



## Journal of the Short Story in English

Les Cahiers de la nouvelle

52 | Spring 2009  
General issue

---

# Identity is a Slippery Fish – the Discovery of Identity in Elizabeth Bowen's Short Story "The Demon Lover"

Zuzanna Zarebska Sanches

---



### Electronic version

URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/jsse/956>

ISSN: 1969-6108

### Publisher

Presses universitaires de Rennes

### Printed version

Date of publication: 1 June 2009

ISSN: 0294-04442

### Electronic reference

Zuzanna Zarebska Sanches, « Identity is a Slippery Fish – the Discovery of Identity in Elizabeth Bowen's Short Story "The Demon Lover" », *Journal of the Short Story in English* [Online], 52 | Spring 2009, Online since 01 December 2010, connection on 03 December 2020. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/jsse/956>

---

This text was automatically generated on 3 December 2020.

© All rights reserved

---

# Identity is a Slippery Fish – the Discovery of Identity in Elizabeth Bowen's Short Story "The Demon Lover"

Zuzanna Zarebska Sanches

---

- 1 Identity is performed or produced through action and not simply, as psychoanalysis has suggested, through identification. It is a process embedded in positionality rather than essences. In early psychoanalysis it was Freud who maintained in his *The Ego and the Id* that the ego-subject is a corporeal projection one constructs during the lengthy process of identity and unity formation. Still different, Lacan believed subjectification to be indirect/imaginary projection of the body outlined by the image of the other.
- 2 In one of her interviews Judith Butler says that it is essential to distinguish performance from performativity: the former presumes a subject but the latter contests the very notion of the subject. Butler explains that she begins her work with the Foucauldian premise that power works in part through discourse and it works in part to produce and destabilise subjects.
 

“But then, when one starts to think carefully about how discourse might be said to produce a subject, it's clear that one's already talking about a certain figure or trope of production. It is at this point that it's useful to turn to the notion of performativity, and performative speech acts in particular - understood as those speech acts that bring into being that which they name.” (Judith Butler <http://www.theory.org.uk/but-int1.htm>)
- 3 At this point the subject, we may talk about, is a distinctively particular product of a discourse. “Performativity is the discursive mode by which ontological effects are installed. ... Likewise performance is the discourse of a pre-established subject.” (Butler 1993: 93) In the analysis of both performative acts (which are not singular in nature), and performances (which supposedly unveil the pre-established subject we see how both the private and the public languages of identification (the personal and the political) are not free. Dino Felluga writes in “Modules on Butler” that “our most

personal acts are, in fact, continually being scripted by hegemonic social conventions and ideologies.” (Felluga 2006) Elizabeth Bowen’s “The Demon Lover” unveils the spuriousness and artificiality of subjectification processes in the way that they are always fruit of the pre-established discourses through which hegemonic powers operate in order to give an illusion of private and public freedom.

- 4 Writing about otherness from a different critical angle Elizabeth Grosz speaks about politics of imperceptibility –

“politics in which it is not the subject who acts, that is an agent producing its own identity retroactively, but forces operating in and through the subject.” (Elizabeth Grosz [http://web.gc.cuny.edu/csctw/found\\_object/text/grosz.htm](http://web.gc.cuny.edu/csctw/found_object/text/grosz.htm))

- 5 Similar to the theory of Butlerian pre-established subject, this is a theory of reciprocal Heideggerian *Dasein*, where concepts are pre-disclosed before becoming relevant to subjects. It is both a solitary and response-prompted act, which one may call a transcendental materialist theory of subjectivity, where more than material form of subjectivity can emerge from a corporeal being. Elizabeth Grosz continues to talk about subject’s acts:

“What acts are forces, and these forces are not the effects of a subject but its causes, they are not the intentional object of a subject, but something altogether outside the subject. This philosophy of imperceptibility is about the capacity to act...” (Elizabeth Grosz [http://web.gc.cuny.edu/csctw/found\\_object/text/grosz.htm](http://web.gc.cuny.edu/csctw/found_object/text/grosz.htm))

- 6 “The Demon Lover” story too tries to foreground the idea of becoming rather than being in subjectification – a process in which there are possible various effects of a subject: that of a respectable mother and wife, and that of the demon’s bride.

- 7 As George Lakoff has said all thinking and discourse originate in bodily experience. This experience involves our notions of surfaces, distances bringing us closer to a peculiar dependence on the Other as an essential point of reference for the Being-there as well as Being-with. It is through others that humans develop the notion of one’s identity. Strangely enough it is not only that we draw from the imagery of the Other, the Other draws from the image of our Self and our own body, hence the reciprocity of images. Uncannily, the Other defines our existence from the inside and the outside. The uncanny and abjectable Other thrives where the meaning collapses, between feminine and masculine, between Inside and Outside. In Zizekian terms it thrives between the Real and the Imaginary of our conscious and unconscious self. As such Bowen’s “The Demon Lover” is a story of revelation through experiencing ‘otherness’ – the bodily presence of the demon who comes back as if woken by the trauma of the WW II. Mrs Drover – in fact now the ‘driver’ or the subject of her private discourse – is faced with her demonic (here different from the public discourse) nature, which at first she does not recognize as hers.

- 8 In “The Demon Lover” Bowen touches upon the problems of abjection, the Other, the Real and the Imaginary. “The Demon Lover” story has as its pivotal point the letter, which its main character and focalizer, ‘the prosaic woman’ Kathleen Drover finds on a suggestively naked bed, during a short visit to her pre WW II house. To that Bowen is prompt to add that all that Kathleen wanted ‘was in a bedroom chest’ (Bowen 1945: 661). And that “her call here had been planned to be a surprise” so that one starts to wonder what Kathleen believed so important to risk her life for in the Blitz London. “As the clouds lowered and lawns seemed already to smoke with dark... in the tenseness preceding the fall of rain”, Kathleen opens the letter and finds that it contains an

invitation sent by her former lover 'with eyes like spectral glitters' – the lover who is considered to have died in combat during WW I. He is now claiming Kathleen for a long arranged meeting 'after twenty-five years'. In a quasi erotic metaphor embedded with overflowing sexual tension of the whole situation, rain begins to come crashing down and Kathleen cannot "keep from looking over her shoulder at the stripped bed on which the letter lay" (Bowen 1945: 663).

- 9 As Kathleen finishes reading the letter, she notices that it is signed K. which in my opinion stands for Kathleen and is not the initial of the old lover's name as some critics have suggested. In a stroke of literary genius, Bowen constructs a situation in which Kathleen's mind "performs three functions, those of expectation, attention and memory" (Ricoeur 1984: 19). As a result "the future, which it expects, passes through the present, to which it attends, into the past, which it remembers" (Ricoeur 1984: 19). The Real merges with the Imaginary and what lurks at Kathleen from the past is the life she never had and which she exchanged for a respectable family life – a life that does not stand the test of the wartime desiccation of reality. The mirror reflection she also does not recognize as hers and from which she 'turns away precipitately' gives Kathleen a glimpse of the Other – the very Other, whose role is that of an audience or an addressee. The rain clears away all the growth of normality like the dust that covers the mirror, which leaves Kathleen "more perplexed than she knew by everything that she saw, by traces of her long former habit of life" (Bowen 1945: 661). The scene of the reencounter with the Other is performed outside in the street since houses in Bowen still offer some safe refuge. With a scream of fear or passion, Kathleen is taken away in an unknown direction in a taxi driven by an apparition of the former lover.
- 10 The conflict between performativity, abjection, the Other and impersonality finds its parallel in what Slavoj Žižek describes as the conflict between the Real and the dominant ideologies and its reverberations on the Imaginary. Žižek argues that dominant ideologies wholly structure the subject's senses of reality. Yet, the Real is not equivalent to the reality experienced by the subjects as a meaningfully ordered totality. The Real is spread between many resistance points refusing the hegemonic systems of representation and reproduction. The truth is revealed in the process of transiting the contradictions. The relationship of the Real and the Imaginary stands for the revelation of the Real within the subject through the Imaginary of glimpses of the Other, which in fact are the glimpses of the self. "The Demon Lover" is a subtle interplay of the demonic Real and Imaginary discourses of the self/other dyad within both private and public discourses. Identity grows on this terrain sprouting from the gap between the hegemony of the discourse and the opaqueness of the mind. Identity is therefore fickle and instead of striving to achieve completeness –the All- it pursues the incomplete non-All, where something always remains untheorized. According to Žižek,
- "subjectivity itself is, ultimately, the permanent tension between the phenomenal, experimentally constituted ego and the quasi noumenal, unrepresentable *manqué-à-être* (lack of being) in relation to which every determinate identity-construct is a defensive, fanthasmatic response." (Johnstone 2008: 10)
- 11 Since the subject is "nothing but the failure of symbolization" (Johnstone: 2008), we may argue that the force of subjectification lies outside of the subject, in its reaching outside its innermost kernel. In Lacanian terms *moi* is the object grounded in the mirror identification and remains empty after uncovering the subjectivities layers – just like in the Žižekian metaphor of peeling an onion and reaching nothing at the end. Lacanian *je* is however the premise of the signifier, and as follows the signifier is the

field of the other. And yet Lacan tells us that “any form of self-acquaintance alienates the subject from itself, derailing this emptiness into the fleshed-out fullness of the ego and its embodied avatars.” (Johnstone 2008: 9) Subjectivity, therefore, becomes a personal matter, as long as it remains impersonal, that is as long as it focuses on the other. The greatest fear that Žižek shares with Hegel and Kant, is that subjectivity’s fulfillment is only attained in the subject’s death – meaning there is nothing more meaningful than death, since death stands for “self-withdrawal, the absolute contraction of subjectivity, the severing of its links with reality” (Johnstone 2008: 22). Death does not stand for nothingness but for absence of annihilation – meaningful contraction of human matter with reality. The subject’s living reality is best presented in the Hegelian gruesome picture of a butchered, dismembered body that on decaying disappears into earthy substance. Similarly in Bowen, Katherine’s possible death is just a contraction of reality, the coming together of her *moi* and *je*, which she struggled to conciliate in her ordinary life. One fears however that Kathleen’s fulfillment as a subject will only be attained through her death. But it may also be that her death will only be death for the dominant discourse.

- 12 The subject’s negative existence is furthermore exemplified in its relation to the object, as in the Möbius strip – “subject and object can never meet” (233) explains Žižek since they are on the same surface and yet on opposite sides that can only merge in death. Because of that the fullness of subjectivity reveals itself to be a fickle moment, the reaching out towards the other, before collapsing into annihilation (the unknown destiny of the taxi swerving to and fro and rapidly disappearing into nothingness with Mrs Drover) and consequently there always remains a stain – “a spot of opacity on the... smooth two-way flow of dialectical reflection between ... subject and object” (Johnstone 2008: 234). It may be that subjectivity is constructed in bursts that follow the subject’s repetitive movement from the imaginary to the symbolic, as are Mrs Drover’s hallucinatory flashbacks of her past, as well as her kaleidoscopic vision of the present.
- 13 What becomes important in the construction of the Other is the relationship to the Other’s *jouissance*. The other’s experience of *jouissance* is considered dangerous as it stands for the theft of my own enjoyment. Still, one remains constantly fascinated with the Other’s *jouissance* to a point that it seems to become palpable. It represents that which is more ourselves than we know and thus prevents us from achieving full identity –as it has been said the All pursues the incomplete non-All. And here again Bowen seems to guide us through this idea, being it also a hint at Kathleen’s former lover’s sado-masochistic habits in which nevertheless Kathleen took pleasure. Bowen writes about Kathleen’s meetings with the demon lover:
- “The young girl talking to the soldier... now and then- for it felt, from not seeing him in that intense moment, as though she had never seen him at all – she verified his presence for these few moments longer by putting out a hand, which he each time pressed without very much kindness, and painfully, on to one of the breast buttons of his uniform. That cut of the button on the palm of her hand was, principally what she was to carry away” (Bowen 1945: 663).
- 14 Within the plot of “The Demon Lover”, within the memory of love affair, the naked bed overflows with *jouissance* in surplus. Another erotic metaphor describes Kathleen’s reaction to the letter as leaving her with an ‘intermittent muscular flicker’ while throwing open ‘the lid and *kneeling* to search’.

- “No other way of having given herself could have made her feel so apart, lost and foresworn. She could not have plighted a more sinister troth” (Bowen 1945: 664).
- 15 Therefore, in marrying a respectable man later in the story, Kathleen loathes that which has threatened the borders of her self – the self she conjures from the society’s discourse.
- 16 Forming an identity is a constant struggle between abhorring that which threatens the borders of our symbolic self and seeing oneself in the Other, the Other which we may come to despise. It stands for rejubilating in the Other’s jouissance. As such, we live according to the principle of the impossibility of self-identity.
- 17 For Elizabeth Bowen identity is anchored in memory and her “idea of being passively entered into by the past is derived from Proust” (Lee 1981: 190). She writes in one of her novels entitled *A World of Love*, “Where there not those who said that everything has already happened and that one’s lookings-forward are really memories? (Bowen 1955: 221) In an essay “The Bend Back”, Bowen states, “One might say one invests one’s identity in one’s memory. To relive any moment, acutely, is to be made certain that one not only was but is” (Lee ed. 1983: 56). With her ideas of memory and time, Bowen offers some consolation to those lost within the matrix of theory. Deleuze’s becomings merge with Ricoeur’s narrative identity and Kristevan ontological and epistemological analysis of time. Ricoeur’s analysis of St Augustine seems useful here. Time has a threefold nature, “The present of past things is the memory; the present of present things is direct perception, and the present of future things is expectation” (Ricoeur 1990: 11). Temporality in Deleuze translates itself into multiple becoming, becoming a desiring machine and the BwO, which results in multiple identities/simulations. Bowen explains, “... how is there to continue to be freshness? By means of ever-differing presentation”. (Lee ed. 1983: 46) The present of subjectivity can only be traced in the backwards-gaze of the Hegelian skull onto memories and where the Result, is the abstraction from the path leading to it.
- 18 In the development of identity, in subjectification through relations with the Other, Elizabeth Bowen traces the development of her characters’ adolescent identities. However, society is a fantasy, similar to the Real: *the abject real*, which cannot be symbolised and *the symbolic real*, which the self struggles to comprehend and fails. And yet to be fully and consciously human one needs to create a dialogue within and without one’s surrounding space. One needs to become a body in a dialogue with other bodies, “what saves us from the past and ultimately from ourselves is the presence of others and our interaction with them” (Kelly 2002: 4). Kristeva writes, “The other is my proper unconscious” (Kristeva 1988: 183). “From the connections of bodies or from experience, human mind forms ideas” (Colebrook 2002: 82), new simulations, conflicts and its consciousness. The completeness of such identity lies in its incompleteness – the body in becoming. Hence, identity is an issue of public and private relationship. It stands for ‘Oneself as an Other’ in a given place and at a given time. Samuel Huntington says, “For people seeking identity (...) enemies are essential.” (Huntington 2002: 20) According to Kristeva “we know that we are foreigners to ourselves, and it is with the help of that sole support that we can attempt to live with others.” (Kristeva 1988: 170)
- 19 It should be noted that even Zizek remains faithful to the idea of the subject being forever alienated from either culture or nature. The bone subjectivity – ‘the bone in the throat’ of the symbolic – is the agonizing scream of the barred S. Both the Real S-in-itself as the “immanent negativity perturbing the ‘not all’ of being’s conflict-riddled

substance” (234) as well as the Symbolic S-for-itself as “self reflexive-negativity” (234) contract in the subject’s death into a meaningful surmounting of the division between the subject and the object. Similarly, the heroine of “The Demon Lover” shouts out the final scream on seeing the former lover before she inevitably dies for the dominant discourse. And yet one believes that Kathleen reencounters her bone subjectivity – the Spirit or the demon lover. It is by no means a coincidence that the past fosters the answers for Kathleen, as it is revealed to the Spirit in the inward gaze of the Hegelian bone: “the skull – inwardizing memories... are the scattered skulls of the past figures of consciousness” (Johnstone 2008: 235).

---

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Ausch, Robert. Randal Doane and Laura Perez. *Interview with Elizabeth Grosz* CUNY Graduate Center. 1 Sep. 2007 [http://web.gc.cuny.edu/found\\_object/text/grosz.htm](http://web.gc.cuny.edu/found_object/text/grosz.htm)
- Bowen, Elizabeth. “The Demon Lover”, *Collected Stories*. 1980. London: Vintage, 1999.
- . *A World of Love*. London: Vintage Classics, 1999.
- Colebrook, Claire. *Gilles Deleuze*. London: Routledge, 2002.
- Deleuze, Gilles. *Difference and Repetition*. London: Continuum, 2004.
- . *A Thousand Plateaus*. London: Continuum, 2004.
- Felluga, Dino. *Modules on Butler*. 3 Dec 2008. <http://www.cla.purdue.edu/english/theory/genderandsex/modules/butlerperformativity.html>
- Freud, Sigmund. *The Ego and the Id*. Chatto and Windus, 1962.
- Grosz, Elizabeth. *Volatile Bodies: Towards a Corporeal Feminism*. St. Leonards, Australia: Allen and Unwin, 1994.
- Huntington, Samuel. *The Clash of Civilizations: And the Remaking of World Order*. Free Press, 2002.
- Johnstone, Adrian. *Zizek's Ontology: A Transcendental Materialist Theory of Subjectivity*. Northwestern University Press, 2008.
- Kelly, Marian. “The power of the past: structural nostalgia in Elizabeth Bowen's *The House in Paris* and *The Little Girls* - Critical Essay”. *Style*. Spring 2002. FindArticles.com. 1 Sep. 2007. [http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi\\_m2342/is\\_1\\_36?pnun=17&opg=89985873](http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m2342/is_1_36?pnun=17&opg=89985873)
- Kristeva, Julia. *Powers of Horror. An Essay on Abjection*. 1941. New York: Columbia University Press, 1981.
- . *Strangers to Ourselves*. 1988, New York: Columbia University Press, 1991.
- Lakoff, George. *Metaphors We Live By*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1980.
- Lacan, Jacques. *The Four Fundamental Concepts in Psychoanalysis*. London: Karnac Books, 2004.
- . *The Language of the Self: Function of Language in Psychoanalysis*. John Hopkins University Press, 1998.

Lee, Hermione. (ed.) *The Mulberry Tree: Writings of Elisabeth Bowen*. London: Virago, 1986.

---. *Elizabeth Bowen*. 1981. London: Vintage, 1999.

Osborne, Peter, Lynne Segal. *Gender as Performance: An Interview with Judith Butler* *Radical Philosophy*, 1994. 1 Sep 2007 <http://www.theory.org.uk/but-int1.htm>.

Ricoeur, Paul. *Time and Narrative*. 1984, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1990.

---. *Oneself as Another*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1992.

Zizek, Slavoj. *Tarrying with the Negative: Kant, Hegel, and the Critique of Ideology*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1993.

## ABSTRACTS

Le présent article est essentiellement axé sur une théorisation du processus d'identification présente dans la nouvelle d'Elizabeth Bowen « The Demon Lover ». Le sujet de l'histoire, une femme et mère de famille, est hantée par l'amant du titre qui fut son fiancé, un soldat tué à la Première Guerre et réveillé, en tant que spectre, par l'expérience traumatique de la Deuxième. Le sujet de l'identification traverse ainsi une altérité démoniaque pour se définir par le biais d'un processus de devenir plutôt que dans un état d'être. Dans cette nouvelle, où l'expérience identitaire pivote autour du corps du sujet présenté comme chronotope, Bowen semble dire qu'une interprétation subjective du processus d'identification ne peut être que superficielle. Ainsi, c'est le cri agonisant du sujet qui constitue l'ossature de la structure symbolique de cette nouvelle. Baignant dans le doute, l'histoire devient encore plus brouillée par une négativité intrinsèque et une négativité autoréflexive qui s'en dégagent pour se confondre dans la mort du sujet en nous proposant ainsi de lire son histoire comme un traité sur l'inséparabilité du soi-même et de l'autre, d'une identité et d'une altérité au sein d'un seul et même corps.

## AUTHORS

### ZUZANNA ZAREBSKA SANCHES

Zuzanna Zarebska Sanches studied at the University of Warsaw and University Nova de Lisboa where she received her undergraduate degree in 2003. Now, at the University of Lisbon, with a doctoral fellowship from Fundação para a Ciência e Tecnologia (FCT), she is finishing her PhD dissertation devoted to Elizabeth Bowen's longer fiction ("Elizabeth Bowen and The Counter Discourses of Femininity".)