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The Figure in the Ground:

Perception, Identity and Readerly Involvement in four Short Stories
by Elizabeth Bowen



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Introduction

This essay will, as its title suggests, study perception and identity in four of Elizabeth Bowen's stories, focusing especially on how the reader is invited, even forced, to become an active participant in the formation of meaning. Perception and the textual representation of it is seen as the key to understanding the concern with identity in the stories, as it draws attention to subjective points of view, affected and shaped by their context. The stories studied here have been chosen as much for their similarities as for their differences, but a feature they all share is a 'ghostliness', a fantastic element which will receive special attention. Three of them have been labelled and anthologised as ghost stories proper (Wilson 91-93), the one that has not, 'The Inherited Clock', is, nevertheless, an uncanny tale with similar strategies and therefore interesting to compare the others with.

The author and previous criticism

In her famous preface to *The Demon Lover and Other Stories* (1945)¹, Elizabeth Bowen wrote of her war-time stories that they reflected the strangeness of the war experience, the desiccation of every-day life, hallucination as a saving resort against the threat of annihilation; in her 'resistance fantasies' in general it is 'the "I" that is sought – and retrieved at the cost of no little pain. And the ghosts ... they are the certainties ... hostile or not, they rally, they fill the vacuum for the uncertain "I"' (Mulberry Tree 97-98). Those of the stories studied here which are included in that collection are 'The Demon Lover' and 'The Inherited Clock', but I would argue that the issues reflected in the preface are present in earlier stories as well. 'Dead Mabelle' and 'Foothold' both first appeared in *Joining Charles and Other Stories* in 1929.² Whereas the war clearly sets its mark in various ways on the war-time stories, many of the narrative strategies and the concern with identity studied here permeates Bowen's work as a whole.

Critical work on Bowen has generally focused on her 10 novels and the only book length study of her short stories remains Phyllis Lassner's *Elizabeth Bowen: A Study of the Short*

¹ Reprinted in Hermione Lee, ed. *The Mulberry Tree: Writings of Elizabeth Bowen* (London: Vintage, 1999), pp. 94-99.

² 'The Demon Lover' was first published in the *Listener* in November 1941 and 'The Inherited Clock' in the *Cornhill*, in January 1944. Bibliographical information from Elizabeth Bowen, *The Collected Stories of Elizabeth Bowen*, edited and with introduction by Angus Wilson (New York: Knopf, 1981). All page references to the stories are to this volume.

Fiction. Lassner sees a thematic whole in the short stories in terms of how they treat the relationship between past and present and focuses, among other things, on Bowen's dual heritage and the history of Ireland. She addresses and analyses the stories thematically in what she sees as five 'modes'. In doing so, she also draws our attention to Bowen's, often ignored, sympathy for women's plights and studies 'entrapment in female characters who are sometimes also capable of engineering their own escape' (Lassner 8), something which I will also examine in my readings. As well as analysing the stories thematically, Lassner provides an overview of the critical attention directed at the short stories before 1991 and notes that the stories tend to be read as glosses on the novels rather than an artistic achievement in their own right, as well as a frequent failure among critics to account for what Bowen does with the short story form itself (Lassner 157). I shall return to some of Lassner's points as well as those of other critics in the main body of this essay.

Whereas the past in relation to the present certainly is important to Bowen's stories, not the least those treated here, I shall place my focus on the level of the individual and the various factors which come into play for identity formation and expression. More importantly, I want to study *how* the texts treat this theme and why they not only invite but necessitate readerly involvement in ways which mirror the problems that the characters struggle with.

Methodological framework

My reader-orientated method derives its impulse and tools from narratology, as presented by Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan in *Narrative Fiction*, and cognitive poetics, as presented by Peter Stockwell in *Cognitive Poetics: An Introduction*. The close study of narrative fiction developed within narratology contains, according to Rimmon-Kenan, 'a view of the text as a system of reconstruction-inviting structures rather than as an autonomous object' (120), a view which has formed part of the foundation upon which cognitive poetics has been built.³ In general, cognitive poetics focuses more on the reader and a broadened understanding of context, but insofar as it is used for textual analysis of a specific literary text (rather than

³ Both disciplines in this take their cue from the phenomenological approach to literature, which differentiates between the book/text as autonomous objects and literature as heteronomous, 'concretised' only by being read. Cognitive Poetics attempts to take phenomenological reader-response theory further by the application of cognitive linguistics and cognitive psychology, in order to define and explain the cognitive process of reading in a new way.

actual readings or human thought in general, where it closes in on linguistics and psychology) there are still many similarities with narratology and other reader-response approaches.

The theoretical concepts which I will use in my analysis are defamiliarization, focalization, foregrounding (differentiating between figure and ground within the text), and gaps, all seen here as interrelated and useful in order to be able to define and analyse what happens in the text. Defamiliarization, Victor Shklovsky's formalist term for the ability of art to challenge our automatized perception of the world and of art itself, a concept which focuses on the 'literary' as opposed to the 'normal' language, is still useful.⁴ Peter Stockwell discusses defamiliarization in the context of the figure/ground idea developed within cognitive linguistics as well as the idea of deviance (Stockwell 13ff). Whereas the Formalists focused on defamiliarization as the main, and mainly desired, strategy to expose art as art and thereby remove automatism of perception, Peter Stockwell sees it as a way to define and discuss any aspect of the text which presents the world in a new way and which thereby challenges preconceptions. It is in this latter sense I use the term, and incorporate linguistic deviance as well as estranging (for instance supernatural) components of the plot.

As mentioned above, the stories studied here all share a 'ghostliness' and contain a defamiliarizing element of the fantastic. In his efforts to delineate the fantastic as genre, Tzvetan Todorov sets up a framework of criteria which partly concerns aspects of the text and partly concerns the reading of the text. The pure fantastic, according to Todorov, is a text characterised by unresolved hesitation regarding supernatural events; that is, those events are neither explained (which would make the story uncanny) or accepted (which would make the story marvellous). While this hesitation may or may not be experienced by a character, it is the reader's hesitation, past the end of the narrative, which determines the fantastic. The genre 'therefore implies an integration of the reader into the world of the characters; that world is defined by the reader's own ambiguous perception of the events narrated' (Todorov 31). Todorov points out that only a few works actually fit the description (notably Henry James's 'The Turn of the Screw') and that subgenres, which provoke a sense of fantastic doubt before

⁴ Regarding the purpose of art, Shklovsky writes that 'it is to impart the sensation of things as they are perceived and not as they are known. The technique of art is to make objects "unfamiliar", to make forms difficult, to increase the difficulty and length of perception because the process of perception is an aesthetic end in itself and must be prolonged. Art is a way of experiencing the artfulness of an object: the object is not important...' (Shklovsky 16). The, at times, narrow scope of the Formalists, focusing mainly on the language of literature, is widened by approaches which take context and the readerly contribution into account.

falling down on either side of it, are necessary to complete the picture. (The Bowen stories under scrutiny here would probably fall into the category of ‘fantastic-uncanny’.)

Having concluded that hesitation/doubt is the defining characteristic of the fantastic, Todorov points to the prevalence of first-person narrators in fantastic works (Todorov 82). Because a first-person narrative by necessity is a subjective account, with the narrator also being a character, the narrative escapes the ‘test of truth’: a character can lie or be delusional within the world of the text and there is nothing the reader can test the account against. Hesitation cannot be resolved by textual evidence; again ‘The Turn of the Screw’ is, famously, a case in point. Furthermore, it illustrates an important effect created by fantastic first-person narratives: the very act of perception becomes more important than that which is perceived (Todorov 104-105). The governess’s account of her experience and the question of whether she is mad or not almost overshadows the events of the story.

The importance of subjectivity, pointed out by Todorov, is something I want to develop. None of the stories studied here (and indeed very few of Bowen’s other stories) are first-person narratives, but they use subjectivity to a similar, but also significantly different, effect. Todorov sees the fantastic as having three functions in a text: provoking fear/curiosity in the reader, creating and maintaining suspense, and, finally, permitting the construction of a ‘tautological’ universe, one which has no reality outside language (Todorov 92). Despite being third-person narratives, Bowen’s stories locate the fantastic within subjective experience and allow the fear, curiosity and hesitation it elicits to become a part of the suspense which drives the plot. Because they are third-person narratives, however, the stories present the reader with an opportunity to challenge the subjectivity and participate actively in the formation of meaning. An important tool for such a process is the idea of foregrounding.

As mentioned above, foregrounding is, within cognitive poetics, linked with defamiliarization. If we consider that which is deviant or estranging as the ‘figure’, the rest becomes the ‘ground’: in ‘The Turn of the Screw’ Bly is the ground upon which the ghosts appear, but, as it is a first-person narrative, the events themselves can be seen as the ground which allows the narrator’s voice and mental state to become a figure. In order to determine what is to be understood as figure, we can study how the text directs readerly attention, how it foregrounds characters, objects, settings, or the narrative language itself. A third-person

narrative which presents subjective experience can, moreover, be approached with a close study of focalization.

Focalization is presented by Rimmon-Kenan as the ‘seeing’ as opposed to the ‘speaking’ within a narrative; a seeing, furthermore, which can be external or internal to the story and comes with different facets: perceptual, psychological and ideological (Rimmon-Kenan 77ff). Most of Bowen’s stories and all of those treated here have an external (extradiegetic, non-participating) narrator. As we shall see, however, focalization within the stories is very complex, shifting as it does between character-focalizers and a narrator-focalizer stance, as well as dividing the facets between different focalizers. The narrator, while remaining external to the story, is usually not an ‘objective’ and ‘detached’ voice, but one which displays a subjectivity of its own. The lack of a narrative authority which claims interpretative supremacy contributes to the hesitation and doubt which I will below call uncertainty. I use uncertainty in order to let it incorporate the ‘hesitation’ between different options as well as a more general sense of not quite knowing what happens and ‘gaps’. The end result is a web of subjective accounts which the reader must actively navigate.

Another way to consider defamiliarization and foregrounding is that, among the prominent aspects of the text (the figures), there are also ‘gaps’ for the reader to fill. The notion of gaps is of course mainly connected with Wolfgang Iser, who also addresses the notions of foregrounding and defamiliarization as part of the dynamic relationship between text and reader (Iser 62-63).⁵ Gaps are not complete blanks, even when they are textual absences; they come in many forms, suspensions in plot (temporary gaps) as well as missing information (unfilled gaps), but also as uncertainty and themes. Even the absences are a part of the whole story and a context which determines response rather than an ‘emptiness’ which can be filled at random: ‘the written text imposes certain limits on its unwritten implications in order to prevent these from becoming too blurred and hazy’ (Iser 51-52). I shall here focus on how the text *invites* participation as well as *shaping* it: how, as Iser puts it, the text forces a readerly activity of ‘filling in the gaps left by the text’ (Iser 55). In talking of ‘the reader’ I deal with a

⁵ Defamiliarization for Iser is a strategy in the narrative which can aid the ‘interruptions’ in the reading flow that are necessary for readerly involvement; it can also create surprising links between things and thereby force the reader into a process of reconceptualization. The ‘recreation’ process of reading ‘...is steered by two main structural components within the text: first, a repertoire of familiar literary patterns and recurrent literary themes, together with allusions to familiar social and historical contexts; second, techniques or strategies used to set the familiar against the unfamiliar. Elements of the repertoire are continually backgrounded or foregrounded with a resultant strategic overmagnification, trivialization or even annihilation of the allusion.’ (Iser 62-63).

notion of an ‘ideal reader’, encoded in the text, and not an actual one; the main purpose here is to closely examine the text. At times, however, it is interesting to consider possible actual reader responses in terms of how the text guides attention and expectation only to leave the end open in such a way as to force the reader to reconsider the entire story.

Thesis and purpose

Rather than being fantastic in the sense that the hesitation is not resolved, Bowen’s stories present a challenge to the reader in terms of evaluating subjective accounts and drawing conclusions from the clues placed in the ground. The fantastic, as part of the representation of subjective experience, becomes a part of defamiliarization, a ‘striking or unsettling recognition of familiar patterns’ (Stockwell 18), which presents tension between levels of perception and interpretative efforts. Readerly attention is guided via the characters’ attention and defamiliarization becomes a way to signpost and question the represented subjectivity within the stories.

Regarding foregrounding and the guiding of readerly attention, Peter Stockwell addresses the deliberate repositioning of attention which is part of a critical approach (Stockwell 20), and essentially I want to shift attention from the foregrounded ‘figures’, to the ‘grounds’ which contain them. Defamiliarization is a foregrounding activity, but, as I hope to show, an analysis of focalization and how it functions in the narrative can reveal how the text in fact sets up the ‘ground’ as a problematic origin for the ‘figure’. I want to offer a suggestion as to what, by doing so, the texts are trying to communicate. In the end, this is a close reading of the thematic content in the stories, one which takes into account how the narrative technique and structure reinforces meaning.

The ‘ghostly’ feeling which constitutes the fantastic element in the stories thus has a defamiliarizing function and draws attention to subjectivity. This is complicated, however, by the fact that the text creates tension between distance to, and empathy with, the main character focalizer. The reader follows the interpretative efforts of the character, but from a distanced position which invites the reader to consider the larger framework which has created any given situation in the first place. Filling the gaps in the text and participating in meaning formation activates empathy in the reader; attention is guided via the main focalizer, but the

lingering feeling of uncertainty shows that the problem is located around the character rather than within. When characters' insides seem to be a gap – why are they, and why and by whom are they presented as such? When characters' lives are empty, what do they try to fill them with and why? With this focus, the thematic concern is unveiled as one of identity, of the 'authentic' life, of social codes in opposition to independent self-understanding and self-expression. The stories dramatise on all levels the problems of assigned identity, of social 'set-ups', of codes and misunderstandings.

In each chapter I will begin by analysing focalization within the story, pointing out shifts, facets, narrative uncertainty and suspense-eliciting strategies. This will be followed by the main bulk of the chapter, in which that analysis is discussed against some of the salient features of the story. By way of conclusion, each chapter considers how the 'filling of the gap' in the story has worked on the level of plot as well as reading.

The Demon Lover – Gothic Vision

The most famous, the most discussed and the most anthologised of Bowen's stories is 'The Demon Lover', which, despite being very short, contains a narrative and thematic complexity that fully merits the attention. My discussion of it forms the point of departure for the remainder of the essay, as I argue that there are striking similarities as well as interesting differences in narrative technique and content between the stories which warrant comparisons. 'The Demon Lover' is seen here as a tragedy of assigned identity and misconception, represented as a gothic tale of ghostly persecution which creates narrative uncertainty by signposting subjectivity in various complex ways. Strong suspense and uncertainty are maintained and at the tragic end the reader is left to ponder how this end came to be, and why. Rather than giving any answers about the foregrounded 'figures' in the text, the story places its thematic crux in the surrounding 'ground'.

Focalization-analysis

There are many shifts in focalization in 'The Demon Lover', but there is also an ambiguity concerning the attribution of perspective which complicates matters further. Mrs Drover is

usually the perceptive focalizer and her subjectivity colours the descriptive language, which also contains her emotional responses. Often, however, those emotional responses are not stated and must instead be inferred from a description of her outward behaviour, something which creates a subtle distance as well as a textual gap with regard to Mrs Drover's inner life. The closeness to Mrs Drover's perspective does not mean a complete narrative sympathy with her, as the narrator inserts pejorative comments about her with an ironic distance. This suggests that ideology is focalized by the narrator more than the main focalizer, and adds to the feeling that Mrs Drover is contained in a situation dominated by social codes which she only partly understands.

As the story opens, a description in 'normal' language (see introduction) soon moves into Mrs Drover's perspective and the language becomes coloured by her perplexed return to her shut-up house. Defamiliarization is a factor on the story level as well as the language level: the 'once familiar street' has been rendered very strange by the war, mainly because the entire area is empty and deserted.⁶ Mrs Drover's responses are characterised by a sense of the supernatural as she takes in the familiar but strange house, an activity which will increase as the story progresses. The narrator also adds to the uncanny feeling by stating that 'no human eye' watched Mrs Drover (661). This refers mainly to the fact that there is a cat but no people around, but the choice of words fits the defamiliarizing tone. Mrs Drover's initial concerns are within the realm of the 'prosaic', as the narrator puts it, but despite revealing her mundane reflections the narrator also creates a distance and shows her limited understanding, as when the reader is told that she 'was more perplexed than she knew' (661). Her train of thought is soon broken off in a shock effect. The uncanny letter enters the story accompanied by a 'shaft of refracted daylight' and Mrs Drover reacts as though it has suddenly materialised out of air (662).

Her response to the letter is shown to be initially within the realm of the prosaic again, as she speculates about the caretaker and is strongly focalized through her with the narrative even falling into free indirect discourse (FID). After reading the letter she is even more shocked, but the narrator presents the outward effects of the shock rather than her actual thoughts and feelings. The reader must infer the emotional upset from, for instance, her lips going white.

⁶ As we shall see again and again, the historical contexts and actual facts are very important in Bowen's stories; they are essential to the character's experiences and form a complex web of the actual and the symbolical, especially with regard to people's feeling of the unreal in life. Defamiliarization as a concept is not just useful on the language level, but also on a content level as an experience in the characters' lives.

Mrs Drover goes to the mirror, as if to confirm her own sense of self when she feels as though reading the letter has provoked a change, and is 'confronted by a woman of forty-four'. The reader is told of Mrs Drover's normal expression, 'controlled worry, but of assent' (662), and her ability to 'sustain a manner that was at once energetic and calm' (663). The evaluations of Mrs Drover and her behaviour seem to stem from the narrator, but could of course belong to Mrs Drover herself. Her continued agitation is shown by her actions and the only direct response shown is when Mrs Drover speaks out loud and reveals her bewilderment.

What follows is a complex mixture of memory and narrative flashback, which presents internal discrepancies and as such add to the suspense-gaps as well as the uncertainty. Naming is an interesting factor here, and in general signals different perspectives, focal points and attitudes within the concept of focalization (Rimmon-Kenan 84-85). While the labelling suggests that it is the narrator (or possibly the older Mrs Drover) who states that 'the young girl talking to the soldier had not ever completely seen his face', this is also contradicted almost immediately as the girl becomes the perceptive and emotive focalizer and we are told that 'it *felt*, from not seeing him at this intense moment, as though she had never seen him at all' (663, my emphasis). The young Kathleen feels mainly intimidated by the whole situation and does not fully understand what is going on. Defamiliarizing language, mirroring Kathleen's feeling that it is all unreal, creates an image of her fiancé which is already that of a 'demon'. Whereas it is easy to attribute the expression 'unnatural promise' (663) to the young Kathleen, the expression 'sinister troth' (664) could suggest a modification by the older Mrs Drover or even a slightly ironic comment by the narrator, pointing to the high-strung feeling of the girl.

The remainder of the flashback is told with a narrator-focalizer stance, especially as pertains to ideology. This mainly seems to reflect Kathleen's family's response to the situation, which is strongly influenced by the 'normal' order of things. Kathleen's behaving 'well', things going 'straighter', Kathleen becoming 'natural enough to share her family's anxiousness' (664) are expressions which show that adherence to protocol are of the highest importance. The narrative then moves back to Mrs Drover's perspective, talking about 'this' house, and finally returns to the present of the story.

The following is strongly focalized through Mrs Drover, and reveals a conflict between the attempts at finding a realistic explanation and the tendency to fall into a sense of the

supernatural. Her home appears to be a ‘cracked cup from which memory, with its reassuring power, had either evaporated or leaked away’ (664). The letter-writer, it appears to Mrs Drover, has struck ‘knowledgably’ at the right moment, why this could be so remains unclear. Mrs Drover’s escalating fear must be inferred from her conflicted and erratic thoughts as she tells herself that she neither is ‘permitting her mind to dwell’ on the supernatural, nor ‘care[s] to consider’ the simpler solution that someone has broken into the house – yet clearly does both (664-5). The conflict between the supernatural and the actual is not resolved; Mrs Drover’s escalating fear is given a supernatural tinge by the language, but simultaneously the actual events do not confirm that there is anything supernatural going on.

Mrs Drover locks the door to the room and contemplates her escape. The narrative, increasingly weaving FID and direct discourse into already strongly focalized passages, reflects the mounting agitation of the protagonist. Despite Mrs Drover here being the focalizer, it seems as though the narrator interferes and inserts another comment about her as ‘a woman whose utter dependability was the keystone of her family life’ (665), a distancing statement which adds a tragically ironic dimension to her situation. Her increased thinking activity eventually culminates in a new memory, this time, however, not with an ambiguous sense of narrative flashback. In her memory, which is another textual gap as the reader is not told what she remembers, there is also an overt gap: Mrs Drover cannot remember the face of the man. Again a gap adds to the suspense, the reader can only share with Mrs Drover the horror that there is ‘no time to run from a face you do not expect’ (665).

Mrs Drover plans to find a taxi, and is heartened enough by the idea of a taxi driver to leave her upper floor room. The reader is told that she hears nothing, but that a draught travels up the stairs. This initially suggests that the person who at that moment leaves the room has been there all along, presumably since leaving the letter for her, and that the threat is very real indeed. However, the situation is complicated by an uncertainty which seems to suggest that Mrs Drover is the focalizer (rather than the other option, that the narrator is informing the reader of an event unknown to the protagonist): the person is leaving the house by a door *or* a window (666). If the sentence refers to Mrs Drover’s interpretation of a little draught, the reader must question whether there is a person there at all: Mrs Drover does not actually see anyone and the narrator does not confirm the interpretation.

The final sentences of the story create what must be deemed to be a tragic ending, but it is an open ending full of unresolved gaps. Who is the driver? Does Mrs Drover even recognize him? Could he be the same person as the person who left the house – if, indeed there was such a person at all? Is her fear really merited or is there some kind of natural explanation to it all? Is Mrs Drover captured by a ghost, a psychotic former lover or a criminal taxi driver about to mug her? In the final passage Mrs Drover is the perceptive focalizer, and her experience seems to determine the selection of information. It seems likely that it is Mrs Drover's feeling that they remain 'for an eternity eye to eye' (666), but the reader is not told anything of the driver. The story ends with a sentence which retains the narrative uncertainty: the phrase 'without mercy' suggests that the driver is sinister, but it is still Mrs Drover's feeling, presented by the narrator as the *taxi* accelerating without mercy (666), a phrasing which displaces agency and places the focus on subjective evaluation. The story, which has foregrounded the letter and its sender, ends without filling the gaps and the reader must look for the answers in the ground, rather than the figure.

Absence, apperception and assigned identity

Shifts in focalization, along with a narrative voice which displays subjectivity and a complex tension between closeness and distance to the protagonist-focalizer, creates a narrative uncertainty which subtly adds a further dimension to the suspense in the story. Suspense, then, is here an effect of the gaps in the narrative as well as the subjectivity in the representation which focuses on the mounting fear of the protagonist.⁷ The reader is invited to share Mrs Drover's perspective, by a focus on her thoughts as well as descriptive passages coloured supernatural by her cognition. As I hope to have shown, however, there is a subtle complexity in the presentation which questions this very subjectivity and creates a distance from which we can study not only Mrs Drover, but also the social context that contains her, critically.

In addition to the obvious, foregrounded absences in the story, such as the soldier's face, there is, in general, more absence than presence in 'The Demon Lover'. The Drovers' house and the entire street is deserted, the caretaker is away on holiday, the fiancé who went missing in the war is present only through his words and a vague, incomplete memory of him, Mr Drover is

⁷ As the uncertainty, or hesitation, is not fully resolved, 'The Demon Lover' could be called a fantastic tale according to Todorov's criteria. There *are* possible natural explanations for all events, but the fact that they are far-fetched, coupled with the fact that the supernatural has been invoked and almost makes more sense, allows for an unresolved hesitation between the two.

only mentioned in passing, as are the Drover children and Mrs Drover's parents and sister. Human activity in the house has stopped and is present only in traces it has left on furniture and walls, indeed, Mrs Drover feels that memory itself has evaporated. The story therefore hinges on a woman alone in a house having to respond to her past without the safety net of the familiar.

The reader's attention is guided via the most obviously foregrounded presence, the mysterious letter, to the most obviously foregrounded absence, its sender: the reappearance of the soldier becomes the catalyst which triggers the crisis for Mrs Drover. It is often pointed out, most thoroughly by John Coates, that 'The Demon Lover' possibly refers to an old ballad ('James Harris or The Demon Lover') in which the lover returns to see his love settled comfortably with another man and takes his vengeance on the faithless woman by carrying her off to hell with him. Coates and others interpret Mrs Drover and her responses as emotionally inadequate and see her as the faithless woman, unable to return a love which therefore becomes sinister to her. The intertextual reference may be valid, but I would argue that placing the 'blame' on Mrs Drover is an interpretation which fails to acknowledge the conditions that have shaped all Kathleen Drover's responses.

Tanya Gardiner-Scott also points to the metaphorical implications of the soldier as a personification of the forgotten values of WW1, coming back to haunt a world which has started a new war. Robert Calder reads the story entirely in allegorical terms, the anonymous soldier becoming a figure of the returning war and not only our complicity with it but our inability to control it as it destroys us. Allegorical readings of the soldier (and the tale as a whole) are certainly valid, as Bowen often masterfully weaves the symbolical and the actual together, but my reading focuses on how Mrs Drover's situation sets up her doom, rather than why the soldier (if, indeed, there is a soldier at all) comes back to take revenge. Mrs Drover and the soldier are both determined by their history and historical context, and therefore both can be seen as victims of it. Lassner sees the soldier's reappearance as an emotional bridge between two wars, but directs our attention to the sense of a set-up: Mrs Drover is doomed whatever she does. Rather than seeing Mrs Drover as a faithless woman, Lassner argues that Mrs Drover is caught in male fantasies of devotion which only allow for their own reality. The soldier for Lassner is a tragic outcome of historical forces, a victim as well as a perpetrator of the violence of war (Lassner 64-66).

However, a consequence of my reading is that 'The Demon Lover' primarily concerns Mrs Drover and her identity crisis: we only see the soldier as she responds to him. The reader is told almost nothing of this strange man, who is truly present only in the words of the letter (and perhaps, but ambiguously so, as the driver of the taxi).⁸ These words, and Mrs Drover's bewilderment about them, are echoed in the scene under the tree, when the soldier's cryptic statements about not being as far away as she thinks is met with an 'I don't understand?' from Kathleen (663). There is even a similarity in the written 'the day we said' (662) and the spoken 'you know what we said' (663). Kathleen, however, young or old, clearly does not have a clue what 'they' have said.

Mrs Drover's inability to recall the face of her former fiancé is indicative of many things. It signals her incomplete access to her own memory as well as the broader problem of not fully understanding the situation in general. Because of the obvious danger inherent in not knowing who your persecutor is, the absence of the face is also an important part of the suspense. The fact that the soldier is a gap, and that the only access to him beyond the words of the letter is Mrs Drover's memory, means that the image of him created in the text is coloured by a middle-aged woman's distorted memory of a situation when she, as a young girl was standing next to a man and felt intimidated. The potentially sinister tone of the letter becomes positively threatening, and Mrs Drover's response and her memory, in which the soldier is described in supernatural terms, creates the ominous framework. It is this, Kathleen sensing that he is 'without much kindness', 'without feeling' and her own feeling of being 'intimidated' as well as imagining 'spectral glitters in the place of his eyes' (663), which truly makes the man appear to be a 'demon lover'.

Douglas A. Hughes sees the story as a psychological drama, in which Mrs Drover, already a paranoid madwoman, 'cracks up' because of the strangeness of the house and the guilt returning to haunt her. In his response to this theory, Daniel V. Fraustino argues that Mrs Drover is unsatisfied in her marriage and that her desertion of her family creates a situation where her former lover, in this reading a psychopath and a sadist, can strike and kill her. Readings of this kind are, I would argue, outcomes of not taking into account the complex shifting of subjectivity in the story which means focusing too strongly on the foregrounded

⁸ Bowen slyly refused to call the soldier a 'definite' ghost and instead referred to him as a 'questionable' one (Mulberry Tree 98). It is possible to see the soldier, and everything pertaining to him, as a figment of Mrs Drover's imagination.

figures rather than the problematic ground. As was pointed out above, a refusal to take into account all aspects of Mrs Drover's situation and perspective inspires an interpretation which faults Mrs Drover for emotional inadequacy; conversely, an uncritical acceptance of Mrs Drover's foregrounded perspective opens up the madwoman/sadist options. Needless to say, the story has a complexity which allows for all the above mentioned readings; the unresolved hesitation keeps all options, notably also the allegorical one, open. The question is *why* Mrs Drover is lost, be it to a ghost, a psychopath or her own deluded mind.

The baffled and frightened response which Mrs Drover has to the reappearance of her former fiancé, which is quite natural – he was presumed dead – and even natural in the sense that she knew so little about him then that she knows even less now, also reveals important aspects of the woman herself. While the text presents Mrs Drover as 'prosaic', in her thoughts as well as her actions, it also becomes clear that she leans towards interpreting that which she does not understand in supernatural terms, something which is hinted at in the language coloured by her perspective. What emerges from a close study of the focalization is the aforementioned unresolved conflict between attempts at a 'prosaic', realistic explanation and a tendency to understand the incomprehensible as supernatural. When *seeing* the actual, the present, is not an option, *understanding* the absent becomes a problem, solved by an 'unreal' explanation. Mrs Drover, removed from all normality and faced with a past which she does not understand, starts to lose her hold on reality. Thus we can see her response to a draught towards the end of the story: she does not see anything, but believes that there is someone there. The missing soldier and the conflicting interpretations which characterise Mrs Drover's relation to her situation point to what I see as the main crux of the story. Essentially, the most significant textual gap is not the soldier, but the identity of Mrs Drover.

By saying that Mrs Drover herself is something of a textual gap I, mean that the absence in the text of most of her thoughts and feelings suggests an inner emptiness and an absent sense of self. The fact that Mrs Drover focuses on seeing rather than understanding (and is so baffled when she cannot see) is illustrated by the mirror scene, when she *feels* a change but needs to *see* herself in the mirror to verify the fact. Rather than affording her with a sense of self, however, she is 'confronted by a woman of forty-four' and we are told only of her outside. Apperception for Mrs Drover works in the same way as perception in general, she looks to the physical manifestations of things. This holds true in the scene with the soldier as well, she neither *sees* nor *understands* him (and instead thinks of him in supernatural terms)

and the main memory she takes from the event in the past is the physical sensation of his button on her hand. As was pointed out above, much of her emotional response to the present situation is to be inferred from her outward behaviour. Indeed, her outward behaviour and the roles she plays and feels expected to play form the main access we have to Mrs Drover, a feeling enhanced by the narrative distance to her.

So, who is Mrs Drover? A prosaic woman of forty-four, with an expression of controlled worry, but assent, able to sustain an energetic and calm manner and in possession of a dependability which is the keystone of her family life. A summary of what we know of Mrs Drover quickly becomes a summary of the roles she plays. Just as the narrator 'narrates her into being', she is 'narrated into being' by the people around her and their expectations on her.⁹ As the returning mistress of the house she has a job to do, fetching some things, but the letter and its recalling of the past reveals a history of performing expected behaviour.

Kathleen the young girl is intimidated and uncomprehending in her role as the soldier's fiancé, she neither has real feelings for him nor knows how to play the part properly. She does, however, know the part of a girl left by her man: 'she could only wish him gone' and 'caught a breath for the moment when she could go running back there into the safe arms of her mother and sister, and cry: "What shall I do, what shall I do? He has gone"' (663). We are told that she 'behaved well' when the soldier did go missing, but that her 'dislocation from everything' became a problem for her family when she 'failed to attract' new lovers (664). As was mentioned above, the ideology, or social codes, are focalized from outside of Mrs Drover here, but events show how she eventually falls into the expected line of behaviour by marrying William Drover. The fact that we are not told of any love for her husband, just relief at finally being married, hints that this act may be a new role well played.

'The Demon Lover' suggests that a life of performing expected social behaviour becomes an empty and doomed one, as the 'utter dependability' ultimately becomes the undoing of its protagonist. When Mrs Drover finally decides to leave the house, her actions stand in conflict with the more sensibly logical alternatives at her disposal, and thus reveal her mechanised behaviour and lack of independent understanding of the world. The only thing she knows is

⁹ See reference to Lassner above. I want to add, however, that expectations come not only from the men in her life, but also from her family and society at large. My argument is that unless we focus on that which surrounds Mrs D and not just her and the soldier we cannot see the 'set-up' properly and end up blaming her.

threatening her is a stranger, a man whose face she does not know, yet the only thing giving her hope and boldness is also a strange man: she trusts in the protection offered by an unknown taxi driver. And the reason for choosing this option is her unwillingness to fail her family in her utter dependability and leave London without the things she has come up to collect.

Mrs Drover's walk towards the taxi is, in a way, a symbolical mini-narrative of how she relates to the world. When she is alone, the strangeness of emptiness makes her panic and she feels as though the houses look at her with a 'damaged stare', when in public, among strangers, she stops walking quickly and becomes self-conscious instead. Eventually she does not seek protection among other people in the 'ordinary flow of life', but in a man, and effectively exchanges the dangerous enclosed space of the deserted house for a new dangerous enclosed space – the taxi. The fact that the reader is only told of her feeling of 'eternity', rather than what the man looks like, suggests that panic has now displaced seeing as well as understanding and only the reader can make the analysis that Mrs Drover's hopes for male protection have misfired in the worst way possible.

Filling the gap

The problem of 'emptiness' for Mrs Drover is suggested by the 'emptiness' of her thoughts as well as the absence of them, but the problem arises at the specific moment which constitutes the story not only because of the re-emergence of the past, but because Mrs Drover is alone. There is a quite natural danger for a woman to walk alone in deserted areas of London in the middle of a war, but this physical danger is conjoined, actually and analogously, with the more psychological one of being removed from other people. If, as I suggested above, Mrs Drover defines her own sense of self entirely as the performance of different roles and against other people's presence, then the strange situation is also a strange novelty in that Mrs Drover is not used to being alone. The complete desertion of area, street and house sets a defamiliarizing scene where Mrs Drover's normal roles do not apply, something which explains her frantic need to do exactly what she has come there to do, despite the danger.

Without her family, without people, the house is just hollow to Mrs Drover, it is a gap into which the long-forgotten past can suddenly intrude again. Actually as well as symbolically, the past comes back to haunt Mrs Drover and does it, as Elizabeth Bowen put it, by filling ‘the vacuum for the uncertain “I”’ (MT, 98). The nature of the vacuum being roles so well played as to have cancelled out an independent sense of self, means that Mrs Drover has no defence, cannot fill the gap herself and change the outcome. As we have seen, information gaps become filled with supernatural content for Mrs Drover, a method which ignores the threat rather than addresses it.

However we choose to regard the soldier and despite the subjective presentation of Mrs Drover’s panic, there is an actual threat implied by the letter and the mysterious driver. But the reason why Mrs Drover is vulnerable to it lies in the ground, in her lack of understanding and her mechanised responses to her situation: we come to understand that even if there are more logical responses to her predicament, she has no ability to choose better. Her reiteration of familiar patterns, in a situation which necessitates adjustment, becomes her undoing. Figure and ground combined, symbolically and actually, form the tragic outcome and leave the activity of filling the gaps of interpretation entirely to the reader. Whereas in the other stories there is an openness to the ending, and a sense that characters, who have filled the gaps of their lives with new gaps, unreal things, may now stop doing so and start living fulfilling lives, ‘The Demon Lover’ ends with Mrs Drover enclosed and powerless.

The Inherited Clock – A narrative of one’s own

Narratives are at the heart of ‘The Inherited Clock’, in the form of memories and the stories they become when related to others. It is a tale composed like a mystery story, centred around the uncanny presence of a skeleton clock. The main focalizer in the story is Clara, whose journey to discovery of her own past we follow. But there are also shifts, as the narrator considers Clara from the outside, which create distance and uncertainty. The narrative is composed of passages focalized through Clara, passages with an ambiguous narrator-focalizer stance and hypodiegetic narration by other characters. It is a story of gaps, some filled, others open.

Focalization-analysis

The story begins, appropriately, with a memory, as Addie Detter tells her niece Clara Detter about a day in Clara's childhood which Clara does not remember. Apart from introducing the salient aspects of Clara's position and indeed the crux of the story, the scene, almost entirely in dialogue, also serves to create suspense. There is an information gap demanding to be filled, as Clara has evidently forgotten something which for those around her was significant. Cousin Rosanna's connecting the clock irrevocably with Clara, Clara's injured finger and her hysterical reaction in the train suggest that something must have happened. Clara's response is an 'engaged and rebellious feeling' (624) and even if she resists digging into the past at this stage, the reader's curiosity has been awoken.

Uncertainty is added to suspense when the narrator in the following relates the history behind Clara's situation. Objectivity is suggested by the use of proper names; 'Cousin Rosanna' is now simply 'Rosanna Detter'. But the narrative voice soon calls its own authority in question. Having expounded the facts, the narrator shows a limited knowledge about Rosanna's motives ('this cannot have been so'), as well as Clara's attitudes ('It was Clara, surprisingly, who was piqued') and moves into the restricted perspective of Clara. The fact that Clara is now the focalizer is signposted partly by overt comment, 'she perceived', and by expressions coloured by her subjective impressions of, for instance, Paul's bride (625). In the following passage, however, it remains unclear whether all facets of focalization really do belong to Clara's perspective. The narrative evaluates the social implications of Clara's relationship with Henry, makes comments on Rosanna's social influence and passes judgment on her house. The reader is told of events and information which are in Clara's sphere, but the narrator does not clearly show whether the ideological considerations are Clara's own evaluations or if Clara and her situation are contained by the broader concerns of society.

Moving back to the present of the story, the narrator makes Clara the perceptive and emotive focalizer. She returns to Sandyhill and the reader sees what she sees and is told how she feels about it. Again the clock is foregrounded, as the conversation topic and, finally, as an actual presence. Defamiliarizing language reveals Clara's subjective response to the clock and triggers a feeling of the uncanny, or even supernatural, as she feels it to be 'threatening', 'spectral' and 'her sanity being demolished' by it (627-628). When Clara talks to Rosanna,

she again finds herself at the receiving end of a story about herself, and again it merely adds new dimensions to the apparent information gap. A solitary walk around Sandyhill is clearly focalized through her and depicts her emotional response to the scene of her past. She even thinks of her past in terms of storytelling: ‘the history of Clara at Sandyhill’ (629).

After the funeral and the arrival, with Aunt Addie, of the clock, the reader is again presented with a complex passage which relates how Clara’s life has been shaped by her great expectations and her relationship with Henry.¹⁰ The ambiguous nature of the presentation invites the reader to simultaneously consider Clara from the inside and the outside, making the attribution of focalization facets complex again. Clara’s honest belief that Henry will leave his wife once the financial situation has changed is contrasted with the label ‘obsessive’ – does Clara see herself as obsessive or does the narrator want to hammer the point in? As the narrative moves into Clara’s perspective, the language again takes on a subjective tone and the clock ‘chopping off each second to fall and perish’ is foregrounded (631). In what appears to be an effort to escape the clock, Clara goes for a walk in blacked-out London, a passage also focalized entirely through her. Placed in the middle of the story, this scene is partly the main mental crisis for Clara and partly a symbolical mini-narrative of her situation. She is alone, lost, metaphorically as well as literally ‘in the dark’, doubts the access to her own memory, has to rely on others to show her the way but finds this problematic as she does not even know the right questions to ask. When she comes back all that awaits her is the clock.¹¹

The rest of the story is the gradual revelation of the past by Paul in a scene which is focalized by Clara (note for instance how she regards him at the beginning of their conversation), but sees Paul as the main hypodiegetic narrator. In a curious mixture of narrative flash-back and memory we are told of an event during a sleepless night a few days prior to the conversation between Clara and Paul. Its place in the plot organisation reflects Clara’s apparent attempts to forget about it and the fact that Paul brings it all to the surface. Paul’s remark that Clara is ‘stuck on the past’ is what finally causes Clara snap and ask him to explain what on earth is

¹⁰ Their relationship, beginning when Clara is 21, makes Henry the third ‘absent’ man in Clara’s life: her father having died young and her ‘relationship’ with Paul having been a secret and conflicted one.

¹¹ As so often with Bowen, the subtle symbolism of this passage is also placed firmly in a historical context. The black-out, in place because of the very real presence of the war, creates a scene where such a ‘surreal’ (in subjective terms) walk in darkness can take place. The historical moment and how it subtly affects even the smallest aspects of everyday life is important throughout the story, especially in how it renders everyday life strange, uncanny and ghostly. Rosanna’s house is closed down as a direct effect of her servants serving the war instead of her and whole rooms, including that with the clock, are covered in dust sheets – something which adds to the uncanny feeling of the clock ‘expectantly’ ticking.

going on, making Paul realise that she does not remember and that his comment actually holds true in two ways: Clara is stuck *in* the past because she, by not having access to it, has become stuck *on* it.

Paul's narrative of their 'story' culminates in his direct action of putting Clara's finger in the clock once more. Again the story presents a complex mixture of narrative flash-back and memory as the reader, with Clara, moves back in time. The old Clara appears to be the focalizer in the realisation that 'it is Paul who selects the finger', but the wording suggests that Clara the child is the focalizer in the realisation that 'the hundred years are all angry' (639). Coming back to the present, now with access to memory, leaves Clara facing new beginning. The spell of the clock is broken, Paul ties up his story and prepares to leave and Clara is left to 'sit with' her memories.

A web of narratives

The suspense-eliciting force of the story is the uncanny, in a Todorovian sense; the story is also a tale which illustrates the uncanny in a Freudian sense: something rendered strange by repression of a memory about it (Freud 151). The events set up a strange mystery about the clock which is resolved, and the narrator reinforces the process by showing Clara's subjective responses to the clock as bordering on, for her, the supernatural. As in 'The Demon Lover', the ghostliness is a subjective experience which, for the focalizer, replaces actual understanding. Unlike 'The Demon Lover', however, defamiliarization here ultimately leads to re-familiarization: having had a position as strange, threatening element while incomprehensible, the clock is reduced to an unnoticeable object for Clara once she understands the story about it. Throughout the story, then, the clock and the mystery of it is foregrounded. As with 'The Demon Lover', however, the crux lies not in the figure, but in the ground.

Looking away from the clock enables the reader to see that the mixture of different perspectives and narratives which make up the story displaces the sense of narrative authority, and instead reinforces a sense of life as being made up of subjective accounts. Nobody, it would seem, can have full autonomous access to their own life, their own story; we all depend on each other to fill in the blanks. The narrator has no more authority than any of the

characters and the story invites interpretative action on the part of the reader. The signposting of subjectivity in all perspectives, and the fact that the denouement comes from a hypodiegetic narrator with his own agenda, means that while the suspense ('what happened with the clock?') is resolved, the uncertainty is not: the reader is still left to ponder what all this meant and what will now happen to Clara.

If nobody can account fully for their own life on their own, this applies to an even higher extent to Clara. Not only does she suffer from memory loss, her very identity is, like Mrs Drover's, determined by other people's stories about her; she has a gap in her memory but she *is* also a gap which others fill. Her life, of which we are told very little, has been characterised by waiting (for the money and for Henry) and she has stepped into this assigned identity. Her relationship with the present is stagnant and she sets all hope to expectations of the future. In other words, she has limited access to the story of her past, is unable to make a story of the present and lives with fantasies of what lies ahead. Rosanna's death makes present out of future and Clara feels 'the current of her nature stirring strongly under the thinning ice' (630). Before she can start her new life, however, she must have access to her past.

That Clara seems to exist in a web of other people's stories of her is hinted at early on. The story begins with the words 'Yes, I can see you now', referring to a situation which Clara herself does not 'see', in any sense of the word. Aunt Addie also suggests what Clara should do and what she should say to Rosanna about the clock, not because Clara actually has any interest in the clock but because Rosanna 'so much connects it with you in her own mind' (624). To Addie it is Rosanna's perspective, not Clara's, which must be allowed to dominate. Rosanna herself also has a story about Clara and echoes Addie with an 'I can see you now' of her own (628), along with suggestions of what Clara should do with the clock and Paul. Clara is none the wiser, and when the clock arrives it is not of her own doing but Aunt Addie's who, contrary to all evidence, assumes that Clara is longing for it: 'I knew you would want to have it as soon as possible' (630). Paul, finally, adds his version of the story, which essentially is his interpretation of Clara's (and Rosanna's) role in his own story. Tellingly, Clara's lover Henry is not part of the storytelling. Only part of the events in a fleeting telephone conversation, Henry not only refuses to acknowledge stories of the past, but is actively occupied with composing a story which does *not* include Clara (in order to explain the phone call to his wife). Ironically and tragically, this is of course the only story that Clara *does* want to be a part of.

Clara's life is shaped by her unconscious conflict with the identity assigned to her partly by society and partly by Cousin Rosanna, who, because of her experiences and by acting the way she does, is revealed as both a victim and a perpetrator of gender structures. Named as Rosanna's heir at a young age, Clara's entire life has 'hinged on the prospect of this immense change' (630) and instead of actively taking life into her own hands she has played the part of calmly waiting woman: waiting for money as well as for a man. The clock not only contains the clue to the past, but becomes a symbol of waiting, of the cruel passage of time and of the continuation of patterns.¹² Lassner sees the clock in its position as central image of a waiting game which is infused with oppressive history: 'Clara's goal is to wait; inertia defines her character. The story thus presents her life as a time bomb waiting to go off, set to the ticking of her inherited clock, but is anticlimactic: The clock continues to tick, Clara continues to wait, and thus fulfilment is thwarted' (Lassner 23). What is at stake in this tale is Clara's identity as a woman within different patterns and frameworks of control; Paul, who has lived a life of similar expectations, has not been equally affected by it. Furthermore, Clara, like the reader and indeed the story as such, needs Paul to fill the information gap.

The narrative uncertainty in the story as a whole consequently culminates in Paul's hypodiegetic narration of the past. The reader has already been subtly put on guard in reference to Paul, by a hint at his 'cruel tricks' by Aunt Addie (624), which are confirmed by Rosanna, by his failure to appear at the funeral and by Clara's apprehension about finding him in her apartment. Seen through the eyes of focalizer Clara, Paul is presented to the reader as a somewhat bullish, dominating presence accompanied by a feeling of threat. As it turns out, however, Paul is threatening in an uncanny way exactly like the clock and because of his part in that story; their complicity is, to Clara, 'frightening because it was acutely familiar, more frightening because she could not guess at its source' (634). But even if Clara's fear of him is unwarranted, his narrative – 'our story' – is a subjective one, informed by his ideology and interpretations. In Paul's version, the story of Rosanna, Sandyhill and her heirs becomes a

¹² Clocks are a recurring presence in Bowen's fiction; Eudora Welty points to the importance of time and place in Bowen and states that 'there was a clock in every story and novel she ever wrote' (Welty 1981, reprinted in Lassner, p. 175). In Bowen's novel *The Heat of the Day* there is a clock scene which is similarly concerned with female waiting: 'She wore the look of everything she had lost the secret of being. There was something inexorable in the judgement: she turned away from it. After all, was it not chiefly here in this room and under this illusion that Cousin Nettie Morris – and who now knew how many before her? – had been pressed back, hour by hour, by the hours themselves, into cloudland? Ladies had gone not quite mad, not quite even that, from in vain listening for meaning in the loudening ticking of the clock.' (174)

Great Expectations-like tale of the dominant matriarch eager to play games with young people as a way to make up for her own disappointments in life. Clara's role in Paul's life was mainly that of a nuisance, at six, when they played with the clock and perhaps even more so at fourteen, when they played at romance in front of the clock. Paul's account of the events, and even more so his interpretation of them, may be perfectly accurate or not, either way the reader is called into action by the lack of a confirmed authoritative version.

Filling the gap

As I hope to have shown, Clara and her story are surrounded by subjective accounts; she herself is a textual gap. The sense that Clara is indeed stuck between narratives of her is reinforced by the polyphonic structure of the story and the fact that amidst all the narrators Clara is the only character who is not also a narrator of a part of it. Like Mrs Drover, then, Clara seems to come into being by the narratives about her rather than by an independent sense of self; like Mrs Drover she stands in front of a mirror but is unable to relate fully to what she sees. Just as Mrs Drover cannot help returning to the letter, Clara turns again to the clock. Somewhere in the past is the clue to what has created the present; somewhere in the ground lies the problem of the figure.

Clara may be a victim in a similar way as Mrs Drover, but 'The Inherited Clock' ends on a different note. Whereas the end of 'The Demon Lover' is tragic and forces the reader to ponder how Mrs Drover was so irrevocably lost, 'The Inherited Clock' ends with a beginning. Clara's 'victim status' has been brought on partly by the situation, but also, the narrator suggests, by Clara's passive acceptance of it. She has been the kind of person who 'perceived that her nature was of the kind that is only able to flower in clement air' (630). Now, as the situation has changed, as the air is becoming 'clement', she must start to act. The missing clue to her situation was found by recalling the past, but even if Clara now seems to have all the pieces, the story does not provide an answer to the question whether she will be able to finish the puzzle. Lassner sees the story as resonating with literary memory, not only of *Great Expectations* but a larger legacy of 'creating female characters who have no outlet to express passion' (Lassner 24). The open-endedness is, for Lassner, part of the effect literary history has in affecting a writer's ability to imagine alternative plots for female characters. In this

view, not only Clara has a problem with creating a new narrative for herself. The open-endedness, however, can also be seen in terms of how it necessitates an active reading.

The story does not pronounce with any authority on Clara's future, instead there are conflicting and ambiguous hints which, just like guiding attention towards the clock, necessitate readerly involvement. The spell of the clock, the neurosis, and indeed the spell of Paul, is broken as Clara understands what happened, but the main question is if she will be able to break free from her stagnant 'obsessive love' for Henry and create an independent life for herself. The fact that she does retrieve her memory is of course encouraging, but it is complicated by the fact that it takes a man, a subjective male narrative, to 'rescue' her. In the midst of Paul's narrating, however, the key moment comes back to her not as a part of the story Paul is telling, but as an actual recall.

Just as in 'The Demon Lover', defamiliarization forms an important part of the story, in the plot as well as in the presentation of it. As a dramatisation of the resolved Freudian uncanny, however, 'The Inherited Clock' is also a journey from defamiliarization to *re*-familiarization. The tragedy of 'The Demon Lover' is essentially that Mrs Drover does *not* emerge from her crisis with a newfound realisation that might save her, it is a story of unfilled gaps. Her mechanised behaviour (of which Clara displays some as well) stays with her until the end; Clara, however, emerges from her crisis with new information. Her story, unlike Mrs Drover's, is one where the 'supernatural threat' is entirely subjective and whereas Mrs Drover cannot respond and is lost, Clara can take the past and turn it into future if she chooses.

By being sometimes tied to and sometimes ironically distanced from Clara's perspective, the reader joins this process of realization which is analogous to, but also outside of, the main protagonist's. From both are interpretative efforts called for: just as Clara the reader must navigate among all the accounts that make up her story and just as is the case for Clara, the story ends on an open note, a new beginning the content of which is not filled by the narrator. If Clara's identity is a gap, she must stop filling it with new gaps (such as a perpetually absent man), must be active instead of passive. 'The Inherited Clock' thus dramatises the importance of filling one's life, identity, with one's own content: amidst older women telling you how they see you and men telling you how it is, you must create a narrative of your own.

Dead Mabelle – Haunting in the age of mechanical reproduction

Similar in focalization complexity to ‘The Demon Lover’ and ‘The Inherited Clock’, ‘Dead Mabelle’ addresses male identity and introduces a new medium (film) which plays a part in creating an identity crisis for its main protagonist. Just as the reader’s attention is guided by the focalizer’s defamiliarizing foregrounding of the film star, the protagonist’s life is dominated by this attention. Focalization shifts create a distance, however, and the reader is called upon to pass judgment on the world created by the main protagonist as well as the world he lives in. The problem lies in the ground rather than the figure, and ‘Dead Mabelle’ also invites the reader to consider the problem of the very foregrounding process within the story.

Focalization-analysis

The narrator of ‘Dead Mabelle’ instantly creates a suspense-eliciting gap by announcing ‘the sudden and horrible end of Mabelle Pacey’, without informing the reader what actually happened. Beginning immediately with an opinionated rather than objective stance, signposted by subjective evaluations which furthermore suggest the feeling that ‘we all know what happened anyway’, the narrator invites participation in the consumption of Mabelle and her films. The focalization of ideology is complex throughout the story as the narrator creates a sense of complicity not only in looking at Mabelle, but also in studying William and his position outside of expected and accepted behaviour. As the narrator turns the attention to William it is with an ironic tone (‘he had read, without system, enough to trouble him endlessly’, (277)) which creates a tension between distance to and sympathy for the troubled young man. His nightmares reveal his problematic relationship with his own sense of self, and the musical evening at his Manager’s home illustrates his inability to function socially with any degree of success. The latter event is told from a perspective outside of William, but his tentative friendship with Jim Bartlett is focalized through William, defamiliarizing language showing his aversion to having people in his home: Jim ‘forces’ his way in and ‘paws’ his books, for instance (277).

As Jim takes a reluctant William to the cinema for the first time, the event is narrated with William as the perceptive and emotive focalizer, his response colouring the representation of

the viewing experience. He feels as though Mabelle jumps at him, feels 'embraced in her vision', 'as though she leaned forward and touched one' (278) and immediately starts interpreting her actions on screen, feeling as though he could interact with her. The first visit is the beginning of William's erotic obsession with Mabelle which sees him bicycling all over London, partly as a way to find new films but partly, as he pedals 'furiously', as a way to find physical release. The narrative shows William's conflicted response to the eroticism of the films in highly subjective terms as he sees how the male actor in the film 'devoured her face horribly' (279). William starts to avoid Jim and in a paragraph which shows how William is regarded by those around him, the ideology of male behaviour codes is focalized by Jim.

As the narrative reaches the day of Mabelle's death, William again becomes the perceptive focalizer. His responses to reading the paper are violent and physical, but whereas the reader is told of his physical sensations and outward behaviour, his emotions are not overtly stated and must be inferred. Like Mrs Drover's they are in a sense quite obvious, but a gap in the narrative nevertheless. Whereas most of the remainder of the story is focalized through William, the narrator calls authority into question again by stating that on Monday and Tuesday 'no one knew where he had gone' (281). After that the narrator comes back to what was essentially the first sentence in the story regarding William (276), and thus points to the fact that the narrative up until this point has been a flashback. The narrative now moves into William's perspective, which will dominate most, but significantly not all, of the remainder of the story.

In the office, William feels the presence of Mabelle, 'while he was looking away Mabelle stood there' (281). His sense of loss, knowing that she is no more, is coupled with a strange feeling that she is closer to him now, haunting him: 'Mightn't she as well be *there* who wasn't anywhere?' (281). Defamiliarizing expressions (such as 'the bleeding-away of the minutes') and the restricted perception of William, unaware even of his own movements ('he must have made some movement or sound, for the others looked up'), shows that William is the perceptive and emotive focalizer. When he arrives at the cinema, his high-strung susceptibility becomes apparent by his strong sensual responses to, for instance, the 'world of plush', the 'cold brass rail', 'the dazzlingly white' of the light and 'the flutter and click of machinery'. When Mabelle appears, the worlds collide for William. It seems to him as though she listens to the same fluttering and clicking of the projection machinery as he does and is *there*, in the light shaft from the engine room. Again he interprets her actions and thinks that

she 'liked her men fallible' (283). The fact that she is an actress, playing a role, has never fully dawned on William, but the narrator inserts an ironic comment about the desired effect being so successfully created: 'Her producer kept this well in mind' (283).

The final scene in the film, Mabelle standing still, has such an impact on William that he feels as though Mabelle transcends everything: the film, the world, himself. A shift in the film shatters the moment and the illusion and William rushes out of the cinema, onto a street which is now unreal to him. He is disgusted by the world, by the other people in the cinema who are 'feasted with her' (284), by the physicality even of the actual films (which will be destroyed) and by the lovers he observes kissing by a wall. He distances himself from the physical world, from what he feels to be the 'shabby ... business of living' and feels 'enclosed in a body' (285). He lets the presence of Mabelle, haunting him with her 'realness', determine his actions. Death, joining Mabelle in the spiritual world, is the only option and she herself seems to ask him to join her.

After placing the reader with William in his rather cinematic ghost story, the narrator claims the last passage. A move out of his perspective presents William to the reader from the outside. Having watched too many films, William is prepared to commit suicide, 'the only fit *gesture*' possible. The narrator describes his efforts with an ironic distance, his '*unconscious parade* of decision, an *imitation*, more *piteously* faithful than he was aware, of something which, witnessed again and again under the *spell* of that constant *effusion* from Mabelle, had *seemed* conclusively splendid' (285, my emphases). Life, however, does not come with props in the same way as film: William's drawer does not contain a gun. Actually going out and buying a gun is part of a real life and the kind of real actions which William has avoided. The defamiliarization, William's supernaturally engaging experience of film, ultimately ends in a tragi-comic re-familiarization with the mundane objects contained in his top drawer. His story ends, just like Clara's, with a new beginning: how will William relate to the actual world from now on?

Perception, projection and performance

Similar to the clock in 'The Inherited Clock', the uncannily foregrounded figure in 'Dead Mabelle' is Mabelle herself. Even if she of course is/was a real person somewhere in the

world of the text, she is, within William's story, an object: similar to the clock, but unlike the clock a moving one, an image. Not fully understanding what he sees, William ascribes a somewhat supernatural agency to the projected image of Mabelle. As is the case with Mrs Drover, seeing is almost contrasted with understanding; ghostliness is again a subjective experience emanating from incomplete comprehension. All William does is *see*, and passive sight does not, the story suggests, yield insight.

The suspense created by announcing Mabelle's 'horrible end' in the beginning becomes displaced throughout the story, as the reader finds that it is William and his relationship with her that is in focus. Even if the reader accepts William's perspective and sees Mabelle as a ghost, haunting him and trying to kill him, that suspense, along with the narrative uncertainty, is also displaced by the tragi-comical ending. Narrative uncertainty in this story is less thematic than a way to inhabit different perspectives on the same situation, showing William as he relates to the world as well as how the world responds to him. The lack of an authoritative voice (because the narrative voice reveals a subjectivity of its own), however, is still as significant here as in the other stories, because it opens a space for readerly involvement and interpretation. William's perception and apperception are problematized through shifts which force the reader to look for the problem somewhere else than in Mabelle.

'Dead Mabelle' is a story concerned with the performance of roles: Mabelle acting on the screen and William's inability to perform social roles. Where 'The Demon Lover' suggested Mrs Drover's trauma as being removed from all roles, William's story is the opposite one. Male identity is made up of codified behaviour in a similar way as female identity, but whereas the women in the other stories suffer from the emptiness of the performance, William suffers from the emptiness of being unable and unwilling to perform. He is not enough of a 'natural' young fellow to please his landlady, when confronted with actual girls he does not know how to behave. In his response to the cinema he is contrasted with Jim, who is not spiritually affected by the experience, but happily enjoys the erotic appeal: 'look at that, old man, look at that for a figure' (278). William's secretive behaviour finally alienates even Jim; the accepted social conduct being to be 'open and manly about the business, as pal to pal' (280). The social sphere which William fails to negotiate is the ground which, as with the other stories, holds the key to the problem.

Mabelle's role shall be addressed below, but it is interesting to note that her films appear to be formulaic and repetitive and always within the realm of the erotic. William's responses to how Mabelle makes love, to her recurring lover 'whom one had a dozen times watched her make herself over to' reveal that a Mabelle film is something of a concept. As an actress, Mabelle is given the same part to perform over and over again. The story takes place in 1927, the year which witnessed the emergence of sound cinema (Thompson and Bordwell 213ff), but Mabelle's films are silent films, accompanied by a band playing music and the noise of the projection machinery. William's appreciation of Mabelle is purely visual, she does not have a voice.

In studying a story about a character's obsession with film, the concept of projection is a useful one. Not only in the sense of cinema being just that, but because the reader is invited to see the cinema through a subjective perspective. The experience which William has is completely different from Jim's, who sees it simply as entertainment. An initial shock effect, certainly possible for anyone seeing their first motion picture in the 1920s, is replaced by William's embracing that which was shocking as real. For William, then, it is a dual process, the film is projected and he projects his own responses onto it. Unable to share with Jim the 'male bonding' part of a Mabelle film (going together as 'pals' and looking at a beautiful woman, then talking about it), William projects his sense of reality onto what he sees and feels as though he is there with her. He never seems to fully understand that she is, in fact, an actress, but projects his amazement at her actions, wondering, for instance, what she thinks about when she makes love.

Projection is also an important part of the commodification of Mabelle. As the narrator sardonically points out, her producer is aware of what works. Counting on strong responses from the audience, the industry produces film after film (with the same basic premise), successfully. Mabelle is being mechanically reproduced, on several levels. Whether the audience is made up of people like William, who live in and for the films, or people like Jim who just like to watch, Mabelle sells. Without spotting the irony himself, William is disgusted with the people in the audience who are 'feasted with her' (284), unable to see that the same applies to him. His feeling of a spiritual bond, of being there with her, is all in his head. He too is a projecting spectator. The actual fact that films were reused for other purposes adds to the symbolical sense of commodification, as William reflects on how 'that which was Mabelle would be a shoe, a bag, a belt around some woman's middles'(284). Her very death,

the reader is told in the first sentence of the story, 'gave her a publicity with the European press worth millions'. From the beginning then, Mabelle is an object to be handled and used for projection; the woman Mabelle Pacey is entirely absent, a gap. Lassner points to the structural suggestions of tragedy here, that the responses from the audience, as well as the nature of the films, become the death of Mabelle (Lassner 59-60). Lassner sees the story as being about the perceived threat of female sexuality in a male-dominated society, and William as actively perpetuating the male culture by his will to dominate Mabelle. What she sees as his 'sadistic fantasies' become causally linked with her 'murder' through the plot structure of the story. There is certainly an important point in the sense of causality, but the sadistic nature of William's responses as well as the idea that Mabelle is murdered are interpretations with vague textual support. I prefer to see the undoing of Mabelle in a more general and symbolical sense: the foregrounded problem of her life and death, as well as the problem of William's life, is located in the surrounding ground, which determines the conditions of the drama.

As will be developed in reference to 'Foothold' below (although in a different way), the foregrounding activity of the main focalizer is not in itself unproblematic. The reader's attention is guided by William's obsession with Mabelle, even if distancing efforts by the narrator also forces the reader to contemplate William's social sphere. But William's attention *within* the story is also guided, by the producers of the films. Iser points out that reading is like 'thinking the thoughts of someone else', but in order for the process to work it has to be an active one: if it is not, it ceases to be effective (Iser 66). Watching a film, by contrast, *can* be a passive act, a simple seeing. It is therefore neither the same as reading, nor the same thing as observing, and interacting with, real life: William's sensitive perception is locked in a fixed position while the camera shows him Mabelle. Even if he goes in 'armoured with intellectuality' (277) the film with its suggestive perspective wins him over entirely. This is as problematic as William's inability to separate film from reality. The actual world is no longer significant to William, when film fills the gap more satisfactorily than his actual life ever could, but the 'filling activity' is guided by someone else, who furthermore is making a profit on it.

Filling the gap

Just like Mrs Drover and Clara, William is a gap, something which is overtly commented upon in the story: William is presented as a troubled young man wondering about the nature of reality and existence, and has recurring dreams of visiting himself only to find that nobody lives there. Here too passivity on the part of the main protagonist is presented as a problem. William's inability to negotiate real life is coupled with his apparent lack of interest in doing so. Mabelle and her films can fill the gap in William's life because they allow him to be entirely passive: he just has to watch. Unlike the Manager's nieces, who demand interaction from him, Mabelle is just there, looking at him but not expecting him to act. With Mabelle William can therefore have something of an erotic relationship. Even if the description of his cycling hints at physicality in his responses, actual people loving each other physically fill him with disgust. This essentially tallies with the intellectual stance towards the actual world he had until he first saw Mabelle.

As is the case with Mrs Drover and Clara, however, the reader is invited to consider why William is a gap. As was hinted above, the women in the stories become gaps by performing their assigned roles too well, discovering that doing so denies them an independent sense of self. William, conversely, has a problem with the emptiness of not fitting in. Unable to perform any role, his life is so empty that he starts doubting his very existence. He (unconsciously) attempts to fill the gap by entering a dream-world, and does it as a man who is leaving nothing behind. Just as for the others, his life does not satisfy him but that which fills the gap is another gap – in the sense that it is not quite real. The suspense and uncertainty elements of the stories are, in this sense, a function of the main protagonists' attempts to fit the unreal into the gaps of their lives. Furthermore, the reader is forced to question a social framework which restricts people in such a way that this becomes necessary.

'Dead Mabelle' also has a revealing mirror scene: when William enters the cinema for the first time there is a close-up of Mabelle's face and as he stares at her he expects to see his reflection in her eye. This is the beginning of his inability to fully separate film from reality and it shows that as long as he tries to live within a projected world he will have no reflection at all, no identity. William's challenge is to stop being passive, to start making an impression on the actual world instead of hiding in a dream-world where he has no reflection and his

vision is guided. Whether this will be possible is left to the reader's interpretation. The story ends with the narrator breaking through and removing William as focalizer again, a move which echoes the fact that reality breaks through for William. Will he now go out and buy a gun? Or revert to his old reclusive life? Or has this crisis and its conclusion made him realise that he must take his life into his own hands? The end, as new beginning, is open – and William and his thoughts, not present in this passage, remain a gap for the reader to fill.

Foothold – Life on display

The last story under scrutiny here, 'Foothold', has a fixed focalization perspective. It creates narrative uncertainty not by shifts between focalizing perspectives, as in the other stories, but through a clearly signposted subjectivity of its constant focalizer, whose point of view (in all senses) dominates the story. As is the case with 'Dead Mabelle', there is a problematic foregrounding activity present in 'Foothold' which invites readerly arbitration despite the fact that the text never, as in 'Dead Mabelle', leaves the perspective of the main focalizer.

'Foothold' is a story full of gaps, empty performances and pressing absences, revealing how much distance there can be in closeness. The suspense elicited early in the story is displaced, leaving only uncertainty behind and forcing the reader, again, to ponder the ground rather than the figure. While in some ways different from the previous stories, 'Foothold' also incorporates most of the themes dealt with in the essay so far.

Focalization-analysis

That Thomas is the perceptive focalizer of 'Foothold' becomes clear early on, as he comes dazedly to the breakfast table and 'looked round' (297). The reader sees what he sees, information being added as Thomas takes in his surroundings. To the familiar and cosy breakfast scene are joined two defamiliarizing elements, creating suspense and uncertainty respectively. Firstly, Gerard starts talking, as a matter of fact, about their house ghost, Clara; secondly, Thomas's subjective point of view is clearly signposted by defamiliarizing language describing his attitude to married couples. Consequently the reader is presented with a suspense-gap, the missing ghost, and an uncertainty-gap, a subjective focalizer rather than an objective and authoritative narrator-focalizer.

Alternating with descriptive passages seen through Thomas is dialogue. As in 'The Inherited Clock', dialogue is here important in many different ways. It allows Janet and Gerard to become hypodiegetic narrators of their own stories, revealing what they choose to divulge to Thomas and how. The sheer amount of dialogue, combined with the restricted setting of the story, creates a feeling of drama, of drawing-room comedy. As we shall see, this feeling is only reinforced by the evident role-playing of the characters. To an even greater extent than the protagonists in the previous stories, Thomas, Janet and Gerard are involved in performance rather than authentic togetherness.

However, the story is of course not a theatre play; unlike the theatre, where the spectator can look anywhere on the stage, the reader's vision is guided by Thomas's vision. If the story sets up a 'cognitive space' in the reader which is similar to that of a theatre stage, it is still one with restricted vision. When we realise this we can problematize not only the way Thomas's presence affects Janet and Gerard, but also the foregrounding done by Thomas, thus enabling us to see the ground and not just the figures: Janet and Clara.

There is a suggestive tension between the strongly focalized passages and the extensive dialogue, which, due to not being contained within a first person narrator's report, has a feeling of autonomy. Even if perception, emotion, ideology, selection and interpretation are all focalized through Thomas, the dialogue and hypodiegetic narratives have an independent existence, becoming something which the reader can compare and contrast Thomas's ideas with. In this sense, the story is, despite its fixed focalizer, polyphonic, and affords its characters (especially Janet) voices of their own. These narratives are, however, contained within Thomas's perspective and, more importantly, affected by him being the narratee.

Theatricality and the Material Veil

Like the clock in 'The Inherited Clock', the pivot around which the events in 'Foothold' oscillate is the ghost, Clara. Introduced quite naturally into the breakfast conversation, which initially suggests that this is a classic ghost story, Clara's existence is soon called into question and Janet becomes an even more foregrounded figure than Clara. The problem of Clara is immediately shown to be that she is missing; she is an absence as well as a gap. Just

as in the other stories, there is a significant number of absences and gaps in 'Foothold'. The ghost and the children, appearing to cancel each other out, are entirely gone, possibly due to the guest presence of Thomas in the house. Thomas himself is a textual gap, the reader is told very little of his life except that he is a writer, travels a lot and concentrates 'a feeling for "home"' in his friendships with married couples (310). Textually absent are also the feelings of the characters: limited to Thomas's perspective and the theatricality of behaviour within the story, the reader must infer the world of feeling simmering under the polished surface.

The theatricality which permeates the events in the story is made apparent mainly through Thomas's reflections about his own and the other's actions. A case in point: 'Thomas peppered a quarter of a muffin with an air of giving it all his attention. He masked a keen intuition by not looking at Janet, who sat with her air of composed unconsciousness, perhaps a shade conscious of being considered.' (305). There are many similar instances, in which Thomas is shown to be concerned with his own performance as well as maintaining the balance of the situation – such as the opening scene when he senses a 'sensitiveness' and changes the subject (298). The treatment of the topic Clara reveals how Thomas adjusts his attitudes and behaviour to the person(s) he is talking to, be it Janet or Gerard or both.

An interesting instance of the theatricality of behaviour and events in the story is the recurring presence of a book, whose presence becomes similar to that of a stage prop. When Thomas picks up Mabbe's *Celestina*¹³ it is fairly obvious that he has no intention to actually read it, he just puts his finger in the book and stands in the hall. The choice of book appears to serve as an opportunity to showcase an interest in Spain (where he has just been) and possibly cultural refinement in general. Janet gently puts the book away and does not engage further in Thomas's attempts at drawing the conversation in this direction, even when he states that if *he* had a ghost he would call it *Celestina*. When Gerard talks to Thomas about something being amiss, and comes up with the analogy of losing a book, Thomas's reply that someone might have borrowed it recalls his own handling of Gerard's books: an analogy with implications which do not seem lost on Gerard, who looks 'sharply' at Thomas. Finally, it is (at least ostensibly) to retrieve *Celestina* from the hall that Thomas leaves the drawing-room in the

¹³ That is James Mabbe's (1572-1642) translation of Fernando de Rojas' *Celestina* (1499), a novel in dialogue. Its vividness and passionate complications of plot could be seen as the antithesis of the measured drama unfolding in 'Foothold'.

final scene. By doing so he finds Gerard standing in the hall, and their attempts at social gestures are, after this, even more empty.

Thomas's interest in Janet, revealed by his keen attention on her as well as subtly hinted at in the text, also appears to be more of a performance than love with any real desire. Even if the return of Gerard into his day with Janet makes Thomas uneasy 'like a watch-dog waking up at the end of a burglary' (305), the story does not seem to imply that Thomas is about to commit a 'burglary'. His keen attention on Janet is a foregrounding activity which, although different from that in 'Dead Mabelle', also comes with problems as it forces a performance from Janet, 'conscious of being considered' (305). The intrusive nature of Thomas's friendship with the couple is partly a perfect sympathy (at least to Thomas) which allows for closeness, but it is also a lack of commitment, and thus true closeness, indicated by his infrequent visits. Thomas likes to play the part of visiting, sympathetic and quietly adoring friend, but he displays little actual concern about the wellbeing of Janet: he himself would not consider leaving a lovely house, 'not for the menacing of all the Janets by all the Claras' (308).

While there are problems with Thomas's attention on Janet which echo William's attention on Mabelle, Janet's situation is at the heart of the story in a way which Mabelle's is not. The fact that the reader sees Janet through Thomas's restricted perspective reinforces the sense of Janet's containment in male narratives. Janet's problem is revealed to be her 'angel in the house' role, a part which she is eminently capable at performing, but which ultimately leaves her empty and unfulfilled. Lassner points to the different attitudes expressed towards the house and home: whereas Gerard, who has a life outside it, and Thomas, who is a visitor, coming back from travels in the world, view it as a comfortable retreat, Janet is exhausted by the demands it appears to place on her (Lassner, 13). Rather than affording comfort, Janet feels as though it is getting bigger – just as her life within it has 'more room'. The vacuity of her domestic role becomes a gap, one that is filled by Clara: 'She does at least help fill the place', says Janet (302).

The garden is also a foregrounded presence which illustrates the problem of self-expression. It is one of the main things on display in Janet's and Gerard's life, as Janet's eagerness to show it to Thomas reveals, but it is also one of her main outlets for self-expression. Having worked so much with the garden in their previous home that it had become a 'limitation' of being too much their own, too finished, Janet now has a new garden to work with. Again, however,

there are ‘limitations’, a character having to be kept due to the dominance of the Georgian house. Janet feels as though she must respect the ‘point of view’ of the house (301). Gerard, unperturbed, wants to build a few tennis courts and states that his ideas are quite different from Janet’s (307).¹⁴ As an activity to fill the gaps in life, the garden work comes with more restrictions than potential – even if Janet quickly points out to Thomas that it ‘contents’ her absolutely (301).

Germane to the sense of containment and theatricality in the story is the strong focus, by all characters, on the material. The new house, the objects, the garden, the food and drink are all props which drive the ‘play’ onwards. Mary Jarrett even sees Clara as the latest in a ‘sickening, civilized display of luxurious acquisitions’, but then points out that she is gradually revealed as the embodiment of Janet’s unhappiness (Jarrett 71-9). When revealed as the backdrop to a story of female containment and loneliness, materiality is also revealed as the unsuccessful and problematic gap-filling which causes the containment and loneliness in the first place. Thus the ghost fills Janet’s desire for spiritual company in a world of material performance.

Janet’s need for a spiritual companion is immediately thwarted by her unwitting husband, who does manage to turn Clara into a display object. When Janet tells him about Clara he immediately starts looking for the ghost as though she were a lost key or a rat; the fact that this evidently bothers Janet causes him to stop and they then don’t talk about it with each other. However, when there are guests, like Thomas, in the house, Clara becomes a conversation topic and is put on display as the house ghost. As the story opens Clara is spoken about in exactly the same natural tone as the marmalade, it is only later that the reader understands how humiliating this is for Janet, who tells Thomas that she wishes she had never told Gerard about it as he ‘takes things up so fearfully’ (300). The spiritual becomes materialised by the men, who make it part of the comfortable house while performing their respective parts when the three are all together. When the men discuss it among themselves, they see it as a problem, Gerard realising it is a joke taken too far. Neither of them, however, is capable of addressing the most pressing issue: if Janet spends too much time with a ‘ghost’, whatever it may be, *why* does she?

¹⁴ Seeing Gerard through Thomas’s eyes is interesting, as he appears to be masculinity epitomised for Thomas. In the scene, for instance, which reveals that Gerard wants different things in the garden Thomas observes him cracking walnuts with his bare hands.

Thomas's own 'meeting' with Clara is not taken entirely seriously by him and Gerard, even as they contemplate there being *something* there – Janet is, after all, not mad. The situation is veiled in ambiguity, forcing the reader to contemplate the possibility that Thomas, who initially thinks he is hearing Janet, might actually *have* heard Janet before she went out to the dogs. Because Thomas thinks, until the very end, that he is listening to the movements of Janet, the scene really serves to reveal his strong sensual awareness of her. After the strange intimacy between them, prompted by a gap of the unsaid, Thomas starts considering the implications of her 'intimacy' with the ghost and how the revelation that Janet contains a well inside her, unnoticed and untapped by them, reflects in a humiliating way on the men.¹⁵

The happy state of material comfort when they are all together in the evening makes Thomas question the whole situation again. Having produced a successful performance of storytelling (of his time in Spain), Thomas is now reclining in a comfortable chair and prepared to forget it all. The feeling for home, which he creates with his visits, has its foundation in this feeling of material comfort created by people who are 'rooted': he likes his friends to be unproblematic and settled. The irony of his comment that comfort 'wears the material veil pretty thin' (310) becomes that there is so much still veiled in their relationships. At the end the men are literally and metaphorically in the dark, unable to lift the veil and reach Janet who is talking to her ghost. The darkness which forces both men to unsuccessfully 'grope' for a light switch becomes the final curtain of this 'drawing-room comedy'.

Filling the gap

The process of filling a gap with another gap reaches new heights in 'Foothold', as do, in a way, the calls on the reader's attentive involvement. Clara is a gap in the narrative, but she is also that which fills several gaps; she is a suspense-gap as well as a 'stage prop', a foregrounded figure in a problematic ground. 'Foothold' essentially presents us with two protagonists whose 'gaps' we are invited to ponder: Janet, whose story is foregrounded and placed at the heart of the narrative and Thomas, whose life, a textual gap, is shown to be filled by his friendships and by his interest in Janet. This dual process emerges out of the destructive

¹⁵ Lassner points us to the disruptive nature of Janet's 'faculty', her relationship with the ghost effectively threatening the men's model of domestic stability, transcending male desire (Lassner 13). As becomes apparent, the men may sense the 'threat', but are unable to respond to it in any meaningful way.

fixation with the material aspects of life: focusing only on the material expression of Janet's social role (nicely set tables and so on) means ignoring her spiritual dimension and this creates emptiness. The gap, loneliness and unfulfilment, forces Janet to fill it with a spectral friendship with a dead woman.

As in all stories, we find a revealing mirror moment which illustrates the problem. While Thomas is in the hall waiting, unread book in hand, for Janet, he 'looked at his own reflection in two or three pieces of walnut and noticed a Famille Rose bowl, certainly new, that they must have forgotten last night when they were showing him those other acquisitions' (300). Even while looking at his own reflection all Thomas notices are the luxury objects on display: identity is displaced among material ostentation. If Janet and Gerard fill a gap of 'home' for Thomas, enabling him to avoid commitment for himself, he also helps them to fill a gap: a home full of acquisitions, on display as in a museum, needs an audience.

The fact that the house, despite its carefully decorated state, is somehow empty is clearly shown to be a problem for Janet, but even Gerard seems to pick up on the fact that something is missing. The move to the new house, the children being off at school and that strange feeling that Janet has changed combine to create a sense in Gerard that there is something 'minus', like a lost book (308). As we have seen, neither Gerard nor Thomas are able to pinpoint the problem and the reader is invited to finish the puzzle begun in Janet's hypodiegetic narration and Thomas's uncomprehending responses to it. The story ends without clear answers; less suggestive of doom than 'The Demon Lover', there is also less hopefulness than in 'The Inherited Clock'. Will Janet find a fulfilling life without Clara and can the men find the light switch?

Clara's presence is an embodiment of Janet's loneliness, but it also becomes indicative of Janet's attempts to create a narrative of her own. Like the other characters studied here, she is filling the emptiness in her life with something that is unreal, a new gap. The absences combine with an assigned identity and entrapment in other people's narratives to create confinement. Just as Mrs Drover is unable to break out of habit and confinement, Janet also remains in the house, creating a bond with a ghost rather than with the outside world. Like William she tries to escape the actual by entering the supernatural, but unlike him she is too 'rooted' in real life to find much comfort in it. Like Clara she is contained in narratives and demands on her, something which is reflected in the structure of the story, and like Clara her

only way out is to make a new one. Whether her relationship with Clara the ghost is, as Lassner suggests, a subversive act which will set her free, or an escape out of reality which leaves her even more enclosed becomes, as always, a question directed at the reader.

Conclusion

Ambiguity and the role of the reader

The introduction used Henry James's 'The Turn of the Screw' as a comparable example of ambiguously fantastic works which present a problematic subjectivity, and I will complete the comparison by way of conclusion. Various approaches to Jamesian ambiguity depart from a notion of two, mutually exclusive, readings which coexist and together form the text as such.¹⁶ Todorov bases his argument about the fantastic on a readerly oscillation (hesitation) between different readings, one of which is supernatural and one of which is not. Subjectivity has been shown to be paramount in creating the oscillation, which often is illustrated by Gombrich's famous duck-rabbit figure: both are equally possible, but the existence of one cancels the existence of the other (Gombrich 5). An ambiguous text, according to this kind of analysis, has two possible readings, and its reader has to either make a choice or acknowledge that both are equally tenable.

In her reading of James's famously ambiguous short story 'The Figure in the Carpet', however, Rachel Salmon convincingly shows the inadequacy of the oscillation approach as a ground for interpreting the meaning of James's stories. The utilisation of the Gombrich figure, argues Salmon, neglects the *coexistence* of the conflicting readings (790); a logical contradiction which, while impossible in traditional logic, is nevertheless possible in persons, readers as well as characters (791). By showing how James uses marriage, and implicitly sexual union, as a metaphor for true reading in his story (which is, of course, *about* reading and interpreting fiction), Salmon makes a case for Jamesian poetics regarding reading as a creative process, one which integrates life and art.

¹⁶ See for instance Shlomith Rimmon's *The Concept of Ambiguity: The Example of James* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1977). Rachel Salmon reviews responses to Jamesian Ambiguity (especially in reference to 'The Figure in the Carpet'), pp. 788- 791.

Ambiguity is, for Salmon, James's way 'to counteract the reader's urge to paraphrase and summarize' (799). The narrator is unable to find the 'figure' in the 'carpet' because he has the wrong approach, a fact revealed by the events and his responses to them as well as his narration and interpretation of the situation. As long as he believes the 'figure' to be an intellectual 'thing' to be 'found', he will be unable to perceive it; the figure is only there for people who are creative in their reading, who let the text interact with, and even affect, their life. The unnamed narrator, crucially, does neither.

Salmon quotes James on the role of the reader, in his statement that 'in every novel the work is divided between the writer and the reader; but the writer makes the reader very much as he makes his characters. When he makes him well, that is, makes him interested, then the reader does quite the labour', and goes on to argue that 'The Figure in the Carpet' itself illustrates the point: it produces not a secret meaning, but a reader (800)¹⁷. A creative reader of this and other stories, is able to realise the simultaneity of meanings, of life and art, of reader and writer (802).

The Figure in the Ground

My approach of shifting attention from figure to ground and then back again, in order to understand what has created the foregrounded situation, essentially attempts a similar thing: to integrate elements which initially seem contradictory, as well as elements which initially are obscured, into the reading. The Bowen stories studied here are set up as 'ghost stories', guiding readerly attention in the direction of the supernatural. An examination of subjectivity, however, reveals a textual ambiguity regarding the supernatural element and thereby asks questions of the reader. Studying focalization and the gaps in the text as subtle hints to the reader, finally, opens further dimensions of the texts – and necessitates a creative process of reconstructing the ground and the figure into a whole; a whole, furthermore, which is no longer necessarily a ghost story.

A more apt image than Gombrich's to illustrate the process may be found in Tintoretto's painting 'Susanna and the Elders' (c. 1555-56), reproduced on the title page, and how it guides the viewer's attention. Initially attention is steered to the bright, beautiful naked

¹⁷ The quote is taken from Henry James's essay 'The Novels of George Eliot', in *Views and Reviews*. Ed. Le Roy Phillips (Boston: The Ball Publishing Company, 1908). 18.

woman, who occupies nearly half of the picture. Having taken in this obviously foregrounded figure, the viewer can shift attention to the surrounding ground in a triangular movement, from her face going left and finally down. In doing so, the viewer may receive a small shock at finding not just one, but two, men looking at the woman from different angles. Having located the two men there is still an abundance of detail left to complete the picture. Once the attention has been shifted from the figure to the ground surrounding it and then back again, it is possible to see the picture as a whole and draw conclusions from it. Even if the painting is an illustration of a famous biblical parable, it tells its own story and has significant suggestions to make even for those not familiar with Susanna: the woman's exposed position contrasted with the men's ability to hide, her beauty and youth contrasted with their ugliness and old age, the self-centredness of the woman, centre stage and looking into a mirror, which is why she does not see the men, her ensuing unsuspecting and naïve calmness in a threatening situation, and so on. If the viewer has, indeed, had his or her attention guided by the composition of the picture (and experienced the intended shock), it will produce an empathy with its main subject: the viewer was initially just as unaware of the threat as the woman. The form, then, becomes a part of the storytelling as it guides and shapes the viewer's response. So, I would argue, do Bowen's stories.

In each story the foregrounded figure is introduced within the first few paragraphs: the letter, the clock, Mabelle and Clara the ghost all demand attention from the beginning and make the stories ghostly. As the narratives progress, however, more and more information is added to that which surrounds them, the ground. The stories will remain ghost stories unless the reader, induced by uncertainty and gaps, begins to question subjectivity and considers other possible readings encoded in the text. The final judgement of events belongs to the reader and the openness – especially in the cases of 'The Demon Lover' and 'Foothold' – allows for ambiguity, hesitation and different readings.

As criticism on 'The Demon Lover' shows, it is an ambiguous (or indeed fantastic) work comparable to 'The Turn of the Screw': while the subjectivity is less overt (due to its not being a first person narrative), it is nevertheless the subjectivity which causes readers to find ghosts, madness, murders and metaphors in both texts. Both texts, in short, allow for a plethora of readings. My approach, which utilised the cognitive poetic strategy of repositioning attention, focused (in the case of 'The Demon Lover') less on the actual threat which Mrs Drover is under, or whether said threat is there at all, than on why she is so

vulnerable to it and eventually succumbs.¹⁸ Mrs Drover has a problem with assessing her surroundings adequately; the reader who does not attempt to do just that encounters similar problems.

‘The Inherited Clock’ presents subjectivity in yet another way, being, as it is, a web of subjective accounts. The narrative structure illustrates and reinforces the problem for the protagonist and propels the reader into an analogous journey of discovery. Clara and the reader must both make an active reading of the narratives which make up Clara’s story. The process of arriving at understanding (of one’s own identity and surroundings) is a recurring theme in Bowen’s stories as well as in my analysis of them, as defamiliarization becoming re-familiarization or in the tension between seeing and understanding: sight versus insight.

The latter pair was seen as an important aspect of ‘Dead Mabelle’, as it revealed the problematic nature of William’s passive looking, a seeing which not only yields no understanding, but also hampers William’s identity formation. William’s attention is guided by the films, just as the reader’s attention is guided by the story. Unlike watching a film however, the story invites active participation in meaning formation and the narrator brakes through to offer a road to new insight. ‘Foothold’, finally, was seen as taking the fixation of attention one step further, while also illustrating the other points made so far. Functioning more like a stage play than a film, ‘Foothold’ presents attention as a theme and allows some foregrounded figures to resemble stage props. Inviting the reader to contrast Thomas’s interpretations with the hypodigetic narration, the story necessitates an active reading and a conscious repositioning of attention. Seeing as contrary to understanding is again a clue, as the act of looking at physical things in the story displaces spirituality and identity.

I have argued here that Bowen creates her stories in a way which invites and necessitates active readings. There are many possible approaches to choose from, along with risks of ending up in a similar position of eternal bafflement as the narrator of ‘The Figure in the

¹⁸ Using a similar approach for ‘The Turn of the Screw’ might shift attention from the mental state of the narrator and the ontological status of the ghosts, and instead study Bly and the past as the origin for the problems. What did the dead servants do with and to the children, making them ‘corrupt’ and haunted? Why does the new governess’s presence seem to induce a resurfacing? Can she, or indeed anyone, ‘save’ children who have been damaged by their experiences? Is there something wrong with the social structures (and the uncle) that have set up the situation from the beginning, limited Mrs Grose’s ability to interfere with Peter Quint while he was alive and also reduced the new governess to a role of onlooker? And so on.

Carpet', whose problem really is twofold: not only will he never find the figure, but as long as that is all he is looking for he will fail to appreciate the carpet.

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