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The Existential Modernism of Elizabeth Bowen

by

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A thesis

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To the Graduate Faculty:

The members of the committee appointed to examine the thesis of Katherine Merrill find it satisfactory and recommend that it be accepted.

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## **Dedication**

I dedicate this thesis to my grandmother Elizabeth Leatham Merrill. I wish I had known you, but at least I had the opportunity to walk in your footsteps at your alma mater these past two years. Your children say that you would be proud of me.

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## The Existential Modernism of Elizabeth Bowen

Thesis Abstract--Idaho State University (2018)

Since Elizabeth Bowen is a growing figure in the literary canon, there is much that has yet to be discussed concerning her work. For instance, critics are only now beginning to question how to classify her work in terms of existing categories and periods. This thesis proposes that Bowen should be considered a modernist writer not only for her idiosyncratic style that reflects the modernist writings of her contemporaries, but also, and more importantly, for the existential concerns and themes that arise in her novels. As parallel movements that developed together and responded to the same events from the last decade of the nineteenth century to the middle of the twentieth century, existentialism and modernism share concerns, themes, and ideas. By using an existential lens, we can establish that Bowen is dealing with the same existential issues that are prevalent throughout modernism.

Key Words: Elizabeth Bowen, *The Last September*, *The House in Paris*, *The Heat of the Day*, modernism, existentialism, Nietzsche, Kierkegaard, Sartre



## Introduction

Elizabeth Bowen published novels and short stories from her first short story collection *Encounters*, published in 1923, until 1968 with her final novel, *Eva Trout*. Anglo-Irish, she was born in Dublin but lived much of her adult life in England. Despite her friendships with novelists such as Rose Macaulay and Virginia Woolf, Bowen is still a growing figure in the literary canon and there is much that has yet to be discussed concerning her work. For instance, critics have only recently begun to question how to classify her work in terms of existing categories and periods, since her career stretches from the height of modernism to the rise of postmodernism. The scholarship that has been done on Bowen's work generally falls into two categories. First, there is cultural and historical criticism, which most frequently deals with her split nationality and its echoes in her fiction. Second, many critics attempt to classify her works as realist, modernist, or late modernist, or they demonstrate that she is simply unclassifiable.

Most critics of Bowen use forms of cultural and historical criticism, ranging from postcolonialism to gender and queer studies, to demonstrate how Bowen's works comment on the social issues of her time. For instance, Bowen's split in nationalities draws many critics. Taking a historical approach, Neil Corcoran argues, "I think that she has arrestingly strange, but intelligible, things to say about Ireland and Anglo-Irishness, childhood, and war... I see her as a writer deeply engaged with some of the most urgent matters of both personal and public history in her time" (13-14). Following this line of interest, he conducts close readings of several of Bowen's central works to examine her constant self-reflective return to the images of Ireland, childhood, and war, from a personal and cultural perspective. He uses this to show us "her deep—although not, perhaps, abiding—affections for [Ireland]" (14). While studies like Corcoran's are more frequent in recent Bowen scholarship, Bowen's work also draws feminist

and queer critics. For example, the feminist critic Phyllis Lassner argues that Bowen's work emphasizes women's struggles with the patriarchy. According to Lassner, "Bowen...pays greater attention to the lack of access to self-expression for female character. For her, women's inexpressiveness is a function of how their will is paralysed by social and literary traditions" (*Women Writers* 163). Lassner argues that Bowen persistently has female characters who struggle with self-expression in patriarchal "social and literary traditions." However, it is important to note, as Lassner admits, that Bowen "dismissed such labelling" as being called a feminist writer (153).

As for the second category, Bowen's classification and place in the literary canon have been difficult to determine from the beginning. Early critics on Bowen classified her as realist author. For example, one such critic, Jocelyn Brooke, suggests that Bowen has a preoccupation with the relationship between an individual and his environment (8). Brooke pays particular attention to Bowen's vivid descriptions of the times and places she encounters, such as her depiction of London during World War II in *The Heat of the Day*, considered to be the most accurate literary portrayal of Blitz-struck London. Later critics challenge the classification of Bowen as a realist. Susan Osborn, for example, argues that Brooke and his fellow early critics are unable to reconcile themselves with the ways Bowen's work diverges stylistically from the realist tradition. Some of these later critics classify Bowen as a modernist because these stylistic irregularities in her novels are reminiscent of other modernist works, such as the works of Virginia Woolf. Examples of these stylistic irregularities include abrupt shifts in thought, disjunctive dialogue, and ellipses that refer to major scenes left out of the narrative and only talked about later on.

Over the past decade, critics have argued that Bowen's work cannot be limited to one tradition or critical approach. As Maud Ellmann states in the preface of *Elizabeth Bowen: The Shadow Across the Page*, her expansive critical study of Bowen's life and work, while "much has recently been gained from re-evaluating Bowen as a woman writer, an Anglo-Irish writer, and a war writer...her novels and short stories far exceed these classifications" (xi). For example, several critics have engaged in the argument that Bowen's work actually hovers between realism and modernism, unable to be wholly placed in either. Keri Walsh, for instance, takes up Hermione Lee's argument that Bowen's novels are a fusion of Anglo-Irish literature and European modernism; however, Walsh's argument takes a turn that suggests yet another tradition in Bowen: surrealism. She points out how many critics say that Bowen's style is "strange," and she suggests, "Uncovering Bowen's dialogue with surrealism...allows us to see her 'strangeness' in a new light, as part of her engagement with avant-garde, continental discourses" (128). In other words, surrealism can help us to not only understand Bowen's strange writing, but also consider her as an avant-garde writer. Here we see how Bowen's work can be applied to many traditions.

A few recent critics, such as Thomas Davis and Paige Reynolds, have attempted to synthesize the disagreements on Bowen's classification by arguing that Bowen is a late modernist writer. The fairly recent concept of late modernism challenges the dichotomy between modernism and realism. "Late modernist literature" refers to literature that is still considered modernist despite being published in the 1930s and 1940s, after the height of modernism. Tyrus Miller, Jed Esty, and Thomas Davis note a shift in this literature, its focus turning outward to the external world—culture and everyday life—in contrast to the inward, psychological narratives characteristic of the early modernists. Esty proposes that we view late modernism, not as "a new

historical phase requiring its own formal innovations” (4), as we view postmodernism, but rather as an aftereffect of modernism that responds to the decline of the British state. He argues that many of the key high modernists, faced with the decline of modernism in the 30s and 40s, responded to their changing society by infusing their writing with the sense “of cultural revival” (8). The way that Davis, in his book *The Extinct Scene: Late Modernism and Everyday Life*, sees Bowen participating in this outward turn and response to cultural change is through what he calls her “disruptions of everyday life.” Davis writes, “In their sustained attention to those disruptions of everyday life, Bowen’s stories ask what the unsettled surfaces of the everyday might tell us about less visible historical transformation. ...How do these agitations at the level of everyday life correspond to ‘great change’?” (2). Thus, Bowen responds to and prompts us to consider the great changes in the world by focusing on the everyday and how the everyday is disrupted by change. While this argument is strong in that it accounts for the outward turn and mixture of realist and modernist sensibilities in her novels, it does not account for the internal focus that Bowen retains, particularly with her characters, that is distinctly modernist.

Therefore, while the scholarship surrounding Elizabeth Bowen is steadily growing, many facets have remained unexplored, including how the content, not just the idiosyncratic style, of her novels relates to modernism. This thesis provides an alternate approach and answer to the question of how Bowen’s novels relate to modernism by examining *The Last September*, *The House in Paris*, and *The Heat of the Day* through an existentialist lens. I argue that Bowen should be considered a modernist writer not just for her idiosyncratic style that reflects the aesthetic modernism of her contemporaries, but also, and more importantly, for the existential concerns and themes that arise in characters’ lives over the course of her novels.

It is important for me to note that this thesis is not the first scholarship on Bowen to explore the connections between her novels and existentialism. Janice Rossen, in her dissertation *The Early Novels of Elizabet Bowen: An Existential Reading*, examines Bowen's focus on character relationships and points out how these relationships reflect Sartre's own ideas on relationships, "with questions of free will and with perception" (8). The relationships, Rossen argues, are full of conflict between the self and others to the point that they become impossible. As she writes, "Relationships in Bowen fail in different ways, but this fundamental theme underlies all of them: they are based on irreconcilable conflict" (8). The conflict, based on how characters perceive one another and respond to being perceived, is the primary reason the relationships fail. Rossen suggests that this is evidence toward a kind of pessimism in Bowen's novels, but most importantly, she argues "that [Bowen] does have a coherent, definite philosophy of human nature which is depicted in possibilities inherent in relationships rather than in individual characters" (14). In other words, the characters' relationships, not the characters themselves, depict Bowen's philosophy of human nature. While Rossen conducts a valuable examination of Bowen's early novels and their correlations to Sartre's existentialism, her exclusive focus on the relationships in Bowen's early novels does not explore the depth to which Bowen's works throughout her career can be examined existentially. The purpose of this thesis is not only to conduct a more thorough existential study of three specific novels spanning her career but also to thereby provide reason for her to be considered a modernist writer.

As parallel movements that developed together and responded to the same events from the last decade of the nineteenth century to the middle of the twentieth century, existentialism and modernism share concerns, ideas, and methods. Existentialism is a branch of philosophy that addresses the questions of our existence, especially when faced with the threat of nihilism, the

idea that life and our world are meaningless, which became a major concern in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. As nihilism grew more prominent, so did existentialism as a response. Existential philosophers respond to the crises of these centuries by presenting various theories of how we might make, or at the very least accept, our lives in a way that makes living worthwhile. In other words, most existentialists emphasize that, even in a nihilistic world, we must give meaning to our own existence. Existentialism also refocuses philosophy on the human individual, rather than placing emphasis on rationality and abstract concepts such as “the good.” Thus, existentialism is a way of philosophizing rather than a set of philosophical doctrines. Instead of analyzing the meanings of fundamental terms or evaluating arguments, existentialists explore aspects of the human experience, such as despair, anxiety, and the need for meaning. They often do this through novels and plays, such as Albert Camus’s *The Stranger* or Jean-Paul Sartre’s *No Exit*.

Existentialism is not a school of thought or a system because, although existentialists share common core themes such as despair or angst, choice, freedom, authenticity, and affirmation, their use and understanding of these terms may differ. Moreover, existential philosophers differ greatly in their conclusions due to differing ideologies. For example, while Kierkegaard and Sartre both insist that the only thing which we are not free to choose is whether to choose or not, one is a steadfast Christian and the other strictly an atheist, and both beliefs strongly affect their philosophies.

The themes of despair or angst, choice, freedom, authenticity, and affirmation are not only the concerns of existentialist philosophers; they are also the concerns of modernists, and are addressed in works such as T.S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land* or James Joyce’s *Dubliners*. Existentialism and modernism are chronologically related in that they developed together from

the last decade of the nineteenth century through the middle of the twentieth. However, both are also unlike normal schools or movements. They resist essentializing definitions that would reduce them to lists of doctrines or even points of agreement, and each also lacks the common purpose and solidarity between their members that characterizes the movements that preceded the twentieth century and the upheaval of ideas and traditions that came with it. The influences on modernism, such as the threat of meaninglessness in the modern world, the alienated individual, and the need to make some order out of the chaos, are the very issues that existentialism deals with, especially since they both responded to the events and issues of the later nineteenth and early twentieth century, especially the traumas of the First World War.

These common concerns of modernism and existentialism can be boiled down to one question: what does it mean to be an existing individual in a nihilistic world? As Robert C. Solomon writes,

[Existentialism] is a philosophical realization of a self-consciousness living in a “broken world” (Marcel), an “ambiguous world” (de Beauvoir), a “dislocated world” (Merleau-Ponty), a world into which we are “thrown” and “condemned” yet “abandoned” and “free” (Heidegger and Sartre), a world which appears to be indifferent or even “absurd” (Camus). (ix)

Existentialists first recognize that they are in a world without meaning, a world that is “broken,” “ambiguous,” and “indifferent,” and then they are faced with the challenge of determining what this means for them and their existence. However, this realization and world is not exclusive to existentialists. This world is the very world that modernists respond to in their literary, artistic, and musical innovations. As Robert Pippin suggests, “what is distinctive about modern art is the intense philosophical self-consciousness of the likes of Manet, Flaubert, Baudelaire, Wagner,

Eliot, Pound, and so many others” (12). In other words, modern art, including the work of the modernists, is particularly a result of philosophical thought. This philosophical self-consciousness arises because the ideas of intrinsic meaning in life and of human autonomy—or the ability to determine or rule oneself—that rose with the Enlightenment were challenged in the “broken,” “dislocated,” or “ambiguous” world Solomon describes. Subsequently, both existentialists and modernists rise to meet this challenge in their works.

In addition to shared concerns and themes, both existentialism and modernism explored new methods. For instance, literary modernists searched for new ways of expressing and exploring the human experience. Writers such as James Joyce, Virginia Woolf, and T.S. Eliot developed and practiced innovative literary methods such as stream-of-consciousness narratives and multiple narrative and poetic points of view. Likewise, existentialists broke from the established thoughts and assumptions of Western philosophy that had been in place for centuries, particularly rationalism and the scientific need to categorize the individual. Instead of examining humanity through rationality and the methods of philosophers such as Descartes or Kant, existentialists recognized that in a world where long-held truths and values were being challenged, a new approach was necessary to determine value in existence. Some of the existentialists even demonstrate stylistic methods that parallel those of modernists. For instance, Pippin argues that Nietzsche’s “inconsistency, obscurity, and unsystematic playfulness, all make him one of the most interesting and representative modernist authors to read” (115). In fact, not only do Nietzsche’s stylistic elements in his writing tie him to modernism, but Nietzsche is often considered to have had a significant philosophical influence on modernism. According to Michael Levenson, “Nietzsche exults in the thought that the sleep of culture is coming to an end, that we might escape the complacency of modernity and revive the power of artistic vision....



Nietzsche welcomes the creative destruction that will become a rhythm in modernist ambition” (2-3). In other words, Nietzsche not only sees that the world is changing, becoming the one that Solomon describes, but encourages the idea that this change will make humanity more aware of life and art, and he shares the same interest in “creative destruction” with the modernists.

Similarly, Daniel Albright notes, “No previous philosopher was quite so skeptical of ideas, quite so ready to embrace *art* as the center of human life” (22). This skepticism and emphasis on art are themes prominent in modernism. Modernists are skeptical of and challenge tradition, especially traditional judgments of art. As Albright says, “Counter to the old value statement about measuring your art against the standards of antiquity, modern art tended to measure itself against a criterion of originality” (6). In other words, modernist art constitutes, quoting Nietzsche, “a transvaluation of all values”: the rejection of traditional values and an emphasis on the new (Albright 1).

Since the concepts and questions that arise around the problem of existence are shared between modernism and existentialism—including despair, individuality, freedom, and confronting nihilism—by using an existential lens we can establish that Bowen is dealing with the same existential issues that are prevalent throughout modernism. Bowen’s novels are filled with characters who try to live well. However, they all fail in their attempts to some degree. Some make choices that are thwarted by social influences and some fall into the comfortable molds of social expectation. Some appear content with their lives while others are clearly discontent but unsure how to make their lives more worthwhile in some way. This sets the perfect scene to examine the characters through an existential lens, as existentialism confronts the question of what it means to exist, to be an individual, and what we should make of our lives in the face of nihilism. Approaching these novels through the lens of philosophy can illuminate

the motivations and thoughts of the characters that populate them. The reasons for their choices are frequently indistinct and the moments of decision absent as Bowen focuses on the dialogue between characters and seemingly tangential trains of thought. Therefore, upon closer reading through this philosophical lens, we come to more fully understand her characters and thus her novels, particularly by considering the existential themes of despair, affirmation, freedom, and responsibility introduced by the philosophers Soren Kierkegaard, Friedrich Nietzsche, and Jean-Paul Sartre. It is Bowen's concern with these themes, played out in her characters, that makes her a modernist, for these are also themes of modernism, since modernists, as well as existentialists face the problem of existence and the threat of nihilism.

## Chapter One

### The Affirmation of Life in *The Last September*

The second of Elizabeth Bowen's novels, *The Last September*, is set during the Irish War of Independence and most of the secondary work done on the novel addresses the war through its effect on the characters and the problem of identity for the Anglo-Irish as they are torn between the two warring nations. According to Laura Green, for instance, "The fragmentation and dislocation of identity is a predominant theme in the novel" (35). She explores the fragmented identities of the Anglo-Irish and of the protagonist, Lois Farquar, and how Lois's life mirrors Bowen's own struggles with identity. She additionally argues that the Anglo-Irish's ignorance and detachment from the war and the land, as portrayed in *The Last September*, is what ultimately led to the class's deterioration. Taking a different approach, instead closely examining the impact of the war on Lois, Susanne Cammack utilizes thing theory to argue that the crashing of a gramophone at a party in the novel symbolizes Lois's trauma from the war. Cammack acknowledges how little we see of the war in Lois's life, but argues that "Lois is not detached from the violence...but fully aware of its presence as a 'sense of life' and all that remains is for her to find a method of coping with that aspect of her reality" (138). In other words, the war has a significant presence in Lois's life and many of her struggles throughout the novel are her attempts to cope with the war. However, while the war and political tensions cast shadows over the events and characters in the novel, the central conflict each character in the novel confronts is not the war, but rather the threat of nihilism.

An alternative way of examining the inner conflicts of the characters is an existential one. Their conflicts and struggles can be clearly examined through Friedrich Nietzsche's test of eternal recurrence and the ultimate necessity to affirm one's life. Nietzsche's point is significant

for our interpretation of this novel because it addresses the nihilism that was pervading Europe after the First World War and that was reflected in modernist literature. An existential examination of most of the characters shows that they are discontented with and struggle to affirm life. In particular, this can be seen in the characters Mr. Montmorency, Marda Norton, and the central character Lois.

Nietzsche is most often considered a nihilist. However, careful study of his philosophy makes it clear that, while he argues that the world is nihilistic and meaningless, his primary concern is finding a solution to the threat of nihilism. In his first book, *The Birth of Tragedy* (1872), Nietzsche explains the problem of existence by relaying the story of King Midas finding Silenus, a wise companion of Dionysus's. King Midas asks Silenus "what was the best and most desirable of all things for man," to which Silenus responds, "Oh, wretched ephemeral race, children of chance and misery... What is best of all is utterly beyond your reach: not to be born, not to *be*, to be *nothing*. But the second best for you is--to die soon" (42). Silenus reminds Midas that human beings are short-lived, and their short lives are full of disease, pain, and grief. Therefore, the best thing would be never to have existed in the first place. The initial pessimistic view of humanity that is presented in this story is something that Nietzsche doesn't contend with. He agrees that life is short and full of pain and that the world is devoid of meaning and purpose. However, it is Silenus's conclusion and the subsequent conclusion drawn by other pessimists and nihilists that Nietzsche strongly disagrees with. He argues that there is a solution to this problem of existence.

He finds his solution in the Greeks, whom he greatly admired, but not for the classical ideal for which so many other philosophers admire them. *The Birth of Tragedy* examines the Greeks by establishing a distinction between the Apollonian and Dionysian. The former is the

classical ideal, filled with harmony and order, but the latter represents chaos and passion. Nietzsche argues that Greek tragedy, which originated in religious festivals to Dionysus, is emblematic of the Greeks' affirmation of life in its Dionysian and Apollonian elements. It is dreamed up and driven by the wild, dancing chorus, which is quintessentially Dionysian. This, of course, does not mean that the Apollonian is completely absent from tragedy. While the chorus is Dionysian, the dream it dreams—the drama on the stage—is Apollonian. However, ultimately the drama, as a dream, is only “imagination, appearance, phenomenon,” because “Apollo governs the world of *appearance*” while “Dionysus represents the *in itself*” (Melchert 531). In other words, while the Apollonian is essential for the drama, constituting its plot, it is not at the heart and origin of tragedy, nor is it at the roots of Greek life. The Apollonian is simply the illusions and plot performed on the stage, whereas reality, or “in itself” as Melchert describes it, is represented by the Dionysian chorus. As Daniel Albright points out, “For Nietzsche, Greece is at bottom not serene, not cheerful, not measured, not composed, not nothing-in-excess, not the golden mean, but close to a state of ecstatic existential despair” (23). In other words, for Nietzsche, Greece is not, at its core, what everyone supposes it to be: a place of harmony and order and rational thought. Instead it is much better represented by Dionysus and the ecstatic behavior and emotion portrayed by the chorus as they face the reality of their human existence. Therefore, this key presence of the Dionysian chorus provides a place for “the suffering of human life” to be “presented, explored, and given weight” in the Greek tragedy (Melchert 530). Nevertheless, despite the presence of the suffering, the Greek spectator still proclaims, “It is a dream! I will dream on!” (BT 35). He continues to watch and says “yes!” to the tragedy.

Nietzsche examines tragedy because through it we can see how the Greeks solved the problem of existence. Just as they affirm the events of a tragedy, not denying or preventing the

suffering, so we affirm our own existence and our lives. Silenus says it is better for man to have never existed and Nietzsche argues that “The Greek knew and felt the terror and horror of existence” (42). However, while both acknowledge a nihilistic world, neither the Greek nor Nietzsche surrenders to it as a true nihilist or pessimist might. Rather, Nietzsche insists that we must enthusiastically affirm life, including all of the harsher parts.

This argument is the basis for Nietzsche’s dismissal of all philosophies or beliefs that seek to deny this life in search for something better, either rationally or spiritually. Lanier Anderson, in his article “Friedrich Nietzsche” in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* explains, “What is wrong with these views, according to Nietzsche, is that they negate our life, instead of affirming it” (3.2.2). We should not neglect this life. Instead, he argues, we should have a passion for it and construct lives in which we find meaning in the aesthetic. Anderson continues, “Art and artistry carry value for Nietzsche both as a straightforward first-order matter, and also as a source of higher-order lessons about how to create value more generally. At the higher-order level, he insists that we should learn from artists ‘how to make things beautiful, attractive, desirable for ourselves when they are not’ (*GS* 299)” (3.2.4). In other words, for Nietzsche, art, as part of our affirming life, makes life more valuable and beautiful for us.

It is also in *The Gay Science* that Nietzsche provides the ultimate test for affirming life. This test is the concept of eternal return or recurrence: could one will to have one’s life repeated infinitely just as one has lived it? Nietzsche’s description of the test is poignant:

What, if some day or night a demon were to steal after you into your loneliest loneliness and say to you: “This life as you now live it and have lived it, you will have to live once more and innumerable times more; and there will be nothing new in it, but every pain and every joy and every thought and sigh and everything unutterably small or great in your

life will return to you, all in the same succession and sequence...” Would you not throw yourself down and gnash your teeth and curse the demon who spoke thus? Or have you once experienced a tremendous moment when you would have answered him: “You are a god and never have I heard anything more divine.” (273-274)

Here Nietzsche proposes a thought experiment. He asks us if the prospect of our life repeating itself, without change, for eternity fills us with dread or if we could accept it joyfully. If we can accept it joyfully, then we have achieved the highest level of affirmation. As Julian Young notes, this concept of eternal return suggests the response, “were one to come to believe that whatever one did next would be repeated throughout all eternity the result would be to attach incredible importance—‘weight’, ‘gravity’—to each and every action one performed.... One would begin to live with incredible *intensity*” (319). This is the ultimate conclusion of the affirmation of life. Life and every moment and action in it becomes vitally important, especially as an eternal recurrence of this life, not some other ideal world waits at its end. Nietzsche’s thought experiment is a challenge for his real-life reader, but for my purposes, this thought experiment merely provides an illustration to clarify what it would mean to affirm life. We cannot, of course, ask a fictional character if she would say “yes!” to eternal recurrence.

Since the key issue of existentialism is determining what it means to exist, particularly in a nihilistic world, Nietzsche’s philosophy is representative of existentialism in that his purpose is to determine a solution to the problem of existence, namely the need to affirm our lives. The meaning of existence, according to Nietzsche, is found in living intensely and artistically, embracing the Dionysian reality rather than the Apollonian illusion.

In *The Last September*, the characters’ struggles can be clearly examined through Nietzsche’s concepts of affirming life or considering its eternal recurrence. The largest set of

characters in the novel are the Anglo-Irish gentry, who persevere with their parties and obligations even as a war rages around them. Instead of facing life fully like the Greeks do their tragedies, the Anglo-Irish gentry of *The Last September* are discontent in their lives. This is evident in how they turn away or seek the kind of “Apollonian illusions” described in *The Birth of Tragedy*, primarily evidenced in their social obligations, such as the frequent tennis parties that are mentioned throughout the novel. They do not fully acknowledge the war as something that can and will affect their lives, but instead endeavor to treat it as either a topic of seeming entertainment or something completely separate from them. Their detachment and avoidance of reality is perfectly illustrated in Lady Naylor’s nephew Laurence’s comment to a visiting friend Mr. Montmorency. He remarks, “I should like to be here when this house burns,” and when Mr. Montmorency expresses his disbelief at the idea, Laurence insists, “Of course, it will, though. And we shall all be so careful not to notice” (58). Laurence here acknowledges how the gentry’s world is inevitably coming to an end, symbolized by the burning of the house Danielstown, but the key statement is that closing thought: “we shall all be so careful not to notice.” This kind of obliviousness encapsulates the Anglo-Irish gentry’s unwillingness to accept the harsh realities of their lives in wartime.

When the gentry do talk about the war, it is most often with a sense of novel entertainment, as if the reality itself was an Apollonian illusion, part of the drama on the stage. This is one way that they can remain detached from the reality. For instance, during a tennis party, while they discuss a tragic incident at a British barracks, the narrator notes, “No one could quite understand why Captain Vermont and the subalterns did not seem more appalled and interested. It was not apparent how the subject rasped on their sensibilities” (64). While the gentry are captivated by the information, they are surprised that their British friends are not. The



gentry view the war abstractly, as if simply part of a drama that actually in no way reflects their life. However, even the prospect of being directly affected by it is entertaining. When Laurence tells Lois and Marda Norton about a raid for arms at a nearby great house, he says, “I am hoping perhaps they will come here tonight” (148). Lois responds, “At any rate, don’t tell the others. Uncle Richard’ll get fussy and spoil it, and if Aunt Myra meets them she will keep them talking all night” (148). Lois’s concern here isn’t on what might happen because of a raid; instead, she’s worried that the excitement of the event would be dampened by the older generation.

Even when the focus is not on the drama of the war, there is a disconnect between the harsh realities and how the gentry perceive them, once again suggestive of an inclination toward the Apollonian illusion, not reality. For instance, Lois’s comment above also illustrates Sir Richard’s and Lady Naylor’s usual responses. Sir Richard, of all the characters, shows the most concern about the war, but always on specific elements of it rather than the whole issue, as if he can’t accept the truth of the whole. For instance, when Peter Conner, an Irishman on the run, is captured by the British, Sir Richard’s response is “His mother is dying.... We must remember to send up now and inquire for Mrs. Michael Connor. We’ll send some grapes. The poor woman—it seems too bad” (131). His concern is primarily for Peter’s dying and now grieving mother, not Peter’s own welfare or the war overall. Similarly, when presented with the idea that his niece Lois could marry the English subaltern Gerald Lesworth, Sir Richard does not express concern about Lois’s happiness or even the overall political difference between the two, represented by the war. Instead, “What chiefly worried him was, might she not have mentioned to Gerald those guns in the lower plantations?” (84). Sir Richard here makes it clear that he only worries that Lois will be indiscrete about an idle rumor, when his real concern should be Lois’s happiness. Lois’s comment about Lady Naylor—“if Aunt Myra meets them she will keep them talking all

night”—in contrast, reveals her aunt’s lack of interest in the war. Lady Naylor would turn it into a social visit, not caring about raids and weapons.

The illusion that the Anglo-Irish use to ignore their discontent as well as the war carries over and affects their friends as well, such as the British subalterns. When Sir Richard bemoans the pain that Peter Connor’s capture causes his family, “Gerald was horrified. His duty, so bright and abstract, had come suddenly under the shadowy claw of the personal. ‘I had no idea,’ he exclaimed to Laurence, ‘these people were friends of yours’” (131). Up until now, because of the gentry’s lack of involvement, Gerald and the other English subalterns are able to separate their duty to their country from their personal relationships with the Anglo-Irish. So, when faced with the truth that the people he is fighting are closely connected to his friends in the gentry, Gerald is stunned. Laurence, however, responds by once again recasting the war as an abstraction. He asks Gerald casually, “How is this war of yours really going? Do you realize I know nothing—this might all just as well be going on in the Balkans” (131). First, he calls the war “yours,” not admitting to his own and his family’s involvement, and then he denies all knowledge of the war, making it as physically remote as it is abstract to him by saying it could be happening in the Balkans. However, following right after Gerald’s realization, this comment of Laurence’s feels particularly evasive. These examples of the Anglo-Irish’s avoidance of the war and other unfavorable aspects of life and how they instead cling to illusions make it clear that they are not able to affirm their lives.

While their general inability to affirm life is obvious in their approach to the war, the Anglo-Irish’s discontent with life can be particularly seen on an individual level. For instance, Hugo Montmorency is greatly discontented with his life. While visiting Danielstown, the place he grew up, and being surrounded by young people such as Lois, Laurence, and Gerald, he is

confronted with the fact that he has lost his youth. At the tennis party, when Mr. Montmorency goes to play in a set, “Laurence looked forward to a melancholy exhibition of departed proficiency” from “the ‘magnificent’ player of ten years ago, with little painful grunts as point after point was given way” (54). Mr. Montmorency, once very good at tennis, is now so out of practice that he will certainly lose, eliciting pity instead of admiration from his audience. However, it is more his own self-perception than his actual skill that suffers from his lost youth. His wife, Francie, recognizes this well. Later that day she reflects, “Hugo had played magnificently this afternoon... [But] she would not be able to combat Hugo’s conviction that his tennis was going off... So still she would have to feel his pride suffer—as though he were growing old, when there wasn’t a shadow of age on him” (76). In other words, Mr. Montmorency is actually not “the ‘magnificent’ player of ten years ago” that Laurence expects, but still is in his prime. While he is no longer a youth, he is not old either, but nevertheless his discontent stems from a misperception of himself as having grown old and a tendency to wonder what other choices he could have taken. His pride suffers from the idea that the young people around him view him as old and he subsequently grows unhappy. On a drive with Lois, he comes to the conclusion, “She looked...dispirited—some failure, no doubt, in his company: he must be an old man to her” (87). He thinks her lack of youthful enthusiasm, which he expects from her, is because he is old and thus not engaging company for a young woman.

With his lost youth, Mr. Montmorency has also lost possible paths he could have taken in his life. For instance, throughout the narrative, he and others wonder and even regret that he didn’t take a job in Canada years prior, and while he in many respects appears content in his marriage, taking care of Francie, he wonders briefly what it would have been like if he had married Lois’s mother Laura and is also attracted to Miss Marda Norton who visits Danielstown

as well. This mourning over his lost youth and musing about alternatives encapsulates his discontent and inability to affirm his life. Regrets and wishful thinking are symptoms of nihilism, a way of saying “no!” to life. Therefore, Mr. Montmorency could not accept the eternal recurrence of his life as a whole, but only a return to his youth, meaning that he fails Nietzsche’s test for affirming life.

Marda Norton is quite a different character than Hugo Montmorency, and thus it comes to no surprise that she seems to be content and to affirm life. For one thing, she takes misfortune in stride, much like how the Greeks, to Nietzsche, were able to face their own misfortunes. When news comes to Danielstown of a raid that nearly turned into a battle and Francie Montmorency remarks, “What times...they did live in!,” Marda replies, “But other times...other disadvantages!” (112) Marda recognizes that in any time they could live in, there would be disadvantages and struggles—the problem of existence. However, despite her seeming ability to take things in stride through her portion of the novel, from losing a suitcase to being shot in the hand, and accept them as part of life, her ability to affirm life must be called into question. This is because Lois, who had idolized Marda during her stay, later tells Gerald, “Even Marda—nothing we said to each other mattered, it hasn’t stayed, she goes off to get married in a mechanical sort of way. She thinks herself so damned funny—it’s cheap, really” (281). Lois perceives, in the end, that Marda’s character is not one who affirms life. She doesn’t live life intensely. Her engagement to a man in England is “mechanical” and how “she thinks herself so damned funny—it’s cheap, really” suggests that she is flippant about her life. Therefore, how Marda takes difficulties in stride is cast in a different light—she doesn’t affirm reality and her existence, she dismisses it. When we take into account Lois’s perception of Marda, we can see that, if she faced the challenge of eternal recurrence, Marda would be more amused than

anything, as if watching her life unfold as a comedy. To affirm one's life, one must see it as a work of beauty, something to be lived intensely, not as a comedy.

Lois, as the most central character, has the most in-depth journey toward affirming her life. Throughout the novel, Lois struggles to figure out the purpose and meaning of her life, in other words, to affirm her life, to be decisive, to step out on her own, and to craft her own life. However, as she strives to affirm her life, a few forces impede her progress. First are the continual comparisons made between her and her late mother, Laura. Laura is described as indecisive, unreliable, and detached, and these same attributes are ascribed to Lois. Mr. Montmorency says of Laura to his wife, "She never knew what she wanted.... She wanted her mind made up" (20). This lack of self-knowledge and autonomy indicates in Laura an indifference to her life. Mr. Montmorency notes, "I don't believe things ever really mattered to Laura. Nothing got close to her: she was very remote" (21). This statement makes it clear that she did not affirm life, let alone live intensely. These attributes in turn are projected onto Lois, which makes it harder for her to affirm life when her mother did not, due to the pressure of her family and friends' expectations, particularly since she is self-conscious and sensitive to the ideas of those around her.

Her family's comparison of Lois to her mother is clear in how they act around Lois. For example, whenever Lois considers telling her family something she has thought about, she decides against it because "what seemed most probable was that they would not listen" (43). Her youth likely contributes to this, but how they dismiss her thoughts echoes a similar dismissal of Laura. When Sir Richard worries about Lois telling Gerald about the guns, he thinks, "He had charged her not to, but she was just like Laura, poor Laura's own child in fact; she would talk and talk and you never knew where you had her" (84). They clearly considered Laura imprudent

and frivolous, so Sir Richard, in projecting those same attributes on Lois, does not trust her to be careful with serious information.

Another strongly projected trait on Lois is Laura's indecision. Mr. Montmorency later tells Lois about her intent to marry Gerald, "Well, I hope of course that you may be happy. And decision of any kind is an excellent thing in your mother's daughter" (243-244). Laura was indecisive and did not endeavor to make up her own mind, so in turn, when Lois finally decides to marry Gerald, Mr. Montmorency treats it as something he wouldn't normally expect of her. In contrast, when Lady Naylor learns of Lois's intent to marry Gerald, she dismisses it as fanciful. She tells Gerald, "But I'm afraid, you know that she doesn't love you.... Oh, she's naturally pleased that you like her. And at her age, with her temperament, of course it is nice to love anyone" (264). Here, just as Sir Richard worries about Lois giving away information or just as no one truly listens to her, Lady Naylor dismisses Lois's feelings as part of her supposedly fanciful and insincere "temperament."

Lady Naylor's belief that she can plan Lois's life for her is also partially due to Laura's indecisiveness and lack of autonomy. Mr. Montmorency tells his wife that Laura wanted "her mind made up" (20). Thus, in turn, Lady Naylor strives to make Lois's mind up for her, insisting that she should not marry and should instead go to art school. In a letter to Marda toward the end of the novel, Lois writes, "We all talk about my future... It is to be a school of art, certainly—why did you never tell them I couldn't draw?" (258) The use of the pronoun "we" is ironic since it is clear she has no part in this talk, and the whole prospect of her going to art school is ironic since she can't draw well and does not love it. Nevertheless, by her family treating her as if she is indecisive and lacks autonomy, Lois becomes so, unable to affirm her life until she makes a solid life decision herself. Her mother was incapable of taking on the burden of crafting a life

that she could say “yes!” to and instead allowed others to define her meaning for her. Thus, Lois is temporarily crippled by being cast in that same mold by her family.

This issue of others determining who she is and what she should do is only intensified by her self-consciousness. “She was, as Mr. Montmorency had noticed, very self-conscious” (53). Because she is self-conscious, others’ ideas of her carry significant weight. She asks Laurence, “what do you think I am for?” (236) and when she overhears her aunt and Francie Montmorency talking about her and hears Francie say “‘Lois is very—’ she was afraid suddenly. She had a panic. She didn’t want to know what she was, she couldn’t bear it: knowledge of this would stop, seal, finish one” (83), so she kicks over a water pail to make them stop talking. As she strives to figure out the purpose of her life, she both seeks and avoids others’ opinions of herself because she wants to know who she is but also wants to determine it for herself.

However, despite being restricted by being compared to her mother and despite her self-consciousness, Lois also demonstrates characteristics that help her to affirm her life. For one thing, while she struggles with being decisive, she grows to be a determined young woman. Mr. Montmorency, when describing her, reflects that “Her chin had emphasis, seemed ready for determination” (34). Being “ready for determination” is different than being determined, but this observation suggests that she has the potential to be determined, and by the end of the novel she is, at least where her aunt is concerned. Instead of going to art school, as her aunt wants, Lois goes to France to study French. This is a decisive break from the expectations in which her family would confine her. Lois is taking on the burden of choice and of crafting a life that she can affirm.

Another of Lois’s key characteristics is that she seeks vibrancy and to live intensely. She wants life outside of the Apollonian illusion. For Lois, going to art school is part of the life that

her aunt has constructed for her and thus part of the Apollonian illusion of life at Danielstown. Lady Naylor insists to Gerald, "But for Lois I do think—we all think—a school of art. She cares for her drawing intensely," to which he responds, "She never speaks of it" (265). This shows just how much of an illusion the idea of Lois going to art school is. Lady Naylor says that Lois cares for her drawing intensely, but Lois does not, which is clear in how little she talks about drawing and art other than something her aunt is insisting she do. When Lady Naylor insists that a career in art is best for Lois, her friend Mrs. Trent reflects that a career "was no life" (255). In order to truly affirm life, Lois cannot give into something that will not allow her to live intensely. Instead she must find something else. Marda can tell this when Lois shows her her drawings, saying, "I think you're cleverer than you can draw, you know," before suggesting, "Why can't you write, or something?" (141-142). Drawing is limiting for Lois, so Marda suggests another form of artistic expression. Writing may not work for Lois either, but Marda's suggestion leads to more possibilities that align with Lois's character. They even discuss the possibility of Lois's going abroad, a discussion in which Lois becomes very passionate. Ultimately, this is exactly what she does. But even apart from travel, in one of Lois's ruminations about Gerald she decides that she wants him to "give her air to grow in, not stifle her imagination" (71). Lois's vivid imagination and desire for a full life are vital for her, so when considering a life with Gerald, she realizes that she would be most happy if he doesn't confine her or her imagination. In their last conversation it even seems that she has determined he wouldn't. She remarks, "I was safe with you.... I really can't live at all if it has got to be arranged. I tell you: even what I think isn't my own.... You don't know what it's like for a snail, being walked on..." (281). Here she sketches her life at Danielstown, one without autonomy, neatly arranged for her where even her thoughts don't belong solely to her. In response, Gerald cries, "Who is a snail?" (281). But it is clear that she is



the snail, walked on by everyone but Gerald. This is why she is safe with him. With him, she feels most able to be decisive, to be autonomous, and to craft her own life: ultimately to affirm her life.

However, while she strives to live intensely, Lois's true test of her ability to affirm life is Gerald's death, because it is then that she faces the full tragedy and must accept it if she is to live fully and not be discontent. Near the start of the novel, Lois tells Mr. Montmorency, "Nothing could make [Gerald] into a tragedy" (91). This statement is foretelling since, in the end, Gerald dies and becomes a tragedy. Paralleling this, and likely stirred by her desire for a vibrant life, she tells Mrs. Montmorency shortly before her last conversation with Gerald, "I wouldn't mind being properly tragic..." (275) This interest in being tragic seems to stem from an idea that it would be novel and entertaining, like how they frequently perceive the war, but when the tragedy does come, Lois proves capable of facing it, despite it not being a novel experience she seems to have wanted. Upon finding her after they hear of Gerald's death, Laurence says rather awkwardly, "I expect—I don't know—one probably gets past things," but Lois responds, "But look here, there are things that one can't... At least, I don't want to" (299). Laurence tries to assure her that the tragedy will pass, that she will move on. But Lois, like Nietzsche's Greeks, has confronted the problem of existence and the tragic aspects of life, fully acknowledging that it is a problem one can't "get past" or ignore. And yet, also like the Greeks, she affirms her life when she declares, "At least, I don't want to [get past it]." In a conversation between Lady Naylor and Mrs. Trent near the close of the novel, Lady Naylor remarks, "She did not take it as hard as I feared, girls of her generation seem less sensitive, really" (301). To her aunt, Lois appears detached and wholly rational. This reflects how the Greeks have long been viewed as rational, Apollonian, in their core, not Dionysian. But just as Nietzsche's deeper study of the Greeks reveals their ability to

affirm life with all of its horrors and tragedies, so does deeper study of Lois's character reveals that she too is able to, in the end, affirm life with its tragedies.

The threat of nihilism and the need to affirm life are the central concerns of *The Last September*. These are also central concerns of post-war Europe and modernist writers. Lois, like many in the twentieth century, faces nihilism. Marda reflects, "[Lois] is like someone being driven against time in a taxi to catch a train...looking wildly out of the window at things going slowly past. She keeps hearing that final train go out without her" (118). Nihilism is greatly apparent in Lois's mother's inability to craft a life for herself and it is the threatening possibility that Lois may never step out on her own, that all her endeavors to live intensely will be futile while she's stuck in that taxi cab. Lois faces nihilism completely, however, after she learns of Gerald's death: "Life, seen whole for a moment, was one act of apprehension, the apprehension of death" (297). This is nihilism at its core—death is the ultimate end and every moment we live is in apprehension of it. However, even as she finds herself face-to-face with death and tragedy, Lois says "yes!" to life, and in doing so she demonstrates the solution to the great threat of the modern era.

## Chapter Two

### Kierkegaardian Despair in *The House in Paris*

As with Lois in *The Last September*, *The House in Paris* also centers around a character's development, but the existential issue that arises is not the affirmation of life and the test of eternal recurrence, but rather the need to become a self and the problem of despair introduced by Søren Kierkegaard. The events of the novel are determined by the choices made by Karen Michaelis, a young woman from an upper middle-class family, in her process of becoming a self. In this process she confronts realities that make it clear to her that she is in despair, and in this increased awareness she comes close to becoming a self. However, at the end of the novel, she ends up being in even more despair than before. The reasons for her choices and her eventual relapse into despair are indistinct in the novel, but taking an existential lens makes her reasons and character arc significantly clearer, which in turn helps us understand how her despair and choices affect the entire novel.

The plot of *The House in Paris* is divided into three parts that, like many modernist works, are not presented chronologically. The first part establishes the present moment of the novel, where two children are briefly left in the care of Madame and Naomi Fisher, a mother and daughter, at their house in Paris. One of the children, Leopold, is there to meet his mother for the first time and it becomes clear that he has no idea what his origins are. This part of the novel closes with the sudden announcement that his mother has cancelled the meeting. We, then, are prompted to wonder at her reasons for cancelling the meeting and even for giving him up in the first place. The answers to these questions are grounded in his mother's character, development, and choices, which we come to better understand in the next section titled "The Past," explaining

the events in Karen's life surrounding Leopold's conception nine years earlier. This is where we first clearly encounter Kierkegaard's "despair."

In order to fully understand Kierkegaard's "despair" and how it applies to Karen, we must first understand his concept of the self. First, being human does not inherently guarantee that one is a self. A human being simultaneously consists of two opposites, the infinite and the finite. The infinite part of a human being is the part that strives to be separate from the world. It is quintessentially personified in the solitary monk, dreaming of an ideal and unbothered by the messiness of the world. The finite part of a human being, on the other hand, is preoccupied with living in the here and now, with all of life's vulnerabilities and limitations, "absorbed in worldly joys and sorrows" (*Fear and Trembling*, 41). This part, if given the reins, has no time to dream of abstract ideals or even to dream up some plan for its own life and instead follows the crowd, a "far easier and safer" path. Now, to become a self, which Kierkegaard considers the greatest task of the human being, means to relate these two opposites of oneself successfully. Kierkegaard defines the self in *The Sickness Unto Death*; "The self is a relation that relates itself to itself or is the relation's relating itself to itself in the relation; the self is not the relation but is the relation's relating itself to itself. A human being is a synthesis of the infinite and the finite, of the temporal and the eternal, of freedom and necessity, in short, a synthesis. A synthesis is a relation between two. Considered in this way, a human being is still not a self" (13). In explanation, ultimately, having a self is a process. After all, "to relate" is a verb. We are selves when we are actively endeavoring to not only acknowledge both the finite and infinite in ourselves, but also not giving in wholly to one or the other. A successful relating between these two involves, as Norman Melchert suggests, bringing "these two poles together so that they interpenetrate and inform each other" (491). This involves an awareness, an acceptance, and a kind of balancing of both.

Someone who is a self is fully in life as it is, not detached or dismissive of the messiness of it. Kierkegaard describes this person, whom he titles a “knight of faith,” as “solid all the way through,” finding “pleasure in everything” and taking “part in everything,” and notes that to those who don’t know him, he is indistinguishable “from the rest of the crowd” (*FT* 39). This describes the finite part of one who is fully a self. Yet, this knight of faith balances this finitude with infinitude. Even as this knight of faith appears so wholly in the world, “this man has made and at every moment is making the movement of infinity” (40). This movement is what Kierkegaard calls “infinite resignation,” when one is able to give everything finite away. Despite being fully in the finite, the knight of faith is able to give it up for the infinite, just as a monk gives up all possessions for the spiritual. The difference between the knight of faith and the monk, however, is that the knight of faith returns to the finite, appearing to be solidly in the world, not apart from it. This balance is the task that is required to be a self.

In contrast to the knight of faith, there is a person in despair. When we are unwilling to face this task or fail to relate the infinite and finite, wanting to “be something more or something less” than what we are, then by denying or lacking one or the other of the two we are in despair (Melchert 491). One way of looking at this is as fictions that we make up for ourselves—identifying with either the infinite or the finite and constructing our lives around that. Kierkegaard identifies three main types of despair. The first two correlate clearly with the two parts of the self. First, in the Despair of Infinitude, we strive toward ideals and are unable to accept the immediate, finite circumstances we are in. Fictions we create in the despair of infinitude is that life is rosy and perfect, or that we should be above the messy bits of life. Second, in the Despair of Finitude, we are so focused on the here and now to the point that we lack the vision to make our own path and instead simply follow the crowd. The third despair

Kierkegaard introduces is the Despair of Defiance. This refers to the despair of someone who wants to be their own god and creator. But, as Melchert explains, “There is much about each of us that we simply have to accept. So even defiance is despair. Even this is not being willing to be myself—the self I actually am” (497). In other words, someone cannot create themselves anew just because they don’t like a part of themselves, and becoming a self requires accepting what one actually is—both the infinite and the finite.

Until confronted with something outside of the fiction she has constructed for herself, Karen Michaelis sees everything in the world and her life fit into that picture—one constructed by her family. When we first meet her, Karen is in despair of finitude, meaning that she simply copies what others do. Her life is not only “aimless,” but she has fully accepted this (68). She gives over any sense of her own self to fill the social expectations of her family, including her engagement to Ray Forrester, a secretary and another member of her upper-middle class. Interestingly enough, because she mirrors her family, she sometimes, in her despair of finitude, reflects attributes of despair of infinitude because her family is in despair of infinitude. Her family is described as having an “unconscious serenity behind their living and letting live” (69). They refuse to acknowledge reality and the vulnerability of life and grasp at a false ideal. The following description of Mrs. Michaelis demonstrates this well: “Blurs and important wrong shapes, ridgy lights, crater darkness making a face unhuman as a map of the moon, Mrs. Michaelis, like the camera of her day, denied.... Like the classic camera, she was blind to those accidents that make a face that face, a scene that scene, and float the object, alive, in your desire and ignorance” (125-126). A classic camera smoothed features and did not capture distinctive features or “accidents.” Similarly, Mrs Michaelis insists on viewing life serenely, ignoring the

imperfections and accidents that make moments and people stand out instead of fitting uniformly in a perfect picture of life.

While Karen seems to blindly follow the expectations of her family, she recognizes that the ideal state of life her family clings to may not last. However, though Karen “saw this inherited world enough from the outside to see that it might not last...[she] obstinately stood by it” (69). The most likely reasons why she would stand by her family and their life is because doing so and allowing them to define her life is easier than endeavoring to find some purpose on her own—it is an already established and seemingly perfect life that is handed to her with no effort on her part. Therefore, she ignores the reality in order to comfortably follow her family. Kierkegaard says regarding this, “Very often the person in despair probably has a dim idea of his own state ... feels it the way a person does who walks around with a physical malady but does not want to acknowledge forthrightly the real nature of the illness” (*SUD* 48). In other words, she might have a sense that she is in despair of finitude, blindly following a dying lifestyle, but she instead ignores it and does not acknowledge her despair because, as Kierkegaard explains, she “finds it too hazardous to be [herself] and far easier and safer to be like the others, to become a copy, a number, a mass man” (34). In other words, to avoid the effort of developing a self and any risk to her reputation, Karen allows herself to become one of many, blending smoothly into her family’s society. After her time spent studying art in Paris, where she stayed at Mme and Naomi Fisher’s house and where she developed a crush on Max Ebhart, she returned to London and resumed her part in that lifestyle because it was the easier and safer thing to do. As described by the narrator, “The rule of ‘niceness’ resumed in Karen’s life. She grew up, her regard for order overtook her sensations. She took herself up again from where she had been at twelve: a discriminating little girl who spent her tips on antiques. What would not do, did not do. She had

come to look back at Max as a person who would not do" (113). In other words, she fully becomes part of the serene ideal life her family strives to embody, valuing "niceness" and "order." Things that do not fit into this serene ideal "would not do" and cease to be a part of her life, in this case, Max. In the ease of following the dictations of her family and society, she simply becomes yet another woman like her mother, all distinctiveness and selfhood unseen in the picture. However, as we will see later on, Karen is eventually unable to ignore her despair.

Karen's passivity about life and about her engagement to Ray also illustrates her despair of finitude. While in Ireland she receives a letter from Ray who is sailing to the East in which he asks if she truly does want to marry him, if she had "given the question her whole mind." Her response to his letter is telling: "His letter came as a shock and was, naturally, upsetting. It would have been more of a shock if she had not already detected in Ray what she liked least: a liking for going over things carefully twice. He liked to tot everything up, and this seemed to her a wretched way to treat feeling" (78). By asking Karen if she is sure about the engagement, Ray is challenging her to not simply blindly follow what others say she should do, but to carefully determine her future for herself. This makes her uncomfortable. Then later, in conversation with her aunt, she says, "He can't be content with just me; he keeps wanting to know my feelings, or whatever it is. What I do is not enough, he always wants to know why.... If one begins to think, why should one ever do anything? Marry most of all. Yes, I want to marry him. But I don't want to do anything that a reason's been found for; I want to do something I must do" (85). Karen's reluctance to respond to Ray's question about how she feels indicates that she doesn't want to have to figure out, let alone confront, her own reasons for the engagement. She just wants to go with the choice already made for her. Her list of reasons for marrying him, which she rehearses to her aunt, consists primarily of things to do with society and outward appearances, not genuine



or personal reasons of her own. For instance, “we do not embarrass each other, we should have enough money and everybody we meet out at dinner will say what a charming couple we are” (86). In other words, her reasons for marrying him are to fit into their society where they will not only be prosperous and live serene lives, but where their lives will appear, in all appearances, perfect because, to others, they will be “charming” and they won’t “embarrass each other.” In her despair of finitude, Karen is convinced that she wants most to fit into the un-blemished life of her family.

Karen’s despair of finitude, particularly how closely intertwined it is with her family’s despair of infinitude, is apparent when she meets with her old friends from Paris in London, Naomi and Max, who are now engaged. When Karen first meets up with Naomi, who tells her that she and Max are engaged and asks Karen to meet him, Karen states, criticizing him, “Surely people *should* be indifferent even if they are not?”, to which Naomi responds coldly, “Perhaps in your world, Karen. You live, you see, in a more fortunate world” (104). This passage demonstrates, not only Karen’s indifference to life, a symptom of her despair, but also one key note Kierkegaard makes about despair of finitude. He writes, “Now this form of despair goes practically unnoticed in the world. Just by losing himself this way, such a man has gained an increasing capacity for going along superbly in business and social life, indeed, for making a great success in the world. ... The despair that not only does not cause one any inconvenience in life but makes life cozy and comfortable is in no way, of course, regarded as despair” (34). In other words, the fact that her world is “more fortunate,” makes the despair in Karen’s life and world unnoticeable. To any outsider, Karen’s life is successful. She is from a highly respectable family, has a background in painting, and is engaged to someone from another respectable family. Her life, because she focuses on accomplishing the expectations of her family and society

and rejects the things that “would not do,” seems to be an enviable one. Because of this apparent success and comfort in life, her despair and her family’s despair are masked by apparent prosperity and ease.

Over the course of her conversation with Max and Naomi during their London picnic, significant features of Karen’s personality become apparent and are addressed, primarily by Max. For instance, they extensively discuss her humor. In itself, a character’s humor doesn’t indicate that the character is in despair, but Karen’s is both a way of not taking anything seriously, part of her indifferent attitude towards life, and a characteristic that Max and Naomi attribute to her society as a whole. The fact that Max recognizes this characteristic as part of her society shows that he in some part recognizes that her society is in despair of infinitude. Karen exhibits her indifferent attitude clearly to Max. He states, referring to her time spent in Paris studying art when she was eighteen, “You were more serious then,” to which she responds promptly, “to be serious is absurd; it is useless: what can one do?” (116) She then proceeds to say that she had no sense of humor at eighteen. Max responds in shock and remarks, “What you say is deadly. Must everything be funny?” Karen bluntly responds, “One’s life is.” In other words, humor is Karen’s defense or even mask against the realities that do not fit into her narrative. Nothing is serious or weighty to her, because that is not the way her family is, and to make everything funny is less emotionally troubling for her. Naomi comes to Karen’s defense, saying “I think that humour is English courage.” But Max criticizes this: “Ostrich courage” (121). By this he means that the humor he sees in the English is only a way for them to refuse to face reality. He explains this shortly before. “Things will soon be much more than embarrassing; I doubt if one will be able to save one’s face. Humour...no longer possible. Karen will have to find herself something else” (120). By this he means that, due to societal and world changes,

Karen's people will be challenged with things outside of their established narrative. However, he also, in referring specifically to Karen, not only notes Karen's despair of finitude but also foreshadows her own growing awareness. By awareness, I mean self-consciousness about one's self and one's despair.

When Karen, over the course of the past narrative, faces things in her life that do not fit into the story she has established for herself, she gains greater consciousness, which is necessary in order for her to overcome her despair. Kierkegaard writes, "Generally speaking, consciousness—that is, self-consciousness—is decisive with regard to the self. The more consciousness, the more self" (29). In other words, a self is conscious of itself, and the more conscious someone is of their despair, the closer they are to being a self. Therefore, as Karen is confronted with things that shake her perspective of the world and that show her that she is in despair, the more conscious she becomes. These things that she is confronted with are primarily the reality of death and an awareness of herself sparked by Max's comments in their conversation in London.

Bowen makes it very clear the impact that Aunt Violet's death has on Karen. In Ireland, as Karen realizes that her aunt will die, Bowen writes, "No one familiar in Karen's life had died yet: the scene round her looked at once momentous and ghostly, as in that light that sometimes comes before storms" (80). Karen's perception of the world changes, both physically and emotionally. The seemingly offhand observation when she arrives at her aunt's house in Ireland that "you will never be quite the same again" becomes strikingly true (77). She's not the only one affected either. Mrs. Michaelis is surprisingly deeply affected as well. Even though Bowen notes that Mrs. Michaelis was not very close to her sister and though she seems an ideal embodiment of their class, serenely "living and letting live" (69), this shakes her and it affects

the family relationship. When they hear the news of Aunt Violet's death, "Karen, who had got up, came across to stand dumbly beside her mother. They had not met like this before; no one had ever died; her brother Robin had come safely through the war. . . . Mrs. Michaelis put out a hand towards Karen—not wanting to touch, to show she was glad she was there" (135). Both of them are confronted with something that does not fit into the ideal life they have come to expect. Most surprising, from our experience of Mrs. Michaelis up to this point, is her statement, "This is not the worse that will happen, Karen." Bowen expresses this unsettlement in both Karen and her mother with the statement, "They both saw the crack across the crust of life" (136). This "crust" is the narrative they have established, the calm attitude and acceptance of social expectations, unaffected by any troubles until this moment. Now they recognize that their narrative is vulnerable and that the crack will grow. Karen notes, "once a board gives, the raft begins breaking up" (137). This image gives the sense, not just of the inevitability of the changes coming, but also that their lives will begin to sink if they remain on their raft.

While the reality of death unsettles Karen, it is Max's conversation with her that makes her a little more aware of her lack of a self and thus makes it impossible to ignore her discontent as she does before. There are hints of discontent before her conversation with Max. For instance, "She was not married: at the same time, she had no right to be still looking about; she had to stop herself asking: 'What next? What next?' She had firm ground under her feet, but the world shrank; perhaps she was missing the margin of uncertainty" (68). Being engaged, Karen's life and future is settled and secure, as indicated by the "firm ground under her feet," but she feels confined by the certainty of her future and the shrinking world and wonders if there's anything more. However, it isn't until after talking to Max during their picnic that she stops ignoring this discontent.

Once Karen is aware of her discontent, her consciousness increases. We first see this when she begins painting again after Naomi and Max's London visit. Though art is what Karen initially spent her time in Paris doing, by the time we meet her, her painting seems to have become inconsequential. When Aunt Violet asks her, "You will keep up your drawing," Karen states, "No, I may stop, I'm afraid of finding I can't draw" (86). The use of "may" in the first clause implies that she is indifferent to it, like she is indifferent to everything else. It is not a significant part of her life. This contrasts with the next clause, which shows that her indifference is secondary to a fear that she has lost that skill and subsequently that part of her life. She is now so immersed in living the social and acceptable life that art has become at most a hobby. However, the day after seeing Naomi and Max during their visit to London, Karen takes up painting again. The apparent cause is from seeing "A picture of a flower-pot in a balcony" at "a young man's private view" (131), but this seems odd, considering how many years and social events she must have attended and seen other rather inconspicuous works of art. The fact that it catches her eye this time, after seeing and talking with Naomi and Max indicates her movement out of despair. After news of her aunt's death, however, we read that "she worked away flaggingly, with a dead brush. What she had thought she saw in the flower pot on the balcony, that had sent her back to painting, was gone now" (142). Her grief and restlessness ends up making this return to art brief, but it makes for a beginning at the very least, an indication that she has begun to look for more than the life she accepts from her family, and just after this passage, Karen receives a call from Max which becomes the crisis of her restlessness.

Another indication of her growing consciousness and movement out of despair shortly after this is Karen's conversation with Angela, Ray's sister. Angela states, "We are all far too alike," but follows up this with the justification, "But after all, there *is* only one way to be nice.

Nothing unlike oneself in people really is not a pity. It's better to inbreed than marry outside one's class. Even in talk, I think. Do let us be particular while we can" (134). Once again we meet the "niceness" that is characteristic of the ideal and despair of infinitude suffered by their society and the uniformity of this niceness, all unique and distinct ways of being nice blurred into one or ignored as they remain "particular." Karen, however, responds, "I shall grow more like you, then?" (134). Her coldness and disdain in this statement demonstrates just how much her perspective on her family's ideals has changed, the same ones she was happy to defend and justify at the beginning of her narrative in the book.

Karen's consciousness makes her discontent and restless, which in turn draws her to contact Max. This isn't a random choice. While Max points out her despair in their conversation, he seems to sense parts of her that demonstrate she has the potential to become a self. After all, he remembers her being serious in Paris and is surprised at her insistence to find everything funny. As another indication that he sees her potential to become a self, he declares that "she is ambitious to live" (121). Considering her passivity and manner up to the point that he says this, it is a surprising statement. It is a statement that would be made about someone who would be closer to selfhood—someone who has learned to balance finitude and infinitude enough to live meaningfully. Karen, in her despair, would be far from this. Ambition doesn't allow for her passiveness. Max's statement, however, points out a side of her that grows as she comes closer to being a self. The ambition to live he speaks of could be seen in her taking up painting again or in not wanting to be like Angela, and it is clearly seen in her determination to meet Max.

Max not only helps Karen recognize both her own despair and potential to become a self, but he himself is an influence as he is more of a self. In discussing Max, Mrs. Michaelis assumes that his reasons for marrying Naomi are purely practical, because Mrs. Michaelis sees people

simply, as demonstrated above in the camera comparison. However, Karen later reflects, “What Mrs. Michaelis said about Max and his reasons for wanting to marry Naomi would be, no doubt, true—if you pressed him flat like a flower in a book. But he had a thickness you had to recognize, and could not be pressed flat without losing form” (126). In other words, Max cannot be flattened and simplified without ceasing to become Max. In addition, his thickness of character has to be recognized, and that’s just what Karen does and how he becomes so significant to her own process of becoming a self. When Karen is fully conscious of her despair, Max no longer is the old crush that “would not do.” Instead, he is someone to help her become a self as she endeavors to forge her own way and make her own decisions.

Karen’s discontent and growing consciousness comes to a crisis when she chooses to meet up with Max twice in secret, first to talk and second for a one-night stand. This is the largest step outside of her despair of finitude that she makes because, instead of allowing others to choose for her, she makes her own choice. Kierkegaard writes on will, “the more consciousness, the more will; the more will, the more self. A person who has no will at all is not a self; but the more will he has, the more self-consciousness he has also” (29). In other words, will, in addition to consciousness, is necessary to become a self, and will is indicated by choice, motivation, and action. Therefore, by making her own choice Karen indicates that she has more will, which in turn indicates that she has made significant movement towards becoming a self due to her growing consciousness. Accordingly, Karen’s journey to selfhood reaches its highest point after she and Max meet and choose to marry and she finally tells her mother about this decision. Her mother responds dismissively, saying, “It’s some kind of dream.” In her despair of infinitude, Mrs. Michaelis rejects the messiness of her daughter’s situation. However, Karen states, “This is not a dream. But I’ve been asleep for years.” This is a key statement in the book

as it is her acknowledgement that she has started to move beyond her despair and she now considers herself awake. She is fully conscious and well on her way to becoming a self.

After Max is driven to suicide by Mme Fisher when she finds out that he slept with Karen, Karen seems to hold onto her awareness and not to sway in her growth towards selfhood, even though she gives up Leopold. At the very least, besides some allusions to emotional pain, anxiety, and numbness, the narrative remains distant so that we get no evidence that she is reverting back to a greater state of despair. This distance contrasts with the week between their night together and his death, in which she is restless and uncomfortable due to her mother's unspoken awareness of her secret liaisons. However, even at the close of this week she still declares that she is awake and only promises that, for a month, she won't initiate any contact with Max or write to Ray breaking off her engagement. In other words, she compromises with her mother, but this compromise does not definitively indicate that she loses her growth. Even after Max's death, when Naomi visits, their conversation is almost entirely dialogue with little indication of their thoughts and emotions, but after the conversation, "The Past" closes with Karen's thought and observation, "the idea of the night to come—darkness, comfort with Naomi in the echoing house—flooded her with peace for the first time. On their way down, they passed Mrs. Michaelis' door, open, and saw sheets on the mirror and on the bed" (209). This thought gives us no sign of despair, but rather of contentment and acceptance of her life, and the final image of sheets in her absent mother's room seems to symbolize the death, not just of Max and Aunt Violet, but also of her life before this crisis, including her despair of finitude. Karen remarks to Naomi at one point in their conversation, "In ways, you know, Naomi, I should like very much to be ordinary again. But I cannot remember myself before this happened" (207). This comment verbalizes the death of her previous life, because she has forgotten it. Even though part



of her might still be drawn to the stoic attitudes of her family, she has grown conscious of herself and cannot truly take on her mother's way of life again. It is her mother's room, after all, that is shrouded, and her mother may be considered a representation of Karen's despair, which becomes very clear in the last part of the novel.

Despite having little indication at the end of "The Past" that Karen may revert back to despair, when we return to the present in part three of the novel and see her again after nine years, she is clearly once more in despair, but now she is in despair of defiance. We have not observed her over the years, so the difference in her despair seems abrupt to us, particularly since she was well on the way of becoming a self, however, the shift is purposefully done to emphasize the change. The reader is forced to confront the fact that her journey to selfhood failed.

Her despair of defiance is primarily due to the fact that she still has the consciousness she gained before. As Nietzsche declares in *Thus Spach Zarathustra*, "And once you are awake, you shall remain awake eternally" (Kaufmann, 327). In other words, once we have become more conscious, then we cannot regress or lose that consciousness. So Karen is conscious of her previous despair, but instead of acting on that consciousness, striving to become a self, she becomes defiant. As opposed to mindlessly following whatever path is set for her by her family and social circle, this time it is a conscious and defiant decision. While not in despair of infinitude herself, just as before, those stoic, indifferent characteristics are the ones she actively desires. She doesn't want to be vulnerable and uncomfortable in the messiness of her past. However, ultimately, it is not the messiness of her past that she truly wants to escape. Barrett explains, "[Despair] is the extreme emotion in which we seek to escape from ourselves" (169). In other words, Karen wants to escape the self that includes her messy past and Leopold, and she

thinks she can find this escape by being like her mother. Bowen writes, “Feverishly, she simulated the married peace women seemed to inherit, wanting most of all to live like her mother” (245). Here we see what Kierkegaard terms the lowest kind of despair of defiance: “in despair to will to be someone else, to wish for a new self” (53). Applying this to Karen, she wills herself to be like her mother, rejecting herself and in turn rejecting Leopold. While Mme Fisher’s words are always calculated, we cannot deny the evident truth in her statement to Leopold about his mother: “Dread of the past and nervous weakness of body must have made her, later, grasp at what appeared to be peace. Dread must have made her shrink, on her own account or her husband’s—whom she dared not wrong further—from knowing you” (232). Karen dreads the past and Leopold and clings to the apparent peace, as Mme Fisher calls it, represented by her life before the events nine years previous. This is a surprising change since, in her conversation with Naomi after Max’s death, Karen states about being pregnant with Leopold, “Now, his birth is what I want most: why should Max leave nothing?” (207) According to Karen, Max, who had thickness and a passion for life, deserved to live on through some heritage left behind, namely Leopold. Their child’s existence and life is significant and important to her at this point. She even considers Leopold’s feelings, knowing that he would not want to live in exile with her. She states, “But if he is like Max and me he would hate that—hate exile, hate being nowhere, hate being unexplained, hate having no place of his own. Hate me too, because of all that. He would be better without me, in any place he could believe was his” (207-208). Her primary concern here is for him, understanding the attributes that she and Max shared that would make their son restless and discontent. Even the statement that “he would be better without me” places the emphasis on what she thinks his needs are, not her own.

Nine years later, however, her attitude about Leopold is drastically different. She no longer considers his feelings. Leopold literally embodies Karen's past, in particular the uncomfortableness, grief, and vulnerability of her experience with Max. However, by projecting everything onto Leopold, as if he is the primary problem, Karen refuses to acknowledge her own responsibility for her despair. Barrett writes, "Despair is never ultimately over the external object but always over ourselves. A girl loses her sweetheart, and falls into despair; it is not over the lost sweetheart that she despairs, but over herself-without-the-sweetheart: that is, she can no longer escape from herself into the thought or person of the beloved" (169). In other words, even though we may blame or focus the source of our despair on external situations and people, it actually comes down to ourselves. Kierkegaard writes, "[someone in despair] stands and points to what he calls despair but is not despair, and in the meantime, sure enough, despair is right there behind him without his realizing it" (52). This specifically is evident in the novel because Karen insists that all of the problems and despair remaining are due to Leopold's haunting presence in her life and marriage to Ray and Ray's insistence that she reconcile with Leopold. However, it is actually the comfortable, seemingly unblemished life she desires that is the actual despair. Her true despair is in the fact that she adamantly demands to have this life, to be able to construct her own narrative. Externally, she seems to successfully do this. According to the narrator, "The happiness of the Forrestiers' marriage surpassed the hopes of [their] friends... As a couple, they were delightful to meet" (245). In all appearances, they are a happy, successful couple, a part of the ideal picture of their society. Nevertheless, internally she is in even greater despair than she was before. Even the last described image we have of Karen in the novel demonstrates the depth of her despair. Ray, when he meets Leopold, reflects on how he left Karen. "No wonder she shuddered on the Versailles bed, with the gloves she had put on to go to

Paris, then pulled off, dropped on the floor, and the violets she had pinned on for Leopold pressed dead between her breast and the bed” (242). This image of unhappiness and despair perfectly parallels Kierkegaard’s description of a man in despair, “He despairs and faints, and after that lies perfectly still as if he were dead, a trick like ‘playing dead’; immediacy resembles certain lower animals that have no weapon or means of defense other than to lie perfectly still and pretend that they are dead” (52). Both Kierkegaard’s man in despair and Karen take on positions of helplessness, playing dead as if their problems will go away if they do.

The greatest indication of Karen’s despair is the constant unspoken conversation between her and Ray about how Karen’s past and Leopold are a part of their marriage. Marian Kelly suggests, “Though the marriage finally does take place, it does not, as Karen had hoped, liberate her from the moment with Max that she cannot move beyond. Instead, it provides her with a comfortable haven in which she can avoid dealing with the present” (5). Kelly is correct in stating that their marriage does not liberate her from her past. However, the marriage is also far from a comfortable haven for Karen because her past is part of her present, it is a messiness that is part of who she is, and Ray understands this. Though Karen wants to forget everything to do with Max and Leopold, Ray refuses to let her. Instead he loves her more for it and wants to have and love Leopold. He insists, “But I love the whole of you,” and when she pleads, “Am I not enough?”, he responds, “You know that is not the matter” (244). She thinks, or desperately wants to believe, that she is something apart from her past, and mistakenly thinks that Ray’s insistence in loving her and her past and wanting to have Leopold means that he does not think she is enough. But it simply shows that he sees that her whole self includes her past and that, in loving her, he also loves her past. In her defiance, however, she refuses to see this about Ray and about herself.

Ray is a surprising character when we meet him in this last portion of the novel. Until this moment, our knowledge of him and his personality was filtered through Karen's eyes. Everything we think we know of him is contained in her observations. For instance, she tells Aunt Violet, "To be with Ray will be like being with mother; that is why my marriage makes her so glad" (167). In other words, to Karen, Ray is like her mother and a part of her social life—the others who expected a certain path from her. However, while in "The Past" he seems to be a part of her despair of finitude and she wants to escape her engagement to marry Max for this reason, in "The Present," it becomes clear that he never was who she thought he was. When she realizes this, she grows angry and says that he has changed. In her despair of defiance, she complains, "But I loved you the way you were," to which he argues, "But I never was like that" (244). She desperately wants him to be who she thought he was and thus wants him to display the same response to her past and Leopold that her mother did: "Nothing was to be said" (190). However, Ray makes it clear that he has not changed and is not at all like her mother.

Ultimately, of all of the characters, Ray is the one least in despair and therefore closest to being a self. He neither rejects the messiness of life for some perfect image nor follows the crowd because it is the comfortable and safe thing to do, requiring little effort from him. His actions also do not suggest any despair of defiance—he does not adamantly refuse to be himself. Ray, just like Max, wants to help Karen move past her despair. He is most equipped to and might even prove successful, unlike Max who ultimately couldn't help her while torn between loving Karen and his engagement with Naomi. Ray's endeavors to help Karen culminate in convincing Karen to go to Paris to meet Leopold and then, when she fails to do so, going to the Fishers' himself to bring Leopold to her. While we are still not sure if she does accept Leopold, the end of

the novel suggests that she could still, by accepting Ray's help and Leopold, once again work towards becoming a self.

As I have shown, Karen goes through a journey to selfhood. However, this proves futile. Though she seems to come close, by the end we see that she has only gone from one despair to another. While Karen works towards selfhood and Ray and Max are farther along in the endeavor than Karen, the fact that Karen has so clearly fallen back into despair at the end of the novel reinforces yet another point of Kierkegaard's—the universality of despair. According to Kierkegaard, “Just as a physician might say that there very likely is not one single living human being who is completely healthy, so anyone who really knows mankind might say that there is not one single living human being who does not despair a little” (*SUD* 22). All people, at some point in their lives, are in despair—unwilling to be the selves they actually are. This futility and universality of despair so strongly evident in *The House in Paris* is what makes this novel particularly modernist. This same problem of despair can be found in other modernist novels such as Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway* and Ernest Hemingway's *The Sun Also Rises*. In the first, World War I veteran Septimus Smith, suffering from shell shock and mental illness, is detached from life around him. While not like the idealizing Mrs. Michaelis, his detachment from life and the people around him suggests that he too is in despair of infinitude. In the second novel, the protagonist Jake Barnes and his fellow expatriates take on an “eat, drink, and be merry” lifestyle with no thought of the future as they try to come to terms with life in the aftermath of the war. This demonstrates despair of finitude, though it is far more extensive than what we see in Karen in *The House in Paris*. In addressing despair and the task of becoming a self, *The House in Paris* conveys that same concern that haunts other modernist works.

## Chapter Three

### Deception and “The Look” in *The Heat of the Day*

In contrast with *The Last September* and *The House in Paris*, *The Heat of the Day* has a cast of characters who seem contented with or at least resigned to their lives during World War II. This novel is considered a close portrayal of life in war-torn London. Victoria Glendinning, in her biography of Bowen, says, “the novel summed up and expressed the heightened emotions of those years of war; and for a later generation it is a time-defeating glimpse—even a ‘hallucination’, in Elizabeth’s terms—backwards into a London that is still the same London... *The Heat of the Day* has become the classic novel of London in the war” (192-193). In other words, *The Heat of the Day* so closely portrays life during the Blitz that it provides a clear picture of London for those of us who did not experience it. Thomas Dukes argues that the novel attempts “to define in imaginative terms in a single text the impact of World War II on the characters’ lives,” and sets its “most important scenes in battle areas...where the physical horrors and size of the war are readily apparent; apparent, as well, are those effects of war which emotionally damage the characters” (77). The battle area Dukes talks about in relation to *The Heat of the Day* would be London during the Blitz, and through the Blitz, as well as other connections to the war such as Robert Kelway’s leg injury from Dunkirk, the war greatly impacts the characters. While she also discusses the impact of the war on the novel’s characters, Celine Magot’s argument focuses more on Glendinning’s comment on the “heightened emotions” or impressions expressed in the novel: “Elizabeth Bowen does not give an account of the war in action; neither does she depict the visible effects of the bombs falling on the city. The ruins, the homeless people, the shelters seem to be taken for granted. What she tries to capture is impressions. ...it is a wartime novel, with little description of actual warfare” (2-3). In other

words, unlike Dukes whose argument focuses on the descriptions of the presence of war in the novel, Magot argues that the presence of war is not overtly described in the novel so that the focus can be on the impressions and emotions of the characters in the setting, rather than on the setting itself. She even suggests that Bowen's "deliberately toned down glimpses of wartime London may haunt the reader's memory more than many a graphic description" (8). It is through Bowen's ability to convey an impression that the novel leaves its readers' haunted, not actual descriptions of the effect of the war on London. Allan Hepburn agrees with Magot on the significant presence of impressions as part of Bowen's aesthetic. He writes, "Sensitive to atmospheres and places, she renders them visually, in terms of light and image. An impression is an insight or a glimpse, by necessity ephemeral. The strength of Bowen's writing follows from her ability to define, through gesture and mood, the undercurrents that motivate human interactions" (7). If it is through these impressions that she defines the motivations in human interactions, in turn her characters' interactions, then the impressions that Bowen conveys can help us to understand the characters and their relationships. Therefore, as *The Heat of the Day* is filled with impressions, then the focus shifts from the war to the characters' dynamics. Along those same lines of the novel being character and impression focused, Phyllis Lassner argues, "Bowen's narrative suggests that there is more to spy stories than ferreting out the traitor or trading secrets. Making Robert Kelway's guilt a given allows Bowen to focus on the more difficult task of finding meaning in the language of secret stories and hidden selves" ("Reimagining the Arts of War" 31-32). Lassner means, by stating that "Robert Kelway's guilt is a given," that the novel isn't about proving whether or not Robert is a Nazi spy, but the effects of his identity as a spy and even espionage in general on the other characters in the novel.



Therefore, even in the genre of spy fiction, not just war fiction, Bowen's focus is not only the genre but rather on the nuances of espionage in the characters' lives.

This chapter will build on Magot's statement that Bowen tries to capture impressions, arguing that those impressions that *The Heat of the Day* captures are of the self. The characters are not only greatly impacted by the war but are equally impacted by the questions that espionage brings into their lives—questions of identity, deception, and how one is perceived. These questions can best be explored through Jean-Paul Sartre's existentialism. The novel is a close, personal examination of how one's life and one's sense of self are affected by deception, responsibility, and "the Look," all key existential concepts of Sartre's, more often than not leading to and evident in "bad faith." Central to the novel is Stella Rodney, a London widow who works in intelligence in the war effort. Through her work, she develops a relationship with the Nazi spy Robert Kelway, who has infiltrated the government and works in the War Office. This relationship is the driving force of the novel, not only because they are the central characters, but also because Robert's true identity as a spy creates tension between him and Stella and between them and the other characters in the novel, particularly the counterspy Harrison. However, this tension is not just a plot device, as it also reveals the characters' anxieties and subsequent deceptions. Sartre's existentialism will illuminate the reasons and motivations behind these anxieties and deceptions, primarily in his concepts of "the Look," responsibility, and "bad faith."

In his chapter "The Existence of Others" in *Being and Nothingness*, Sartre analyzes a particular human experience of "being seen." Sartre explains that experience via a thought experiment:

Let us imagine that moved by jealousy, curiosity, or vice I have just glued my ear to the door and looked through a keyhole.... But all of a sudden I hear footsteps in the hall. Someone is looking at me!... This means that all of a sudden I am conscious of myself as escaping myself, not in that I am the foundation of my own nothingness but in that I have my foundation outside myself. I am for myself only as I am a pure reference to the Other. (347, 349)

While we were at first the subject watching objects, in our sudden apprehension of being watched, we are forced to realize that we are, to that Other who is watching us, just an object being observed, exactly like the Other we were observing moments before. As Robert Bernasconi explains, “From being the observer, the voyeur has become the observed; from occupying the subject position, he or she has been reduced to an object” (78). This experience of being seen is our impetus to self-consciousness, namely an awareness of our nothingness. In the moment of peeping through the keyhole we are the sole determiner of the moment as a kind of objective eye as we perceive the people in the other room as objects. We are, as Sartre says, “caught up in the circuit of my selfness” (347). However, when suddenly we are aware of being watched like we were watching others, we are yanked from the circuit and our selfness is stripped from us as we become an object to this Other. Moreover, we do not only become aware of ourselves as an object, but as an object in the act of doing something, and accordingly the Other defines our identity. Bernasconi adds, “In his account of concrete relations with others, Sartre had highlighted the way that the gaze projects an identity on someone who is then trapped in it” (78). Therefore, in this experience of “being seen” multiple things occur: we become aware of ourselves as objects to the Other, gain a hyperawareness of our doing something, and have an identity projected onto us.

A clear and striking description of Sartre's notion of "the Look" appears at the beginning of Bowen's novel. Ironically, the character that experiences this is Harrison, who usually takes on the role of the observing Other. During a concert in the park and in a conversation with Louie Lewis, a young married woman who takes to wandering London, Harrison is forced to see himself through the eyes of another in the act of thinking. After he tries to ignore her, she intrusively asks him, "Going to think some more?" In response, Harrison thinks,

She had made that impossible. Had she not borne in on him, in her moron way, the absurdities to which thinking in public could expose one, the absurdity with which one exposed oneself? She had given him, the watcher, the enormity of the sense of having been watched. New, only he knew how new, to emotional thought, he now saw, at this first of his lapses, the whole of its danger—it made you *act* the thinker. (11)

This exchange sets the tone of the novel. Harrison's experience and explanation of the Look conveys his distaste for it, primarily in his repetition of the word "absurdity" in this moment of exposure and his observation of the "danger" of the encounter, as it influences one's thoughts and actions. It is clear that he knows the danger of an encounter with the Look since he is a spy and frequently takes on the role of the Other. In addition, this description conveys the intensity and pressure of the Look. This sense of the Look is "borne in on him," and this same intensity is the tone that is carried throughout the novel. However, this is the only instance when Harrison is the observed rather than the observer. For the rest of the novel, it is the other characters who experience this intensity of the Look, Stella and Robert most obviously from Harrison. When Harrison goes to Stella's temporary rented flat moments later, he resumes his role as the watcher and uses this idea that being observed doing an action makes one hyperaware of the action, such as acting the thinker, as leverage to blackmail Stella. He tells her that he will withhold evidence

of Robert's spying for the Nazis if she will be his lover. When she tries to call his bluff by saying she will just tell Robert he is being watched, Harrison responds, "would you really expect him not to alter his course a bit... Not to veer a bit, it might be ever so slightly, would take more nerve than a man humanly has. I've never yet known a man not change his behaviour once he's known he's watched" (38). In other words, Robert will, in trying to avoid further discovery, act conspicuously. Indeed, when Stella does tell him about Harrison watching him, his actions and identity as a spy become obvious, as Harrison informs her to her dismay.

However, Harrison doesn't just watch Robert. He also watches Stella closely as she tries to work through her dilemma. A significant example of this is when, after visiting Holme Dene, Robert's home in the country, Stella arrives home awaited by Harrison. At first Stella doesn't believe what her senses are telling her, that someone is watching her, until some while later when Harrison strikes a match. The narrator explains, "That she should seem to perceive a figure posted, waiting, that she should instantaneously know herself to be on the return to a watched house, *could* be only another deception of the nerves" (140). She recognizes that her nerves have been on edge due to the conflict between Robert and Harrison and so attributes her immediate sense being watched to that. However, even as she isn't quite sure she is being watched, the intensity of the idea still makes a significant impact on her awareness of her actions. "Now her approaching footsteps were being numbered; no instinctive check or pause in them went unmarked. *Her* part—listening for the listener, watching for the watcher—must be in the keeping on walking on, as though imperviously" (140). Stella's thoughts here express the intensity of the Look and the impact it has on her actions. Every step she takes is "numbered" and "marked" by Harrison and in turn by her. By knowing that her steps and approach are watched, she too watches her steps. The pressure of the Look makes her uncomfortable, most particularly evident

in the “instinctive check or pause.” Then it affects her actions because, in trying to avoid the uncomfortable Look, she has to keep “walking on, as though imperviously.” In other words, she becomes overly conscious of her steps but in an effort to avoid the Look must act as if she is not aware of them. There is a tension between the observed and the observer here as she strives to protect herself from his monitoring. As we can see, this passage parallels and reflects the same sense of hyperawareness caused by the Look that Harrison experiences in the park where it becomes impossible to act naturally, as if unaware of one’s actions.

The possibility of being watched begins to affect Stella and Robert even when there is no indication that Harrison is watching them. The best examples of this occur when Robert visits Stella for the last time. First, when Stella turns on a lamp and then after closes the bedroom door to prevent the light from going through the open bedroom curtain, she thinks, “In her infestation by all ideas of delinquency, any offence against the black-out seemed to her punishable by death: it could be the signal for which Harrison had been waiting—posted as he could be, as she pictured him, by some multiplication of his personality, all around the house” (311). At first her concern seems to be focused on the black-out and possibility of being bombed if any light were seen by the Nazi bombers. However, this concern is even more so about being seen and watched by Harrison. Anna Teekell notes that the notion of an offence against the black-out being punishable by death “is both an exaggeration of ARP protocol...in which an offence against the blackout could be punished by death from a bomb—and a statement of fact: giving away the treasonous Robert’s position will certainly hasten his death” (76). Harrison becomes the enemy bombers here, watching for her to give away Robert’s position in order to destroy Robert and her relationship with Robert, or in other words, the Other waiting for confirmation about Stella and Robert as he has defined them by his Look. When Stella later almost touches a curtain and

responds to Robert's warning not to by saying that that she wasn't, she admits, "I wanted to. Wanted to crash the window open and blaze the lights on. To think of him makes me angry—I wanted to say, 'Yes, here we are, together: what else do you suppose?'" (322). This is the most defiant that Stella acts toward Harrison, since she is usually indifferent and passive aggressive. He is an enemy that she is wants to confront, and for a moment she considers doing so by no longer hiding behind figurative black-out curtains, defying the need to hide and deceive that he has thrust upon them. Ultimately, it is the presence of this Other that destroys Robert, by making him leave by way of the roof lest the other exits are watched. Stella says when Robert moves to leave, "But there might be someone outside the door." Robert responds, "I have been thinking of that. There has been a step.... Every now and then" (322). While they don't fully know who the step belongs to, once again, the possibility and the pervading sense of being observed strongly influences their actions.

The influence of the Look and the Other on Stella and Robert pervades beyond just the overt instances of being watched discussed above. Harrison becomes a third presence, or Other, in their relationship, even before the conversation in which Stella tells Robert that people are monitoring his movements and know he's a spy. After Stella gets back to London from Ireland, toward the beginning of this critical conversation, Robert states about her trip, "I knew you'd come back full of some thought. I know you have been all by yourself in that house, but all the same I feel jealous, as though somehow you'd been spending your time with some sort of enemy of mine, or rival" (209). This observation of Robert's is true on two points. First, before going to Ireland she had been spending time with Harrison, who is most certainly Robert's enemy and rival in both espionage and their relationships with Stella. Second, however, Robert's comment rings true about her stay in Ireland as well. Even though she is alone in Ireland, she is left alone

with her thoughts and the residual pressure of the Look. Harrison's presence lingers as she struggles to find a solution to her dilemma, and even Robert senses that. After she tells Robert about Harrison and the idea that Harrison planted of Robert's treason, Robert confronts her. Calling this idea a "thing," he says, "This thing locked up inside you, yes; yes, but always secretly being taken out and looked at... We have not, then, been really alone together for the last two months" (213). Through her doubts and suspicions, Harrison prevents them from being alone, because when they are alone she still cannot resist thinking about what Harrison said—it affects the way she views Robert and their interactions. Maud Ellmann notes that Harrison is

the shadowy third that both abetted and destroyed [Stella's] trance with Robert.... Bowen associates the telephone with the shadowy third: the outside that lurks within the inside, rendering autonomy impossible.... Bernhard Siegert has observed that 'telephone systems demand a third person, in whom first and second persons are grounded—namely, the exchange office...' Harrison plays the part of this 'third person.' (166)

In other words, Harrison is like the telephone in this relationship. He grounds Stella and Robert into a reality that they could have gone on ignorant of, namely that Robert is a spy, and thus drives them to the point that they must confront the truth and resolve that difference. However, he also destroys their privacy, being an outsider invading the inside. They are no longer alone in this relationship and their communication is relayed and shaped through this third presence, to the point that they are shrouded in secrets and deceptions.

While before there was complete trust between them, after Harrison plants the seed of doubt, she even begins to wonder, "And was, indeed, Robert himself fictitious? ...he seemed like some other man" (106). Stella comes to a point where she doubts if the Robert she thought she knew is real. After all, if he could lie as a spy, then anything he says could potentially be a lie.

Ironically, it is Robert himself that speaks the most about truth and secrets when he first denies being a spy. “How do you expect me to know what’s true, now? All I can see now is, how well you hide things” (213). But while it is Robert who poses this question, Stella has even more reason to ask it as she tries to discover the truth. In the end, all she can see is how well he hides things.

While Robert seemingly has the worst outcome due to an experience with the Look, Stella’s experience of the Look might be worse. When Robert faces it, his identity doesn’t change, it just becomes conspicuous and fatal. Stella, on the other hand, is forced into a position to discover the truth and thereby becomes what she wasn’t before: a spy. When she finally tells him of her doubts, Robert accuses her of this: “So you’ve always been watching me while we’ve been together? ... While I’ve talked, you’ve been adding up what I say?” (213) As Ellmann states, “Caught in these [...] wheels of surveillance—watching the watched watch the watchers—Stella has no choice but to become a spy herself” (154). In other words, Ellmann argues that Stella is forced into spying herself in order to solve the situation because she is surrounded by spies, and the surveillance and deception that comes with espionage. She is pulled into a circle of people watching and lying to each other, and in order to figure things out and survive the circle, it becomes necessary that she too becomes a spy, watching and lying.

Yet Sartre would disagree with Ellmann. He would argue that Stella does have a choice, and that, in giving way to Harrison’s pressure and spying, she acts in bad faith. But in order to best understand this concept, we must first understand a few more central components of Sartre’s existentialism. First and foremost is what he calls, in *Existentialism is a Humanism*, “the first principle of existentialism”: “existence precedes essence” (22). He explains that, in atheistic existentialism, instead of God creating a particular blueprint of what it means overall to be



human (essence) and then creating humankind accordingly *ex nihilo*, man exists before his essence is determined. He continues,

We mean that man first exists: he materializes in the world, encounters himself, and only afterwards defines himself. ...to begin with he is nothing. He will not be anything until later, and then he will be what he makes of himself.... Man is not only that which he conceives himself to be, but that which he wills himself to be, and since he conceives of himself only after he exists, just as he wills himself to be after being thrown into existence, man is nothing other than what he makes of himself. (22)

In other words, if existence precedes essence, then all meaning comes after we first exist and we have no inherent meaning. In turn, if this is the case, then there is no one to determine what we are and what that means except for us, and we therefore construct ourselves according to our conception and our will.

Imbedded in this philosophy are two more key concepts. First is facticity. This refers to the facts that surround us when we are “thrown into existence.” These facts, however, do not have any inherent value or significance. Instead, we have the second concept: transcendence, which is a human being’s capacity to assign meaning to the facts and how we ultimately define the meaning of existence. However, we don’t just have this capacity. We also have a responsibility to assign value and significance. This is because we are radically free in that no one but us can assign meaning to our facticity. Sartre, in fact, states that we are “condemned to be free” (*BN* 439)—we cannot run away from the responsibility we have in this radical freedom. In turn, since we are condemned to be free, we feel angst, which is the realization that, in our transcendence and responsibility, what value and meaning we determine for ourselves applies to all of humanity. This is because we have determined a particular value and meaning, and so, in

our own subjective perception of the world, that particular value and meaning applies to everything, if we are to be consistent. Thus, Sartre further explains that someone who is in anguish is someone “who realizes that he is not only the individual that he chooses to be, but also the legislator choosing at the same time what humanity as a whole should be” and the consequential awareness “of his own full and profound responsibility” (25). In other words, being in anguish means that we have realized that we are responsible for determining the meaning of our facticity for the whole world, and even when we strive to escape this responsibility, say through suicide, we are still determining the value and meaning of life—namely that it has none.

This angst that comes from an awareness of one’s responsibility to assign meaning leads in turn to bad faith, or what Sartre describes as avoiding one’s individual responsibility for transcendence. According to Sartre, “many people do not appear especially anguished, but we maintain that they are merely hiding their anguish or trying not to face it” (*EIAH*, 25). They hide it and try to not face it most commonly by casting that responsibility to others. This is why they either shy away from or give way to the Look and allow someone else to define them, and subsequently, usually, they refuse to be accountable for their actions—there is someone else to place the blame on. In his passage on the Look, Sartre explains, “I *am* this being. I do not for an instant think of denying it; my shame is a confession. I shall be able later to use bad faith so as to hide it from myself, but bad faith is also a confession since it is an effort to flee the being which I am” (*BN* 350-351). In other words, in the moment of the Look, when caught doing a particular thing, the observed does not deny being the one doing the action, but after that initial instance will strive to deceive himself through bad faith. Nevertheless, the presence of bad faith in someone only reinforces the truth.

Therefore, when Stella gives way to the Look and becomes a spy, it is in an attempt to ignore the responsibility she has to determine her own meaning and her own identity. Thus, she acts in bad faith. We can see evidence of her avoidance of responsibility in many of her actions. For instance, when Harrison tries to make a connection with her by stating that they are “getting to know each other” and “are not so unlike,” Stella retorts, “Why? Below one level, everybody’s horribly alike. You succeed in making a spy of me” (153). And then again, later in this same conversation, she says, “Yes, we both have natures; but what I can’t bear is what you do to mine, what you make mine do” (156). In both of these statements she places the blame that she has appropriated espionage onto Harrison. He has made her into something and makes her do things. Yet Sartre would call this into question and point out that she is in bad faith. In the silence that follows, “She recrossed her feet on the stool, leaned further back, closed her eyes, in the attitude of a woman so tired out as no longer to be responsible for anything” (153). This tired, indifferent, and closed off position additionally demonstrates her bad faith. Her bad faith goes beyond just words, but even her actions and manner indicate her refusal to accept her responsibility.

However, throughout her narrative, Stella evades responsibility in more ways than giving into Harrison’s Look and turning into a spy. In fact, the espionage and secrets that drive the novel parallel deeper and longer-lasting self-deceptions and cases of bad faith. Halfway through the book, Stella’s son Roderick learns from Cousin Nettie that Victor, Stella’s late husband and his father, cheated on her, instead of the other way around as everyone had supposed. Afterwards, Roderick calls Stella and repeatedly insists that “it throws such a different light” (246-247). We never really know what he thinks the truth of the past shines a different light on because Stella interrupts him, but clearly it has a strong effect on him. At first she pretends to not know what he is talking about, which astounds him, and when she does admit to knowing what

he is talking about and agrees to talk to him about it in person, she is impatient: “Yes, yes, Roderick—yes” (247). After the phone conversation, her frustration is clear and she does not stop talking about it for quite a while. She explains to Harrison that “Nothing was simpler for everyone than to see things one way—that *I* had asked for my freedom, for no virtuous reason, and that Victor....was letting me divorce him; simply being quixotic.—In fact, no. Victor walked out on me” (249). Here we see, once again, that Stella allows others to determine her role in the affair instead of taking that responsibility herself—she didn’t bother to correct the misconceptions because they were “simpler” and already fit in with the idea of her that everyone had already determined. However, she not only allows others to judge her, but adopts the judgment as her own. When pressed, she acknowledges the truth, but reluctantly. She tells Harrison, “What I am talking about is the loss of face.... Whoever’s the story *had* been, I let it be mine. I let it ride, and more—it came to be my story, and I stuck to it. Or rather, first I stuck to it, then it went on sticking to me: it took my shape and equally I took its. So much so that I virtually haven’t known, for years now, where it ends and I begin—*or* cared” (251). What Stella means by “face” here is that she has encouraged a perception of herself in order to preserve a particular identity in the eyes of her family and friends. This is not only an acceptance of the story and identity projected upon her, but an owning of it. As Lassner argues, “Preferring to be characterized as a ‘monster’ instead of a ‘fool,’ Stella uses Victor’s story as a passive aggressive strategy, concealing her character while inventing one” (33). She makes this false story her own to the point that it becomes a part of her and she believes it. She allows it to affect who she is and she invents a type of character to “save face” in the pressure of the Look of the Others. Thus she refuses to accept the truth when Roderick brings it up, because for the truth to be revealed means that she will have to accept and determine the meaning and significance of the reality in her life

and how it has and will affect her life. She will have to acknowledge that the self that she has come to view as her true self is actually a deception.

Robert also has deception running deeper than his work as a Nazi spy, and this deception originates and is embodied in his home, Holme Dene. There he lives under the Look of his family. For instance, he tells Stella that on his father's "insistence we were perpetually looking each other in the eye" (130). This might not indicate Sartre's Look, but at the very least it is symbolic of the constant presence and insistence of the Other. Further, on his relationship with his father, he says, "Something was expected: very often I did not know which way to look, and looking back I can see that he didn't either" (130). Here two things come to light. One, his father was just as much an object of the look as he was, and two, he makes the important statement "something was expected," giving us some idea of the pressure that the presence of the Other has on us, particularly when that Other is someone close, like a father. That something which is expected is apparently unknown, but even an unknown expectation is enough to make people shy away from it.

Robert's and his siblings' relationship with their mother is even more strenuous. She is to her family at Holme Dene what Harrison is to Stella and Robert—an ever-watching presence. The whole family seems shrouded in secrets. "[The family's] private hours, it could be taken, were spent in nerving themselves for inevitable family confrontations such as meal-times, and in working on to their faces the required expression of having nothing to hide" (287-288). Therefore, at Holme Dene everyone tries to hide and present a particular image to the others, but it becomes clear that they do not accomplish this. Mrs. Kelway in particular sees everything. Robert tells Stella about his last visit to Holme Dene and his fear of being arrested, "My mother had been waiting for this; she wished it!" (313) It is unclear if Mrs. Kelway did know that he was

a spy, but he still feels the pressure of her Look. Stella thinks, when she meets the solemn Mrs. Kelway, “she had no reason to go out. By sitting here where she sat, and by sometimes looking, by sometimes even not looking, across the furnished lawn, she projected Holme Dene: this was a bewitched wood. If her power came to an end at the white gate, so did the world” (120). This image of Mrs. Kelway is domineering. Even within the confines of Holme Dene, she watches and knows everything that happens there, and even if her Look and power is only at Holme Dene, the house is the world and the only place of significance, as perceived and defined by her. Nothing outside matters except as it relates to Holme Dene, the Kelway family, and her.

It is not just his last visit to Holme Dene that Robert faces his mother’s Look. Every time he returns, he comes in contact with the pressure of her Look. For instance, his room embodies a projection of Robert that his mother expects him to be. It is filled with pictures of him from every age, evidently hung by his mother. In addition, the narrator notes that “first-floor manly comforts had moved upstairs to him. They interspersed fictions of boyishness” (127). The pictures and still-present boyhood “fictions” indicate that Mrs. Kelway expects him to be the boy he once was, or at least the boy she saw him as. Another example of the expectations pervading his room comes when Stella suggests that the pictures are hung because his mother and sister are very fond of him. He replies, “No, they expect me to be very fond of myself” (128). But all of these expectations and “fictions,” which result from his mother’s objectification and judgment of his meaning, are not truly him. This is why Stella exclaims, “Robert, this room feels empty!” To which Robert responds, “Each time I come back again into it I’m hit in the face by the feeling that I don’t exist—that I not only am not but never have been” (129). The person his mother sees is not truly Robert, so when he is in his room, all meaning that he has attributed to his life outside

of Holme Dene is stripped away and he is confronted with a false idea of himself. Therefore, he feels like he doesn't exist, because the past that is shown in his room is all false.

The house itself embodies deception. Robert thinks that the house is "not hollow, being flock-packed with matter—repressions, doubts, fears, subterfuges and fibs" (287). Robert's sister Ernestine clarifies to Stella "that the house, though antique in appearance, was not actually old[.] The oak beams, to be perfectly honest, were imitations" (126). The imitations are false, meant to deceive visitors and give a sense of the house having more history than it truly possesses. Parallel to this, Robert says of his pictures and the moments they depict, "Imitation ones. If to have gone through motions ever since one was born is, as I think now, criminal, here's my criminal record. Can you think of a better way of sending a person mad than nailing that pack of his lies all around the room where he has to sleep?" (129). In other words, just like the house is an imitation and deceptive, so are Robert's pictures and childhood. He never had true moments, because he went "through motions," and so the supposed true moments captured in the pictures are actually lies.

Despite the pressure of the Look and the deceptions at Holme Dene, Robert fights against it. He acknowledges the pictures and doesn't take them down, but he defies them as well. Here he has the advantage over Stella who gives into falsity and allows it to define who she is. However, Robert also acts in bad faith because he refuses to accept his past and the truth behind the pictures—after all, they did happen—and instead constructs a new identity for himself as a spy for the Nazis because he rejects the idea of freedom which the Allies are fighting for. In fact, Sartre would certainly deem Robert's rejection of freedom and spying for the Nazis part of his acting in bad faith. Robert even tells Stella about these ideas of his, "I didn't choose them: they marked me down. They are not mine, anyhow; I am theirs" (306). Here he denies any

responsibility for his ideas of supporting Nazism. Instead of choosing them, he claims that they chose and own him. This parallels Stella's complaint to Harrison about being made into a spy, and for both they refuse to accept the responsibility to apply their own meaning and significance to the facts they've encountered.

The Sartrean existential themes are not limited to the central characters who are in a spy plot. For example, Cousin Nettie is a quintessential character who avoids the Look and acts in bad faith, despite being far removed from the war and espionage. In explaining why she came to an asylum, she tells Roderick, who goes to visit her since he has inherited her husband's estate in Ireland, "For so long they had said, 'If you keep on not going back to Mount Morris when Francis asks you to and everybody thinks you should, people will come to the conclusion that you are odd.' So at last I said, 'Then that must be what I am.... Very well, then, perhaps I had better go into a home'" (238). This acceptance of being insane, as people conclude she is, is compounded with a wish to avoid others. Even as she gives into a projected identity, she does so to further avoid the Look. When Roderick tells her that it wasn't very far to come visit her, she is disturbed by the news. "'I thought it was,' she said, for the first time troubled. 'Too far for anybody to come'" (230). In other words, her greatest motivation is to be too far away for people to come visit her. A short while later Roderick reflects, "One could argue, she had chosen well.... *Here* was nothing to trouble her but the possibility of being with reach" (241). In other words, the possibility of people, namely family and her social circle, visiting her is the only thing that can truly bother her in the asylum.

However, experiencing the Look and using it to avoid social obligations is only one aspect of Sartre's philosophy that she demonstrates. She also avoids her responsibility to face the truth and determine the meaning and significance to her life. It becomes clear that Cousin Nettie



is not in fact mad. When Roderick calls his mother to discuss what Cousin Nettie tells him about his father cheating on his mother, Stella warns Roderick that he has to remember that Cousin Nettie is “off her head,” to which Roderick simply states, “Oh no; I don’t think so” (246). Roderick is a very perceptive character and after one conversation sees Cousin Nettie in a way that no one else, even Cousin Nettie herself, was willing to. However, even though she is actually quite sane, she does not accept the truth. She tells Roderick, “I believe I am very odd.— And you must not tell me I’m not, or I shall begin to wonder” (232). This statement indicates that, at some level, she knows the truth and is afraid that, if someone says that she is not, applying a new Look on her, she will have to consider if not accept that she is not mad. Roderick later tells Stella toward the end of the novel, “but today *I’d* rather not talk about my father.... *He* really is dead... After all, it was Cousin Francis who’s given me my house; and with you I can only connect Robert. Cousin Nettie’s bringing my father out like that may have just shown how determined she is to be mad” (334). Roderick here suggests that, by bringing up the long-buried past that is in no way connected to the life any of them live now, Cousin Nettie tries to prove just how disconnected and out of her mind she wants people to perceive her as. However, it does not work and only further demonstrates how she is in bad faith, because she avoids knowing about the present, let alone determining the meaning of the present facts.

The presence of Cousin Nettie in the story shows that there are many ways the Look and bad faith appear in *The Heat of the Day*, and hopefully prompt further examination of the novel through the existential impressions of the self and others that Bowen includes. There is a preoccupation in the novel, not just with the impact of war and espionage, but also with issues of the self, autonomy, and the power that perceptions of ourselves and others has on belief and action.

## Conclusion

Examining Elizabeth Bowen's novels through the lens of existentialism reveals a great concern about what living well means for her characters. The decisions and conflicts her characters struggle with can be well understood in existential terms, be it the need to affirm their lives, to become selves, or to accept the responsibility to define their existence, or the failure to achieve these, evident in despair and bad faith. In *The Last September*, Lois learns to affirm her life despite Gerald's death and the pressures of her family who live in an Apollonian illusion. In contrast, by the close of *The House in Paris* and *The Heat of the Day*, the central characters do not successfully succeed in their existential struggles. Karen must become a self, overcoming her despair of finitude; however, at the end we discover that she fails at this, instead ending up in despair of defiance as she refuses to accept her past and thus does not want to be the self she actually is but instead wants to be like her mother. Stella and Robert are confronted with the Look and both respond to it in bad faith as they become embroiled in deception and fail to take responsibility for defining their own existence. For example, it is in bad faith that Stella blames Harrison for her becoming a spy and that Robert does not take responsibility for the ideas that lead to his treason, but rather says that the ideas claim him. In these novels, each character's existential struggle is distinct, yet they all deal with the question of what it means to exist, particularly in the face of nihilism.

This question of existence and of nihilism is an underlying issue of modernism as well as existentialism. In the aftermath of World War I and other concerns that arose in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, many people were drawn to nihilism, or the idea of a meaningless world, because they could not reconcile such things as the horrors of the War with the world that came before—one built on tradition and the idea that humanity has an inherent

meaning and purpose, a place in this universe. As Pippin argues, “So many come to be so dissatisfied because modernity seemed to promise what it finally could not deliver—an individually and collectively self-determining life—or because they lost faith that they knew what that would mean, or because some came to believe that it was not such a wise thing to have promised in the first place” (3). The subsequent surge of nihilism shook so many people’s beliefs in such a world and system that philosophers, artists, and writers found it necessary to respond. As a result of this common, underlying issue of nihilism, modernists and existentialists explore similar themes, such as the human individual, the need to determine a meaning in life, and human struggles like angst, isolation, and death, to name a few. Therefore, the presence of the question of existence and these shared strands of thoughts in Bowen’s novels not only make her work existential, but also provide support that she is a modernist writer, beyond her modernist stylistic elements.

An existential study of Bowen’s novels, however, not only supports her position in the modernist canon, but also suggests other ways in which we could interpret Bowen’s works. As Heather Jordan notes, “The state of Bowen studies continues to mirror and absorb this exploration of what lies just beneath what is apparent to us” (47). The struggles and themes of existentialism could easily be included in this observation, because they underlie apparent human choices and behavior. An example of an additional area of study is how Bowen’s underlying existentialism could tie to pessimism. Janice Rossen already suggests this in her dissertation, but with an emphasis on the characters’ relationships. However, even on an individual level, the frequent futility of her characters to truly affirm life or become a self could imply a kind of pessimism in Bowen’s writings. Alternatively, their futility could also indicate a realistic

understanding of the difficulty of these tasks—that becoming a self and affirming life require ongoing effort and that it is inevitable that we will frequently fail even as we progress.

Beyond existentialism, this thesis argues that Bowen’s place as a modernist writer can be established by examining the content and character arcs of her novels, not just her idiosyncratic style reminiscent of writers such as Virginia Woolf. Further modernist studies of her novels might examine themes primarily pertinent to modernism, such as the importance Bowen gives the subject of art in her novels. For instance, Stella’s son Roderick muses, “Robert’s dying of what he did will not always be there, won’t last like a book or a picture: by the time one is able to understand it it will be gone, it just won’t be there to be judged. Because, I suppose art is the only thing that can go on mattering once it has stopped hurting?” (*HD* 337). Eventually tragedies pass, often without anyone really understanding how or why they happen until much later.

However, because of its lasting nature, art is able to convey meaning and an event’s significance far into the future. In turn, art can have a lasting effect on society by going “on mattering” even when the circumstances around the art have “stopped hurting.” The modernists recognized this role of art, and pieces such as Pablo Picasso’s *Guernica* and T.S. Eliot’s “The Hollow Men” continue to “go on mattering” even after the immediacy of the horrors of the Spanish Civil War and the First World War have passed. Pippin describes the rise of the modernist aesthetic as “a new sense of the nature and significance of art-making” (40).

As this thesis has shown, through applying the philosophies of three leading existentialists—Nietzsche, Kierkegaard, and Sartre—to *The Last September*, *The House in Paris*, and *The Heat of the Day*, respectively, we can more clearly understand Bowen’s characters and their decisions within a philosophical framework. Because of the parallels and shared concerns between existentialism and modernism, such a study leads us to conclude that Bowen should be

considered a modernist writer and thus included in the modernist canon. The implications that can be drawn from this argument also open up many possibilities for further scholarship on Bowen's works through the lenses of both existentialism and modernism.

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