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## The White Circle: Womanhood in Elizabeth Bowen's "Look at All Those Roses"

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### Cover Page Footnote

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# The White Circle: Womanhood in Elizabeth Bowen's "Look at All Those Roses"

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## **Abstract**

Elizabeth Bowen's 1941 short story "Look at All Those Roses" is a terrifying masterwork: in the middle of Britain's modern(ist) malaise, a tired couple enters the Mather home, a rose-enshrouded cottage with a disturbing mother-daughter pair and a dreadful secret. Remaining behind while Edward, her partner, seeks a car mechanic, Lou becomes detached from her relationship and begins a psychic spiral inwards that leads to her renouncing life itself—until, of course, Edward returns to rescue her. While the plot of "Look at All Those Roses" is steeped in Gothic tradition and primordial myths, something more fundamental structures this story's chilling plot: the horrible truth that, whether in the world of adult romantic relations or lodged in the perverse Mather family, Lou cannot find a stable, affirming way to construct her identity. As she tries to inhabit different social roles—lover, child, and even father—Lou discovers that neither running from herself nor digging in deeper can solve her crisis. In this fundamental critique of femininity, "Look at All Those Roses" reveals that whether in society or out of it, Lou as a woman can never be a whole, independent person, caught between the "white circles" on the margins and at the center of modern life.

*Keywords:* Elizabeth Bowen, "Look at All Those Roses", Women, Gender, Modernism, Gothic, Modernity, Relationships, Family, Psychoanalysis

In the middle of a wearisome drive back to London, a vision and a noise burst into Lou and Edward's world that bring them to a screeching halt. The vision: a house surrounded by vibrant, "unreal" roses which shine like a beacon in the derelict British countryside. The noise: a loud bang as their car's engine goes out, leaving the unmarried couple stranded in a rural environment hostile to their every metropolitan impulse. Lost and powerless to continue, Lou and Edward backtrack to the incongruous house for help, entering a world that for all its roses is eerily still and quiet in the hot August air. This is the Mather household, and it is where Lou remains while Edward walks to the nearest village to seek a car mechanic. As Lou interacts with the home's uncanny inhabitants, the detached Mrs. Mather and her disabled daughter Josephine, she discovers that simmering under the peculiar lives of her hostesses is the disquieting absence of Mr. Mather, the family's mysteriously disappeared patriarch. The closer she draws to the world of these women, the further Lou retreats from the world she knows, escaping deeper and deeper into her unconscious until she reaches a culminating ecstasy of self-negation—that is, until Edward returns and almost literally drags her out.

Despite its great potential for analysis, Elizabeth Bowen's 1941 short story "Look at All Those Roses" remains criminally understudied. Perhaps its flying under the radar is not surprising: with ten novels and almost ninety short stories to choose from, Bowen scholars are spoiled for choice, especially given the general richness of her prose. "Look at All Those Roses" is no exception to this rule, exemplifying many of the recurrent tropes in Bowen's fiction, or, as Maud Ellmann calls them, "Bowen's addictions": "the car careering through deserted countryside; the stylish couple going nowhere in a hurry; the womb-like tomb-like house strangled in voracious vegetation; the absent father; the motionless enchantress; the demonic

child; the irresistible attraction of the death drive.”<sup>1</sup> These “addictions” unite the real and the surreal, playing existential modernist concerns off the undead, revived phantoms of literatures past. As Ellmann explains, in “Look at All Those Roses,” “there is no attempt to reconcile the urbanity of social commentary with the oneiric landscape of the fairytale: rather, the collision between genres dramatizes the resurgence of infantile impulses of the unconscious in the midst of the complacencies of adult life.” In other words, “Look at All Those Roses” enacts the eruption of the fairytale into the tedium of bourgeois adulthood, a forgotten wealth of arcane material interrupting the lackluster goings-on of daily life.

Bowen’s characters tend to either attempt to evade their languorous fates by running, hiding, and disappearing, or else by self-blinkering and doubling-down in their dead lives, suggesting that if modern life cannot fill the hole in Bowen’s characters’ hearts, then perhaps an escape into a supernatural alternate reality or a regressive retreat from the world can. Yet regardless of how they choose to deal with the vacuousness of their existence, Bowen’s characters remain flies stuck in spider webs: no matter what they choose, they cannot truly escape nor change their situations, helplessly mired in a plane of existence that is tense and thin. Reality seems merely a veil over other, truer worlds that it can neither fully cover nor fully inhabit. In her other short fiction, Bowen explores these thin psychic boundaries in various wartime contexts, from the dreamy moonscape of London in “Mysterious Kôr” (1942) to the time-and-place-jumping fantasies of a woman during a blitz in “The Happy Autumn Fields” (1944). Still, Bowen’s work never jumps fully into the realm of fantasy, for even as phantoms of fairy tales and literatures past seep into her tales, there always remain plausible rational explanations for events and personages suffused with the supernatural. For instance, while the

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<sup>1</sup> Ellmann, Maud. “Shadowing Elizabeth Bowen.” *New England Review*, vol. 24, no. 1, 2003. pp. 144-169. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40244225>. 146.

vehicle's breakdown appears accidental, Lou later suggests that it is in fact Josephine who has "put the evil eye on it," turning a disabled girl into a witch ensconced in her gingerbread cottage.<sup>2</sup> The power of Bowen's fiction is to make these magical impossibilities seem more likely than their rational counterparts.

Formally, the colliding strains of the fantastic and the quotidian have posed a problem for critics attempting to categorize Bowen's work. In their book *Elizabeth Bowen and the Dissolution of the Novel*, Andrew Bennett and Nicholas Royle have taken the uncanny strain in Bowen's work to be emblematic of the dissolution of realist form and character with the onset of modernity. In their formulation, the interrupting Other world does not merely intrude upon daily life, but unravels it, just as Lou psychically spirals further and further from the symbolic order the closer and closer she gets to the "white circle" under which the Mather women live. Less radically, Harriet Blodgett and John Coates have emphasized her combination of psychological realism, the most recent development in fiction in Bowen's era, and myth, the oldest form of storytelling, similar to Ellmann's formulation of the fairytale interrupting modernity. Notably, the myths Bowen deploys tend to be Biblical in nature, particularly in the case of "Look at All Those Roses" and in other stories such as "Telling" (1927) which invoke Edenic garden imagery. Blodgett also brings attention to Bowen's repeated use of Campbell's monomyth, a resonance felt strongly in Lou's crossing of the Mather threshold. Yet in Bowen's Edens, we never see evildoers receive their punishments, and in her hero's journeys, protagonists almost never return having changed or grown.<sup>3</sup> Thus in both the biblical and monomythic readings, just desserts are denied so that the reader is left sitting with dissatisfaction.

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<sup>2</sup> Bowen, Elizabeth. *Look at All Those Roses: Collected Edition*. Alden Press, 1951. 80.

<sup>3</sup> Blodgett argues that Bowen's protagonists do in fact grow as a result of the journeys they undertake, but little evidence exists to support this claim, as characters retain their empty box-like feeling until the story's end in the vast

The “violent off-stage and antecedent material”<sup>4</sup> which so often crops up in Bowen’s work also has curious resonances with the detective genre, as Ann Perce has noted of Bowen’s work more generally. Bowen most often constructs her stories so that “[t]he reader does not ‘see’ the crime committed; instead [they] ‘see’ the character later and examine how the crime has affected his or her life.”<sup>5</sup> This is not accidental, for Bowen herself kept the detective genre in mind as she wrote,<sup>6</sup> using its methods to keep plots tight and every detail relevant. In “Look at All Those Roses,” for example, there remain only the lightest of linguistic traces pointing to Mr. Mather’s fate. Lou “indulge[s] for a minute the astounding fancy that Mr. Mather lay at the roses’ roots,”<sup>7</sup> but the only facts known for certain are that he is gone and won’t be coming back. The narrative intentionally withholds explanations about Mr. Mather’s mysterious fate, and thereby refuses the emotional closure to the reader in favor of a sense of ominous dread. Since he remains an open question, the missing Mr. Mather looms over what remains of his family, stifling speech, action, and interaction as a silent, unspoken ghost. Indeed, early on, writer Robert Aickman lauded Bowen’s “ghost stories,” which Lisa Mullen later called “domestic gothic,” and John Wurtz, most recently, “Anglo-Irish Gothic.” Yet again, not all is dark in Bowen’s work, nor even in “Look at All Those Roses”; in fact, Phyllis Lassner characterizes the story as a “comedy of sex and terror,” highlighting the more humorous elements of Lou and Edward’s relationship instead of the haunting world of Mrs. Mather and Josephine. Anglo-Irish, realist, modernist,

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majority of cases. Lou’s lack of growth over the course of “Look at All Those Roses” will be discussed at greater length later.

<sup>4</sup> Harkness, Bruce. “The Fiction of Elizabeth Bowen.” *The English Journal*, vol. 44, no. 9, 1955, pp. 499–506. DOI: 10.2307/809330. 500

<sup>5</sup> Perce, Ann W. *Those Uneasy Currents: Elements of Menace and Terror in Selected Fiction of Elizabeth Bowen*. Boca Raton, FL: 2006. [www.brownwalker.com/book/1581123388](http://www.brownwalker.com/book/1581123388). 13.

<sup>6</sup> Bowen, Elizabeth. “Notes on Writing a Novel” from *Collected Impressions*, pp. 249-263. London: Longmans, Green and Co. Ltd., 1950. As Bowen remarked in “Notes on Writing a Novel,” there is “[m]uch to be learnt from the detective story—especially non-irrelevance”; that is, that every detail in a well-constructed plot ought to contribute toward the conclusion, but that conclusion ought not be foreseeable. 250.

<sup>7</sup> Bowen. *Look at All Those Roses*. 83.

detective, mythic, neo-Victorian, comedic, gothic: Bowen's work seems to range across every genre and from highbrow and lowbrow, threading together strain after literary strain into an elusive whole cloth which makes Bowen impossible to neatly categorize. Her genre-defying prose is thus strange and familiar, old and new, imparting an unsettling sense of uncanniness to the reader who is never quite sure where they stand.

The general insecurity on the part of the reader is localized in Lou, whose navigation of these uncertain and sinister worlds allows the audience to perceive clearly that which she cannot consciously grasp. With inversions, perversions, and doubles of social roles throwing "normal" life into uncanny relief, each layer of Lou's psychic regression "away" from her life and inwards into her psyche reveals that the useful fictions of socio-familial roles define only a small, unstable space in the midst of a terrifyingly large and indefinable nothingness. The comforting "dream" of being a part of an entirely fulfilling relationship, either with Edward<sup>8</sup> or in the Mather home,<sup>9</sup> is but a comforting falsehood through which Lou can momentarily ignore the "dull burden"<sup>10</sup> of the future and the silence which threatens to rush into her mind if she ever ceases her constant movement from place to place.<sup>11</sup> Yet the fabrications of social life are more than simply dreams: they are traps—of womanhood, of childhood, of motherhood, of wifehood—which cannot be escaped, for to not be in these roles is still to be defined negatively by them (not-mother, not-wife, etc.). To look at it from a different perspective, Lou achieves the impossible by psychically ascending to the "white circle": she for a brief moment leaves the positive/negative, either-or dipole of human relations to become *neither*. Between the

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<sup>8</sup> At the beginning of the story, Edward and Lou in their drive are described as "[feeling] bound up in the tired impotence of a dream" (75).

<sup>9</sup> As Lou paces nervously to the Mather's front window to look at their roses, she "[begins] to wake from the dream of the afternoon: her will stirred; she wanted to go; she felt apprehensive, threatened." Ibid. 80.

<sup>10</sup> Bowen, *Look at All Those Roses*. 75.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid. 85.



meaningless outside and vacuous core of modern relations lies the plane in which Lou and Edward and the Mathers live, their parallel worlds creating a friction that reveals the illusory nature of both of their modes of existence: masculine and feminine, sexual and familial, urban and pastoral, interconnected and isolated. In the final analysis, "Look at All Those Roses" yields the damning truth that nowhere, for man or woman, can anyone positively assert themselves as a person.

"Look at All Those Roses" is not a portrait of one world, but of two, and likewise has two paths of movement which can be traced in conjunction with each other throughout the plot. Physically, Lou and Edward regularly "doubl[e] back"<sup>12</sup> and forth along their primary axis of movement between London and "away." This weekly bored to-and-from "home," where Edward and Lou have "nobody to talk to but each other,"<sup>13</sup> and "away," a "purely negative" space, makes it clear that their repetition compulsion is less of getaway and more of a rut, a constant movement to avoid what they bring with them wherever they go.<sup>14</sup> Along this axis no true life is to be found, for London, rather than being a center of activity, is instead presented as tired list of nouns and quotidian tasks to be fled: "the typewriter, the cocktail-shaker, the telephone"<sup>15</sup>; "unlocking the stuffy flat, taking in the milk, finding bills in the letter-box,"<sup>16</sup> to which Lou and Edward "look forward with no particular pleasure."<sup>17</sup> Nor does "away" hold any particular promise, as its one appeal is that it isn't London, where they've come from. By making their

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<sup>12</sup> Bowen, *Look at All Those Roses*. 74.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.* 76.

<sup>14</sup> Indeed, Lou's comment about the as-yet unentered Mather home, "I wish we lived *there*...It really looked like somewhere," is met by Edward's realistic assessment of the couple's fundamental emptiness: "It wouldn't if we did." *Ibid.* 75.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.* 75.

<sup>16</sup> The most alive the outside world ever seems to be is in Josephine's imagination, when she speaks to Lou about traffic, Trafalgar Square, and Picadilly Circus. Lou becomes a representative of the outside world to Josephine in the same way that Edward is a conduit to the outside world for Lou, a point which will be explored further later.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.* 74.

destination always simply “away,” the pure linearity of their city-country relationship crystallizes: Lou and Edward seek a balm for their meaningless lives in the place-they-are-not, moving ever forward in an attempt to leave themselves behind.

As soon as this back-and-forth seeking movement stops and their car crashes, however, the couple realizes that Edward’s “curious route”<sup>18</sup> through “Suffolk by-roads”<sup>19</sup> has thrown them at a right angle to where they ought to be, landing them somewhere “highly improbable”<sup>20</sup> and losing the back-and-forth thread of their lives in the process. From this out-of-bounds zone—the country realm of the Mathers—the focus of the story makes one last jump: as Lou lies utterly still in the garden with Josephine, her mind and soul are absorbed into the “white circle” of the sky, a leap out of the human plane and into the blank z-axis. Thus, the first way to diagram “Look at All These Roses” is in a spatial sense:

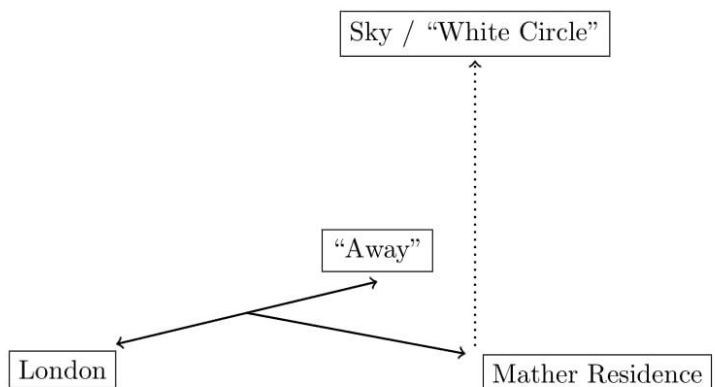


Fig. 1: Diagram of Physical/Focal Movement (“Escape”)

Just right angles are predetermined by the line they spring from, so too are the “escapes” Lou and Edward seek from daily life. In running from the past, they are doomed to always use it as a

<sup>18</sup> Bowen, *Look at All Those Roses*. 74. Like Lou fantasizing about another life, Edward seems to want to be lost, or at least to avoid the choke of modernity on the main roads he so detests.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.* 74.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.* 77.

referent. In other words, forward movement in "Look at All Those Roses" is not determined on its own terms, but by constantly looking back over one's shoulder.

A second way of mapping "Look at All Those Roses" comes in an analysis of Lou's psychic journey, which is not one of right angles, but of increasing interiority:

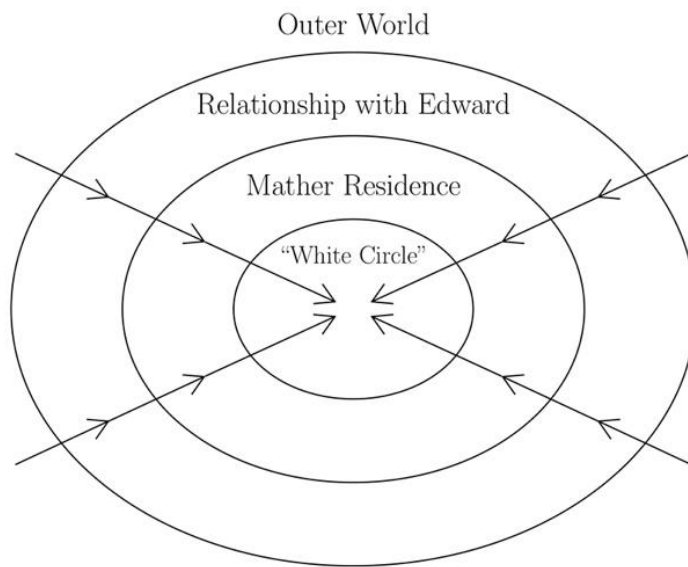


Fig. 2: Diagram of Lou's Psychological Movement/Regression ("Retreat")

In this reading, Lou does not run from herself, but instead shrinks from the fearsome reality of modernity and the outer world by retreating into the comforting cocoon of her relationship with Edward. Accordingly, when that protective layer of partnership is stripped away by Edward's brusque departure, Lou must burrow even further in order to find a place of psychic security. The primordial Mather residence serves this role, for her entry into it becomes an exploration of the pre-Oedipal family, a past at once personal and universal which offers the possibility of a more perfect interpersonal union. But even in this primordial home, Lou cannot join the primal dyad of mother and child, since both roles are already filled. To find a stable place, she delves even deeper until her psychic state eventually becomes that of the existential *néant*, the pure dream, the "white circle" of life and death. Beneath the social fiction of the Mathers lies only this

overdetermined and empty blank, for in Lou, there is no stable core of personality around which she has constructed her identity. As Maud Ellmann has argued, “In Bowen's fiction, the inner world of consciousness is ‘whitened and gutted,’ like the inside of the Mathers' house,”<sup>21</sup> with these empty shells of people merely being piloted by the plot<sup>22</sup> and, in Lou's case, gaining all sense of self through relations with others.

Thus, in “Look at All Those Roses,” psychic movement inwards is coupled with movement to locations increasingly distant from home. These twin focalizations—one centering ever more tightly on the psyche and the other pushing attention further and further from the self—create an unbearably vibrating schism which ends up simultaneously collapsing Lou's consciousness into a dream and shooting her attention into the sky as she joins the “white circle,” the void inside and outside human existence. These ever-diverging shifts in attention are partly what creates the uncanny atmosphere in the Mather home: the house represents a return to the repressed, a “homecoming” to psychic origins, the forgotten but most familiar root of all social life; and at the same time is a foreign, alien land, hostile to the senses and unmistakably Other, thrown completely off the path of the “doubling back” and forth of daily life.<sup>23</sup> Like the detective novel or the bounded, limited world of the realist novel, the Mather estate is determined by what is outside it, i.e. what it does not have<sup>24</sup>: quotidian modern life, men, energy, movement.

Similarly to the paradoxical definition of “uncanny” as both “homely” and “unhomely,”<sup>25</sup> the

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<sup>21</sup> Ellmann, “Shadowing Elizabeth Bowen.” 148.

<sup>22</sup> Bowen, *Collected Impressions*. “What about the idea that the function of the action is to *express* the characters? This is wrong. The characters are there to provide the action.” 249.

<sup>23</sup> Bowen, *Look at All Those Roses*. 74.

<sup>24</sup> Mendelsund, Peter. *What We See When We Read: A Phenomenology*. New York: Vintage Books, 2014. 125. Peter Mendelsund writes of realist novels that “we are introduced (as to a game board) to a bounded location containing limited players.”

<sup>25</sup> Freud, Sigmund. “The ‘Uncanny’.” Translated by A. Dickson and Andrew Chitty. 1919.

<https://web.mit.edu/allanmc/www/freud1.pdf>. “The German word *unheimlich* [literally, unhomely] is obviously the opposite of *heimlich*, *heimisch* [homely], meaning “familiar,” “native,” “belonging to the home”; and we are tempted to conclude that what is “uncanny” is frightening precisely because it is *not* known and familiar.” 1.; “Thus

inverse, accursed Mather household, with its primordial resonances, might in a way actually be more recognizable and culturally familiar as a recreation of an ancient form of maternal witchcraft than the newer, alienated modern era which Lou and Edward represent. These dregs of the gothic linger on in much the same way that Mrs. Mather and Josephine persist in the British countryside, a trace of a remembered elsewhere haunting today.

To point out the Mather home's alienation from modern life is not to say that it is metonymic of the countryside in which it stands; indeed, its eerie,<sup>26</sup> over-present roses make it seem "all the odder"<sup>27</sup> in the wasteland around it. In the midst of a landscape of "dropping gates, rusty cattle-troughs and the thistly, tussocky, stale grass of neglected farms,"<sup>28</sup> the vaginal "sheath of startling flowers"<sup>29</sup> around the house hits the mind's eye like a blow, erupting from the story and into the title as they burst into Lou's world.<sup>30</sup> This "sheath," normally a "purely negative" space in which a man might store his violent instrument, turns from "passive"<sup>31</sup> to sinister by looking back at the viewer, its "dark windows star[ing] with no expression through the flowers."<sup>32</sup> Indeed, a charming feminine flower becomes a sexual, violent "trap baited with beauty"<sup>33</sup> containing not the promise of birth, but instead a cold, dark entry hall akin to the

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*heimlich* is a word the meaning of which develops towards an ambivalence, until it finally coincides with its opposite, *unheimlich*. *Unheimlich* is in some way or other a sub-species of *heimlich*." 4.

<sup>26</sup> Lisa Mullen in *Mid-Century Gothic: The Uncanny Objects of Modernity in British Literature and Culture after the Second World War* summarizes Mark Fisher's astute characterization of the eerie as "'a failure of absence or a failure of presence,' the sensation that 'there is something present when there should be nothing'" and vice versa (7). According to Fisher, the eerie is more often associated with "landscapes partially emptied of the human" than with haunted houses, although of course in the Mather home, the two combine to a heightened effect.

<sup>27</sup> Bowen, *Look at All Those Roses*. 75.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.* 75.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.* 74. The word "sheath" specifically not only evokes the yonic, but hearkens back to the well-worn medieval metaphor for the sword (penis) and sheath (vagina).

<sup>30</sup> The opening lines of this story will be examined further below.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.* 77.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.* 74. One would do well to recall here Lacan's concept of the phallic gaze, which, unified with a yonic force, combines the powers of masculine and feminine in much the same way that Mrs. Mather does.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.* 77.

entrance of a tomb and an “extinct,” “whitened,” and “guttled”<sup>34</sup> room which Maud Ellmann likens to a blasted womb. Ensconcing this unnerving union of life and death, these supercharged roses surround the house like thorny pubic hair (or, indeed, like a *vagina dentata*), sheathing the “blasted” womb within an efflorescence of femininity. Lou, observing the house and personifying it in this way, projects onto it both inhumanity and danger, a powerful but ghastly “apparition” contained within the rosy female form.<sup>35</sup> Whether trapped in an undead London, wrapped within the vampiric feminine of the haunted Mather house, or stranded in the eerie emptiness between the two, Lou’s perceptions of the world around her reveal that no place in modernity is quite as real as it pretends to be.

In crossing the border between modernity and her relationship with Edward and the closed Mather home, Lou’s is both a story of running away and working through, going further afield and drilling deeper down. Yet there is also a third type of movement: her ping-ponging through different social roles and negotiating her place in relation to others. She starts off as a childlike, passionless lover in her relationship with Edward, subject to socially sanctioned, manipulative power dynamics. These are apparent in the characters’ very names, for while Lou is only ever known by her nickname—otherwise known as a *pet* name—Edward is never referred to in the diminutive. With his mighty name “Edward” hearkening to the great British kings, he represents a powerful, patriarchal, independent whole, while Lou is a partial, dependent being who stands not on her own but the eyes of others, specifically those of men. However, her unknown full name has a similar implication to the Mather house: there is something else, something fuller about her that is not socially intelligible.<sup>36</sup> Edward, in typical male fashion,

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<sup>34</sup> Bowen, *Look at All Those Roses*. 77.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.* 74.

<sup>36</sup> Not only that, but “Lou” is a unisex name, in much the same way that Mrs. Mather and the house itself symbolically straddles gender roles. From the outset, Lou’s powerlessness is coupled with a slippery changeability,

writes off Lou's excesses as merely a propensity to fantasize and idealize,<sup>37</sup> rather than recognizing her latent potential to see beyond the limited horizon of their relationship and lives.

Edward's domineering powers are far from complete, for though Lou sits "with the map on her knees," reading out the directions he has marked like a good, subservient housewife, what *should* be resting on her knees is a happy, bouncing baby.<sup>38</sup> While Edward may produce articles and harebrained routes home, he cannot produce an heir. Thus, Edward cannot ensure the continuance of his family line, the foremost objective of the traditional patriarch, and Lou has no leverage to ensure that he will stay with her, a critical worry of hers because she is "not Edward's wife: he [is] married to someone else and his wife [will] not divorce him."<sup>39</sup> In this adulterous triangle, Edward has had two sexual partners without any mention of children, suggesting that his own impotence is to blame. While Mr. Mather's spirit looms large over the Mather women, Edward's wife haunts his relationship with Lou as an "absent third," which Ellmann identifies as a cornerstone of Bowen's character configurations.<sup>40</sup> His presumed dominance thus fails in a second sense, for instead of crafting an ideal, sensual relationship with Lou, the "Other woman," he merely recreates the monotony of a tired domestic relationship. His ultimate failure is thus one of imagination.

Yet the other half of this coin, Lou, is not blameless in this ailing relationship, either. Where Edward dominates, she plays a willing part in her own submission by "never risk[ing] displeasing Edward too far"<sup>41</sup> because she is "determined to be a necessity."<sup>42</sup> In other words,

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with the implication that if she could more powerfully assert her femininity, either through marrying or bearing children, she might also acquire some of the power associated with masculinity.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid. 75-76.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid. 74.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid. 79.

<sup>40</sup> Ellmann, "Shadowing Elizabeth Bowen." 149.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid. 76.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid. 79.

she fears being alone enough that staying in this dull, passionless relationship seems the better option. She goes so far as to think, “How much she wanted to stop. But she never liked to be left.”<sup>43</sup> Her life with Edward displeases her, but she is unwilling to be “left” alone, the odd man out; without a man to stick to, she is lost. Thus, despite being in a relationship, Lou does not actually know what love feels like; rather, “her idea of love [is] adhesiveness,”<sup>44</sup> revealing that she only has an “idea” of love, rather than the real thing, and thinks of it not as an emotion, but as an activity or even a possession. These sterilized versions of emotions—“adhesiveness” rather than “attachment,” “love” as a noun rather than as a verb—reveal how impotent Lou herself is in being able to recognize and act upon her emotions, despite her dreamy tendencies. Her existence is passive, and she would rather cling to what she has than risk feeling anything, since that “anything” will likely be frustration and despair. Lou’s abandonment anxiety drives her to put up with Edward’s domineering that arises from his own anxiety about his impotence, leading to a toxic codependent relationship where neither is happy but both prefer it to the alternative of being alone.

In fact, Lou not only submits to Edward’s will as a female animal,<sup>45</sup> but in a way fills the very role of a child. She certainly speaks like one, whining to Edward upon passing the house, “I wish we lived *there*,”<sup>46</sup> answering questions foolishly, and speaking her mind in a simple, straightforward manner befitting a young child. Her active imagination, easy distractibility, and utter dependence on Edward for everything from money and cigarettes to a place to live and locomotion strongly suggests not only a power imbalance, but active infantilization, with Edward

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid. 79.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid. 79.

<sup>45</sup> Lou is described as having a “smart little monkey face” (76)—if she is but a “smart little monkey,” it must be a marvel to those who look upon her that she can even speak, and out of the question that she is as fully human as the great Edward. Her animalistic self-image is emphasized when she wanders around “like a lost cat” (79) when Edward finally leaves.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid. 75.



filling in the role of a caring father. No wonder, then, that the thought of being alone terrifies her: the "infantile impulses"<sup>47</sup> have a much stronger hold upon her than upon any healthy adult.<sup>48</sup>

While Lou idealizes the father figure and the male more generally, she loathes the mother figure in the form of Mrs. Mather. The inscrutable woman is described, like the ominous house, as having "no expression," sharing the same empty, inhuman, threatening space in Lou's unconscious imagination.<sup>49</sup> Mrs. Mather, occupied as she is by her "inner life," has "nothing to 'place' her by," which Lou clarifies with the explanation, "It is outside attachments...that put a label on one to help strangers."<sup>50</sup> Because Mrs. Mather is utterly out of touch with "the outer world,"<sup>51</sup> unattached both in the marital and psychic senses, she lacks a "place" in the social order, something Lou is not just frightened by, but cannot understand. Mrs. Mather's conception of self is defined by not by men, nor by a subservient femininity: she combines both and simply lives as a "person" not confined by gender roles, content to be alone with herself.<sup>52</sup> She is described as a "shabby amazon" wearing overalls and with masculine, "powerful-looking hands," synthesizing male and female, "mother" and "father."<sup>53</sup> Not only that, but she climbs trees, monkey-like, and eats "in a calmly voracious way"<sup>54</sup> that seems, when coupled with her

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<sup>47</sup> Ellmann, "Shadowing Elizabeth Bowen." 146.

<sup>48</sup> Of note as well is the instability of their situation: Lou is right to be worried, for Edward might leave her at any moment. She has no marital claim, nor any claim on the basis of bearing his children. She functions as a parasite, for not only must she make herself "necessary," but in doing so she must lower Edward's self-esteem so that she can remain the flattering prop for his impotent male ego.

<sup>49</sup> Bowen, *Look at All Those Roses*. 77.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.* 78.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.* 78.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.* 78.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.* 78. While she is no longer beholden to anyone, save her daughter, Mrs. Mather's name reveals the lingering burden of the Gothic father. Her first name is never revealed; she is known only by the name she took from her abusive husband. And the name "Mather" itself, while plausibly read as a combination of "mother" and "father," might be seen more sinisterly as the penetrating masculine "a" invading the "mother," detaching within her and never letting her free of his grip. Thus by her very name, Mrs. Mather carries ghosts; as Bennett and Royle argue, "Haunted or inhabited by the dead, Bowen people live the burden contracted by other people in their former lives" (xviii).

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.* 84.

general silence, incredibly animal-like. She is a synthesis, an extreme version of the animal qualities associated with Lou herself,<sup>55</sup> mirroring not the infantile but the atavistic animalism attributed to the “less developed” female. What the looming power of the house and of Mrs. Mather represent, then, is life outside the bounds of gender roles, an existence not defined in relation to another person, but to an ancient, primordial power. However, because Mrs. Mather is not socially intelligible, she, and by extension her daughter, are doomed to be isolated from society.

While analyses of “Look at All Those Roses” tend to focus on the question of women, the true force flickering over this narrative is the absent male, both in terms of Edward (who is distant, thus along the lines of “escape”) and Mr. Mather (who is lost to the past, thus along the lines of “retreat”). Indeed, if the ghostly white of the sky is read to be just that—a ghost—then Mr. Mather quite literally hovers over the whole countryside. It explains why Josephine does not like to go outside: his body fuels the plants below, and his spirit looks down on her from above. His presence is also stamped on Josephine’s body, for he is the one who paralyzes her and prevents her from ever moving by herself again. Yet she is not without a still sort of power, for when she says, “My back was hurt six years ago...It was my father’s doing,”<sup>56</sup> Josephine removes Mr. Mather semantically as the actor of the sentence even in his most violent act, just as he has been removed from the house. Lou, too, “indulge[s] for a minute the astounding fancy that Mr. Mather lay[s] at the roses’ roots...”<sup>57</sup> revealing the transition she is making in the Mather household. While she is hating the strange mother, she is also engaging in revenge fantasy against the men who control her daily life. Her hatred of her oppressor, so long covered

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<sup>55</sup> If Lou is to play the father role, then Mrs. Mather’s inhuman animal qualities, most of all her cowbell, make Lou’s claim of superiority in the form of modernity much more plausible.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.* 81.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.* 83.

up by strange excuses and pitiful self-abasement, begins to bubble up once she crosses the Mather's literal and psychic threshold. Lou starts to "indulge" not only in the fantasy that the male abuser can be overthrown, but also that she might live an alternate model of life that is not entirely dependent upon men—no matter how frightening that mode of life may be.

Of all the people in the Mather family—the absent father, the widowed mother, and the disabled daughter left behind—it ought to be with the latter that Lou most identifies, given her own anxieties regarding abandonment. However, instead of sympathizing with Josephine, Lou actively avoids identifying with her, even after she learns of how Josephine was injured. Lou's reaction to this tragic tale is neither shock nor empathy for the victimized girl; instead, she simply replies, "Awful for him [Mr. Mather]."<sup>58</sup> Lou sympathizes not with the victim but with the perpetrator of the crime because Josephine embodies the state of isolated, helpless womanhood that Lou fears most. For even though she in reality fills the role of a child, Lou's determination to be "necessary"<sup>59</sup> and her pushing against the boundaries reveals her dissatisfaction in that role. Josephine is the Other which is also self, the ultimate uncanny, for in Josephine Lou sees her worst fears of childish uselessness and repulsiveness fully realized. Her aversion to Josephine (and annoyance when Josephine follows her around and asks her questions) is the same that she fears Edward feels about herself. For example, when Josephine asks, "Must you go back to London?"<sup>60</sup> Lou responds curtly, then "frown[s] and smile[s] in a portentous, grown-up way that meant nothing at all to either herself or Josephine." She then "[feels] for her cigarette case and, glumly, [finds] it empty."<sup>61</sup> Although playacting as Edward, Lou is not equipped to fill a confident, masculine role; Edward has taken away her phallic

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<sup>58</sup> Ibid. 81.

<sup>59</sup> And indeed, children *are* necessary to continuing the family line and, more broadly, reproducing the population.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid. 82.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid. 82.

cigarettes and her money in a sort of vengeful castration, a strike back against her leading the way to the Mather house. To avoid allying herself with that which she most fears being, Lou would rather be complicit with the male abuser than recognize that she and Josephine share the same powerlessness in the face of male abuse, a powerlessness that, even though she is an adult, reduces her to the helplessness of a child.

However, one might also consider Lou not as a child refusing to sympathize with her fellow, but instead as a third term disrupting the primal dyad. While Maud Ellmann has argued that “Look at All Those Roses” tells of Lou’s choice between the primal dyad and the symbolic order, she neglects to account for the fact that there is no way Lou can join the Mathers as either mother or daughter. She is necessarily an outsider, an interrupter of the mother-child bond in the same way the father is. While Lacanian theory posits that the external whole of the third term reveals that the “complete” mother-child bond is actually incomplete, Lou’s perspective shows that the all-encompassing “symbolic” is itself *not* all-encompassing. In other words, neither Lou as a representative of the greater world nor Mrs. Mather and Josephine as a codependent unit are entirely complete in their own right. Both are missing something: Lou, the security of being wholly mutually dependent upon another being, and Josephine, the ability to participate actively in the world of others. Thus, even as the “independent” third term, Lou is still trapped in her insecure predicament, for, being neither mother nor daughter, she is not necessary.

From a Lacanian perspective, “Look at All Those Roses” reveals what happens when there is *only* the feminine lack—or rather, what happens when the positive presence of the masculine is removed from the scene. Despite the opportunity Lou is given to work through her complexes in her encounter with the Mather women, Lou finds herself unable to overcome the patriarchal structures that delimit her sense of herself and world because society provides no

viable alternatives for women's dependence on men. Instead, she wields them to her benefit, taking the phallic knife to cut the roses, harvesting the bait of femininity "forced" to grow<sup>62</sup> by the body of the defeated patriarch. It is here in the garden that Lou's budding fantasy reaches full bloom as she enters a dream state with Josephine, retreating into herself entirely for a brief, ecstatic moment as she experiences the opposite of her normal life in the patriarchy. This movement into self-contemplation comes with the only instance of first-person free indirect discourse in the entire story: Lou, who up until now has used "she" even in her internal voice—to give just one example, "How much she wanted to stop. But she never liked to be left"<sup>63</sup>—begins to use "I," a person speaking for and from herself alone, withdrawing actualization from others and rooting it in herself.

However, while Lou has achieved a moment of self-actualization, this self-actualization is also, necessarily, a death fantasy. As Lou's self becomes anchored in her personhood, rather than her womanhood, she necessarily must withdraw from the world, because up until now her self has been determined by other people. In renouncing the fundamental structures of dependence which comprise womanhood, she "let[s] go, inch by inch, of life, that since she was a child she had been clutching so desperately."<sup>64</sup> When framed this way, Lou's letting go is made out to be an act of maturation. Unlike a child, Lou will no longer look to others to fulfill her needs, rejecting the infantilizing aspect of femininity. Foregoing outside help, Lou's retreat into the self rests on the promise that Mrs. Mather and the house provide: beneath the bounds of femininity lies a mysterious, internal power that can sustain one even without contact with other people. Once she obtains a true singularity, she states, "I feel life myself now."<sup>65</sup> She doesn't feel

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<sup>62</sup> Ibid. 79.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid. 79.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid. 85.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid. 86.

“like” herself; she *is* herself, a feeling she is only just experiencing “now” after retreating from the toxic psychic structures that she formed in her childhood and has carried through her entire life. Without these barring her from experiencing her true inner self, she can put her finger on the pulse of life, feeling it flow through her.

However, as she enters this new space of existence, it becomes clear that in order to be her self, there is no in-between: she can either be attached to others, or to no one. She realizes, “I only think I want things; I only think I want Edward...Now I want nothing; I just want a white circle.”<sup>66</sup> She can desire either Edward or absence; she can remain unhappy but in society or experience “an ecstasy of indifference” alone.<sup>67</sup> While Mrs. Mather and Josephine can handle this separation from others because they stay “still” and think,<sup>68</sup> Lou has not introspected enough to develop a robust inner life. She realizes that now she needs to stop chasing after things because “people who stay still generate power,” like the power Mrs. Mather and the house wield.<sup>69</sup> Lou’s predicament between independent isolation and dependent connection is not merely individual, but a result of structural processes that function throughout the entire society: women can be completely dependent on others within patriarchy, or they can be independent, full people completely outside of it. However, to be a self-sustaining individual force, one needs to think of and about oneself in order to learn how to enjoy spending time alone, something Lou and women more broadly simply don’t receive the social training or encouragement to do. Patriarchy cannot permit them to be whole on their own, for if they were, why would they ever consent to being dominated by men?

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<sup>66</sup> Ibid. 86.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid. 86.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid. 86.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid. 86.

In the end, Lou considers personhood but ultimately rejects it, choosing to rejoin society as a woman tied to Edward instead. Edward makes sure to remind her of his superiority as soon as he returns, calling her "my girl" and saying that he "parked" her at the Mather's while he was away, just like the car.<sup>70</sup> For once, his paranoid fear that Lou will manage to escape his control is founded, so his rapid dehumanization of her to cast her as his possession works to get her to follow him to the car, rather than just letting her stay behind. However, Lou, having been to the other side and come back again, returns somewhat detached, "curiously" asking dreamy questions as she returns to the present.<sup>71</sup> The degree to which Lou loses some gendered part of herself that makes her socially intelligible is unclear, since she remains almost entirely absent from the text once Edward returns, the internal musings that were set free in his absence drowned out by Edward's voice once again. Regardless, she has made her choice: she will return to life in patriarchy, rather than staying in the Mather's upside-down world.

"Look at All Those Roses" is a parable of the fictionality of femininity: an effective way to structure an otherwise aimless existence that continuously circles the drain at its center, the empty but true "white circle" which comes before us and after. As with Lou, no matter how deep we dig, we always believe we will find something, but the white circle expresses the "unthinkable" fear that, just maybe, there might not be any reason, nothing there. In this haze of emptiness and social falsehoods, the damning truth is that nowhere, for man or woman, can anyone positively assert themselves as a person. For a system which cannot conceive of an outside, the Mather home can only be an inverse, an incomplete negation; only the completely empty and simultaneously overdetermined symbol of the "white circle" betrays the alpha and omega truth of the symbolic order: outside of language, a person cannot be at all.

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<sup>70</sup> Ibid. 87.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid. 87.

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