny.

NOTES

* Olena Lytovka is a PhD student at the Chair of Anglo-Irish Literature, Maria Curie-Skłodowska University in Lublin, Poland. She is particularly interested in English modernist literature and psychoanalytic approaches to literature interpretation. In her PhD thesis she analyses E. Bowen’s fiction and focuses on the uncanny representations in the domestic space of the novels.

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